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Subaltern

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What is "the Subaltern"?

In 2006, almost sixty years after the Italian social theorist Antonio Gramsci began using the term *subaltern* to signify those made subordinate by hegemonies of power (of state, class, patriarchy, gender, race, and so on), one can find that "subaltern" has proliferated as a noun and adjective in contemporary discourse, indicating everything from the position of the average contemporary artist in Chicago (see www.subaltern.org) to a description of street food in Calcutta (Mukhopadhyay 2004). Gramsci originally used the term in some of the key, brief essays that he wrote during his eleven years in prison, beginning in 1926 under Benito Mussolini's fascist regime. Though Gramsci's choice of terms was perhaps meant to evade the attention of Italian state censorship, which a word such as "proletariat" would certainly have attracted, the term *subaltern* came to have other advantages. The term could encompass spheres outside capital and labor (which was Gramsci's primary concern) to have a broader descriptive power that might point toward other kinds of subjection to hegemonic force, to envelop the critical social theory pointed by E. P. Thompson at the "working classes" of England (1963), or by Simone de Beauvoir at the gendered subjectivity of the "second sex" (1949), or by Frantz Fanon toward the people he called "les damnés de la terre" (1961).

Gramsci's concern with the state and culture is important in understanding how the term *subaltern* can indicate a person or community in a position "inferior" to others in some fundamental way (i.e., by class, caste, gender, location, and so on). However, it also can be used as a term to designate the relationship of two entities to each other vis-à-vis their access to power or capital (of the material and social varieties). Therefore, one might speak of a "subaltern" person but also of subalternity as a condition of being for everything from a community to a nation to a particular discourse (a set of texts, of practices, of histories, and so on).

The Literature

The elasticity of the idea of "the subaltern" has been most fully and systematically expressed by the core group of scholars who created the Subaltern Studies Collective and the series of edited volumes the Collective, and its later members, have created.[1] Inspired by Gramsci, on the one hand, and Michel Foucault, on the other, the Collective applied the idea of the subaltern to Indian historiography (and later culture, more broadly) and hence to a colonial and postcolonial context. The Collective's agenda in the first several volumes was summarized by its founder, Ranajit Guha, who

suggested that nationalist historiography, produced by European, American, and Indian elites, could not represent the historical realities of nonelites. Guha (1983: 43) described this situation as the "failure of the [Indian] nation to come into its own," to expand beyond explorations of the past centered on the activities and concerns of elites. Guha has defined the regular use of the term "subaltern" by the Collective as "a name for the general attribute of subordination in South Asian society whether this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender, and office or in any other way" (1988: 35). Over two decades, and twelve volumes, the Collective has published essays that engage the site of the subaltern in many ways but with particular emphasis on history, politics, and culture and, in later volumes, gender as well. Critics have noted a shift from the work of the early decade (epitomized in the work of such figures as Shahid Amin, David Arnold, Partha Chatterjee, Ranajit Guha, and Gyan Pandey), wherein one found a greater emphasis on documenting the historical condition of the subaltern as a class in South Asia and marking moments of "peasant insurgency," to a later engagement with cultural and social theory (Dipesh Chakrabarty, Gyan Prakash, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak are representative) filtered through the lens of subaltern subjectivity more generally and applied to transglobal issues of theorizing culture and historiography.[2]

The deployment of the critical term *subaltern* has grown outside the bounds of the edited series, expanding into numerous monographs by authors published within the series and by authors outside this group. Subaltern, as a category of investigation, is present in East Asian Studies (Gladney 2004), African Studies (Kandeh 2004), and Education Studies (Apple and Kristen 2006). Most notably outside South Asia, one finds the study of the subaltern has flourished in Latin American Studies, with the founding of the Latin America Subaltern Studies Group in 1993 (see Latin America Subaltern Studies Group 1993; Rabasa, Sanjinés, and Carr 1996; Rodríguez 2001). These contexts increasingly expand the definition of the "subaltern" outside the confines of "peasant insurgency" and postcolonial studies, as do the various theoretical investments made with the term as interventions into literary studies, historiography, anthropology, sociology, and other fields.

A commonality woven throughout this body of literature is the way in which religion (primarily as an anthropological and epistemological category) appears conjoined to the subaltern, and here we see a significant departure from both traditional Marxism and Gramscian Marxism (see Novetzke 2006; see also Patton 2005). For Marx, religion is ambiguous: infamously the "opiate of the masses" yet, at least in German intellectual history, "the criticism of religion is the premise of all criticism" (1986: 301), which is to say, the central problematic of the bourgeoisie and the public sphere. For Gramsci (1995: 1–137), writing in Italy in the interwar years, religion is synonymous with the Roman Catholic Church, a participant in the hegemony of "common sense" that suppresses the subaltern. Yet from the earliest work of the Collective to the numerous important monographs produced by its principal members (especially Dipesh Chakrabarty, Partha Chatterjee, and Gyan Prakash), religion has been a central feature of "subaltern consciousness" and often in a way that expresses "insurgency" rather than acquiescence to hegemonies of power. In the next

section of this chapter, we discuss the ways in which members of the Collective have engaged this relationship between religion and the condition of subalternity in the context of South Asia and especially of Hinduism. The third section investigates how some studies of Hinduism not situated within the field of Subaltern Studies have nonetheless explored some of the same concerns of how the subaltern condition is expressed, engaged, and mitigated.

Hinduism in Subaltern Studies

How do Subaltern Studies scholars approach their material when a peasant resistance movement and a Hindu religious movement are one and the same phenomenon? The key founding member of the Subaltern Studies Collective, Ranajit Guha, has displayed an intriguing combination of Marxist materialist historiography and an abiding interest in religion, and in particular Hinduism, as it is practiced among India's subaltern communities and among India's Hindu elite. In an essay in the second volume of Subaltern Studies, Guha (1983) discussed a *hūl*, or "uprising," in 1855–56 undertaken by the Santals, a tribal group well represented in northeastern India, in the modern-day regions of Bihar, Orissa, and West Bengal. The economic explanation for the uprising is simple: The Santal believed that land they cleared for agriculture was their property, whereas the colonial authority laid claim to the land through the land-tenure system in place in the early nineteenth century. Discussing this uprising, Guha studies the testimonials of Santals who stood trial in Calcutta for the uprising. Rather than cite the economic reasons for their action, they attributed their activities to the divine call of their ″hākur, their chief diety, as well as to various miracles the deity engendered, and not to any materialist reason. Guha states,

> Religiosity was, by all accounts, central to the [Santal] *hool*. The notion of power which inspired it…[was] explicitly religious in character. It was not that power was a content wrapped up in a form external to it called religion.…It is not possible to speak of insurgency in this case except as religious consciousness" (1983: 34).

Guha uses this particular historical moment to challenge the way in which historians dismiss explanations given by historical agents when those explanations fall outside the paradigms of historical explicability. In this case, religion stands outside the rational explanatory power of normative historiography. Guha, who composed only six essays within the twelve volumes published to date, also returned to the subject of religion in his famous essay, "Dominance Without Hegemony and Its Historiography" (1989), especially when discussing the elite uses of Hinduism (both the invocations of *dharma* and of *bhakti*) (especially pages 244–70), and in discussions of an abortion and the death of a low-caste Bagḍi Vaiṣṇava woman, Chandra, in Bengal in 1849 (1987) and of caste as a mode of discipline and the *svadeśī* movement before independence (1992). In these last examples, religion as "Hinduism" is exploitative and coercive rather than defiant: an expression of elite hegemony rather than subaltern agency.

An even greater concern with religion, and in particular with Hinduism, is evident in the contributions of Partha Chatterjee, another of the principal members of

the Collective. In the first volume of the series, Chatterjee (1982) demonstrates how Hinduism deeply influenced communal identification in agrarian contexts, appearing as a weapon of dominance (wielded by a Hindu majority under a secularist banner) and a foil for resistance, uniting Muslim peasants. In "Caste and Subaltern Consciousness" (1989) in the sixth volume of the series, Chatterjee juxtaposes "Brahminical religion" with "the beliefs and practices of subordinate caste groups" (169). Chatterjee (1989: 172) understands religion in this essay to be a common fabric shared by elite and subaltern alike but which is restructured, even inverted, by the subaltern as a means of marking the intention of insurgency. In doing so, he aligns Hinduism as "Brahminical religion" with caste as an anthropological practice, while tapping "popular religions" for modes of resistance.

Chatterjee reads religious history along the lines of a dialectic between elite religious force and a subaltern inversion of that force, and this dialectic is evident from a later essay (1992) that examines the life and recorded discourses of the Bengali mystic, Rāmakṛṣṇa (1836–86) in relation to the construction of a middle-class cultural identity in Bengal. Here we have Chatterjee's (1992: 68) influential equation of the "private" and "inner" with the "secret history" of India, a history in which religion, and particularly Hinduism, deeply influenced resistance to "the most universalist justificatory resources produced by post-Enlightenment rationalist discourse," which is to say, the discourse of European colonialism.[3]

Studies by two other key members of the Collective—Dipesh Chakrabarty and Gyan Prakash—are also indicative of the way in which religion, and particularly Hinduism, is central to the study of subaltern agency in colonial and postcolonial contexts. However, departing from Guha and Chatterjee, these two authors use examples of religion as subaltern consciousness to think through large issues of postcolonial epistemology, particularly in the context of historiography. Prakash's widely read essay on the "Impossibility of Subaltern History" (2000) provides a cogent treatment of how religion is a site for the management of a culture's relationship to modernity and "Western reason" (293) while at the same time constituting a locus of resistance against hegemony. The genealogy for this idea is generated within a postcolonial understanding of the ways in which "indigenous" religious practices can challenge, subvert, and emend the hegemony of colonial modernity; in other words, this is not a study of religion in the service of the colonial (or other) state but as a mode of resistance to the state's hegemonic coercion, a position similar to that given to Rāmakṛṣṇa by Chatterjee (1992). Prakash's (2000: 293) discussion involves the ways in which the reformist agenda of late colonialism in India, the Ārya Samāj, sought to excise "superstition," of which *purāṇa* or "mythic" literature was exemplary, from "a rational religion of the nation," epitomized by Vedic Hinduism in reformist thought. Prakash finds in the failure of this project "the possibility of overcoming the imperative to arrange culture and power according to the demands of Hinduism as a rational religion of the nation and to construe religion according to the demands of western reason" (2000: 293). He argues astutely that Western reason seeks a certain kind of religion, one conforming to a rational understanding of this anthropological category as it has grown within Western academic fields of knowledge. However, religion, in its

multiple and sometimes nonrational formulations, resists a single character, in Prakash's view. While discussing the work of Chatterjee, Prakash (1999: 202) notes that Chatterjee delineates the "imagination of the nation" as a space constituting an "inner sphere, a 'spiritual' domain," and this space, in both authors' estimation, is one conditioned by new forms of Hinduism that resist what we might consider new forms of "Christianity" in the guise of colonial humanism.

Chakrabarty recalls Guha's study of the "Prose of Counter-Insurgency" in *Provincializing Europe* (2000). Chakrabarty notes that Guha, in the work of making "the subaltern the sovereign subject of history, to take their experiences and thought seriously," found "a phenomenon common in the lives of the peasants: the agency of supernatural beings" (2000: 102–3). Following Guha's critique of Erik Hobsbawm's designation of peasants as "pre-political," Chakrabarty (2000: 12–13) reiterates from Guha that the "peasant-but-modern" sphere is one that integrates the supernatural with the machinations of politics, a field of power available to subalterns that reflects the access to networks and worldviews through which they operate. This alignment of subaltern consciousness with the material of religion intrudes on the authorized space of elite historiography. Chakrabarty disapprovingly writes: "Historians will grant the supernatural a place in somebody's belief system or ritual practices, but to ascribe to it any real agency in historical events will be [to] go against the rules of evidence that gives historical discourse procedures for settling disputes about the past" (2000: 104).

For Chakrabarty, histories written through the logic of religious sentiment constitute "subaltern pasts, pasts that cannot ever enter academic history as belonging to the historian's own position," because a modern historian, "unlike the Santal, cannot invoke the supernatural in explaining/describing an event" (2000: 105–6). Chakrabarty, here and elsewhere, wishes to argue for ways in which the political and the religious are articulated simultaneously and, in India, this articulation is very frequently within the sphere of "Hinduism" (2002: 22–28). Thus, the problem of "religion" in the work of the Collective is engaged on several levels simultaneously: the politics, the social, and the historical at once.

Hinduism Assessed

The majority of invocations of Hinduism in the work of the Collective can be grouped under three rubrics: (1) religion as definitive of subaltern consciousness and thus a vehicle of insurgency and resistance among nonelites; (2) religion as the "private" or "secret" sphere of the middle class under colonial rule, which is often also construed as antithetical to hallmarks of modernity, science, and reason in the service of colonialism, thus a means of resistance for urban elites against colonial dominance; and (3) religion as a sociopolitical form of dominance itself, usually in relation to nationalist or independence movements in the colonial period or postcolonial nationalisms, urban civil social forms, or other coercive forms—thus, here, religion is a form of oppression rather than resistance. Let us look at these three forms in turn. It should be noted at this point that these forms are heuristic categories only, and there is a great deal of overlap and "gray areas" between them.

In the first category, we have the hallmark essay of Guha on the Santals noted above, though this is not strictly about Hinduism. We can cite the work of David Arnold (1982: 96–101) in the first Subaltern publication; he noticed the way in which religion (a syncretism of Hinduism and "tribal" religion) motivated subaltern "hillmen" in Andhra, linking them to their neighbors and also distinguishing their beliefs. In the third volume, Arnold (1984) investigated Hindu cosmologies of responsibility (*dharma*) during a time of famine in Madras in the late nineteenth century. In the same volume, David Hardiman (1984) observed how religious practice provided a position in the religioeconomic sphere for *ādivāsī*s ("original inhabitants") in South Gujarat as part of the Devī or "Goddess" movement in a way reminiscent of the Santal movements of the century before. Saurabh Dube (1992) traced religion as "myth" and "symbol" in the Satnāmpanth of northern India, a Hindu religious community of Camārs, or "Untouchables," founded in the nineteenth century.[4] Tanika Sarkar (1985) wrote about the charismatic tribal leader Jitu Santal, returning to the group studied by Guha in 1983 but highlighting the efforts by Jitu in the early twentieth century to transform Santals into normative Hindus. We also have the investigation of religion, history, and place in Tamil Nadu by Sundar Kaali (1999), which uses oral history—often the "archive" for the recovery of subaltern voices—and a study of "spatial politics" to uncover the history of Tiruppuvanam's urban mode of Śaivism among subaltern communities, both urban and rural. Consider also Shahid Amin's (1984) study of how Mohandas K. Gandhi became a divine, miraculous figure in Gorakhpur, where Amin teases out the implications of Gandhi's hagiographical, Hindu character. In Amin's view, Gorakhpur villagers did not simplistically respond to the "holy man" Mahātmā Gandhi but rather developed a kind of millennialism whereby *svarāj* figured directly as a form of local political agency.

Surprisingly, perhaps, the particular way of engaging religion, and specifically Hinduism, by the Collective that sees religion as the vehicle for subaltern agency and articulation is the least presented category of the three we have outlined. Though we return to this issue below, it is worth noting that, though Gramsci himself understood religion, this more complex view of Hinduism as agency would require a larger view of Hinduism than is usually embraced by Subaltern Studies authors.

What is more common is the second category, the use of religion as a mode of resisting "colonial hegemony" or "modernity" by elites in India. In the second category, we can consider most of the work of Chatterjee that engages religion, and especially Rāmakṛṣṇa, and essays by Sumit Sarkar, such as his reading of the "Kalki Avatar" scandal in early twentieth-century Bengal and its reception in the Bengali public sphere (1989, see also 1984: especially 308–17). Sarkar, who has subsequently left the Collective, has a somewhat ambivalent view of Hinduism. At times, Sarkar suggests that Hinduism appears crucial to understanding "subaltern militancy," as in an essay in the third Subaltern Studies volume wherein he (1984: 309) discusses Gandhian civil protest in Bengal. Yet his understanding of religion seems pejorative at times. He qualifies religion as "magico-religious" and invokes Marx's comments on religion—where we find the infamous "opium" metaphor (S. Sarkar 1984: 308, 310). Sarkar (1984: 308) understands subaltern militancy that invokes religion to be uninformed by

a "disenchantment with the world" that is the product of Western Enlightenment. Thus, Sarkar also appears to suggest a previous "enchanted" vision, one lacking a rational sense of the real, which is replaced by the magical.

On the contrary, Prakash (1996) situates religion in a counterpoise to science, as we saw above, and, as such, in a dialectic of resistance not subordination (see also his 1999). We might also include the work of Chakrabarty, both in the pages of the series (1994) and in separate monographs (2000, 2002), wherein he grapples with the possibilities and limitations of "religion" as an epistemological category in the context of historiography.

In general, urban and "modern" forms of Hinduism are the most likely candidates for sites of "resistance" of elite Indians against the dominance of European thought-forms. Yet these same sites of resistance easily transform into sites of internalized oppression, what Sheldon Pollock (1993a) has called "deep Orientalism."

The oppressive use of Hinduism as a political or social force—our third category—might include Gyan Pandey's essay, "Rallying Round the Cow" (1983), in the second Subaltern Studies volume, wherein he reads the discourse of communalist violence between Hindus and Muslims in the Bhojpuri area of northern India in the 1890s and 1910s as a product of the skillful manipulation of Hindu sentiment. Pandey further argues that peasant movements, such as the Eka and the Kisān Sabhā in 1921, were not Congress-inspired and therefore "top-down" but rather motivated by the structure of land ownership that led to land shortages and high rents. Likewise, his essay, "The Prose of Otherness" (1994), observes the description, often in Hindu religious terms, of the "fanatics" who are the antithesis of the modern, rational citizen.

In addition, we might consider Ishita Banerjee Dube's (1999) compelling study of religious reification and jurisprudence in Orissa and Shail Mayaram's (1999) study of partition violence in Mewat.[5] Satish Deshpande (2000) and, to a lesser extent, Qadri Ismail (2000) directly engage religion and nationalism in India and Sri Lanka, respectively. In a publication outside the scope of the Collective's series, S. Sarkar (1985), who at this point had left the Collective, finds that Hinduism provides a means of expression and social organization but also quells action with a narrative of subordination, particularly in relation to *bhakti*, a thought system, he contends, that presents subalterns with a logic for bearing their oppressive conditions. Here he is in agreement with Guha, who in his essay "Discipline and Mobilize" (1992), refers to the *svadeśī* use of Hinduism as "soul control" (112).

Ambivalence Assessed

Overall, we can see a consistent concern with religion, and in particular with Hinduism, in the work of the Collective generally, but this concern oscillates between two positions: (1) a positive assessment of Hindu expression and belief as part of the "prose of counterinsurgency" or of the "secret history" of the Indian nation under the radar of colonialism and modernity, and (2) the negative assessment of Hinduism (often Brāhmaṇical Hinduism set in equation with caste) as a coercive force in nationalist and postcolonial contexts.

It is worth exploring here in a little more depth the nature of the ambivalence about Hinduism (or indeed any religion) as a form of agency. Early attempts to deal with religious aspects of peasant consciousness led to the problem of the Subaltern Studies' relationship to conventional Marxist theory. Early on, Chatterjee (1983: 65) argued that peasant modes of being cannot be called simply class consciousness but are more complex types of consciousness and practice. Rosalind O'Hanlon (1988; 2000) also put forward the view that changes in religion, as well as such other essentialized categories as caste or nation, present the scholar with "the problem of mapping what on the surface look like fundamental transformations of mentality" (2000: 92-93). She also noted that Subaltern Studies must trace the origins of such transformations in their relationship to the state or to organized religions, without slipping into a rigid teleology or a denial of historical specificity.

This concern grew even stronger as Subaltern Studies became deeply inflected with postmodern cultural studies, especially in the United States. Many assessments of this trend trace its beginnings to the publication of Edward Said's *Orientalism*, a hugely influential work concerned with Western intellectual tradition's representation of its colonial subjects, particularly those in the Middle East. Said's post–Orientalist perspectives then combined with contemporary postmodern concerns with textual and discourse analysis; through this confluence postcolonial studies became the reigning episteme through which much of the subaltern was then studied. Later, Said himself had misgivings about the ways in which "Post-orientalism" became an academic field in its own right. However, leading writers in the new field of postcolonial studies took up the questions of philosophy, historiography, and cultural representation. From this postcolonial perspective, they have argued forcefully for several basic changes in the study of Third World histories: (1) explorations of cultural difference (inspired in part by Jacques Derrida's idea of *différance*); (2) nonessentialized cultural categories; and (3) the writing of a postfoundationalist and a postnationalist historiography (Bhabha 1994; Chakrabarty 1992, 2000; Prakash 1992, 1994, 1996; Spivak 1985a,b). Among many other priorities, these writers state the need for writing a history that is influenced neither philosophically by an idea of a single cultural "mind" that applies to all members of a society nor anachronistically by a false idea of a unifying nation or set of origins set somewhere in a hoary past.

Given these views, many subaltern writers are overtly suspicious of disciplines and fields, such as religious studies, and particularly the study of Hinduism, in the Western academy. Such a field is, in their view, prone to hegemonic and essentializing constructions of the other under a dominant institutionalized gaze. However, subaltern theorists are also concerned among themselves about the reification of religion in their own writings. Some later postmodern writers, such as Dipankar Gupta (1985), have criticized the tendency in subaltern writers to attribute primordiality to the masses or to assume a traditional consciousness or even primordial loyalties of religion, community, kinship, and language. Many subaltern writers have wondered aloud whether subaltern ideas of a moral community, albeit in the guise of "folk" Hindu values of peasant community, are nonetheless well on their way to yet another essentializing category. If peasant or worker consciousness can be reified and severed from history in this way, why not caste, nation, or most importantly for our purposes,

Hindu religious community? Thus the problem remains. As one Subaltern Studies critic put it, although many subaltern writers accept the autonomy of peasants, their accounts are ultimately not that different from the processes of Sanskritization, Islamicization, or popularization—ideas that have all come under fire for essentializing and reifying historical processes of change (Bayly 1988, 2000: 2). How can subaltern writing avoid the problem of making the community an "it" with firm boundaries and, as Marxist secularists increasingly suspect, "expressing a sympathy for the Hindu religious as a way of defining that community?" (Spivak 2000: 326).

The Subaltern in Hindu Studies

The reaction of the religious studies scholarly community to the idea of subalternity has been somewhat less ambivalent than the reaction of Subaltern Studies to the phenomenon of religion. Although the Subaltern school, even in its more marked "cultural studies" form of later years, is mostly ambivalent (and occasionally hostile) to the idea of religion as a category of analysis, many students of Hinduism have welcomed the category of the subaltern. Though not all scholars of Hinduism are convinced by the Subaltern Studies methods and commitments (see, for instance, Smith and Caldwell 2000),[6] some have embraced much of the Gramscian tradition in two significant ways: (1) Subalternist writing can further define and criticize religious studies' own Orientalist perspectives, both colonial and postcolonial, and (2) more postcolonial writing in Subaltern Studies can help religious studies scholars to nuance their descriptions of the cultural identity of the religious groups with whom they concern themselves.

Many scholars of religion, such as those mentioned above and their numerous area studies counterparts, would not fundamentally disagree with the premises of later Subaltern school works on religion, such as those essays found in the 1992 volume of Subaltern Studies: Chatterjee's study of the Rāmakṛṣṇa movement as a religion of urban domesticity, and S. Dube's study of the construction of mythic communities in Chhattisgarh. More generally, Richard King addresses Subaltern Studies' later, more postmodern incarnations: His *Orientalism and Religion* (1999), outlines some of the issues in the relationship between religious and postcolonial studies.

To be sure, early works in social movements and religion may have engaged many of the same issues that Subaltern Studies scholars have engaged, only without explicit use of the term. One might say that Owen M. Lynch's 1969 treatment of the religion of untouchables in his now classic *Politics of Untouchability* is one of the best, and earliest, explorations of the relationship between religion and oppression. Part of Lynch's contribution is that he sees a long tradition of sants, both from within the category of Hinduism and without, that have abjured the caste system (1969: 139-40). Thus, there might be not only *moments* of agency in religious movements on which social resisters might call but long-standing *traditions*. This idea of a tradition of religious resistance as such, based on religious experience, is a controversial one on which Subalternists and Religionists may not agree.

The Literature

The earlier works of Eleanor Zelliot and David N. Lorenzen also come immediately to mind as excellent early examples of ways in which late medieval and early modern *bhakti*, or devotional, movements also focus on modes of empowerment and social change. Lorenzen's earlier (1987) work on Kabīr argues that Kabīr's poetry can and should be read as a form of social protest—perhaps even more persuasively than as a form of "religious devotion" per se. Zelliot (1980) takes a similar view on Eknāth in her article published about the same time (see also Israel and Wagle 1987). John Stratton Hawley's anthology of *bhakti* writings (including Sūrdās, Mīrābāī, Ravidās, and Kabīr) coedited with Mark Jurgensmeyer (1988) also raises this question of the role of *bhakti* in social resistance, as do his slightly later writings on Mira (1995) and *bhakti* and social democracy (1996).

About a decade later, as more Subaltern Studies work was read in departments of religion and anthropology in India, Europe, and the United States, work in the history and anthropology of religion explicitly using the ideas of Subaltern Studies began to appear. Norbert Peabody (1997) thinks through the questions of hegemony and resistance in the performance of the *Rāmāyaṇa* in North India—arguing that certain "mainstream" modes of expression, such as the Hindu *Rāmāyaṇa*, can also be an effective fulcrum for expressions of dissent, precisely because they are seen as mainstream. So, too, Peter Gaeffke (1998) focuses on *bhakti* tradition in North India as a mode of forming community identity which can in turn be a basis for political action.

Even the idea of religious experience per se became open to examination with a subaltern lens: Felix Wilfred, anticipating Christian Novetzke's recent, more theoretical article on religious experience and the subaltern (2006), writes about untouchables in Tamil Nadu in his work "Subaltern Religious Experience," in a 1998 *Journal of Dharma* issue that takes up some of these important themes. A later issue of that same journal, edited by Thomas Kadankavil (2001), takes up the subaltern theme more comprehensively and includes work on apocalypticism and nationalism in subaltern perspectives, as well as the interaction between Christian and Hindu subaltern identities (see in particular Forsthoefl's [2001] piece on apocalypticism as a creative form of agency). The larger question that has been opened in these pieces, and will continue to be debated, is whether the idea of an authentic religious experience can be combined with a commitment to analyzing historical agency in a Hindu religious movement.

In the mid-late 1990s and continuing into the present, studies of specific *sant*s their traditions also began to involve a discussion of subalternity. Ira Bhaskar's "Allegory, Nationalism, and Cultural Change in Indian Cinema" (1998) studies the emergence of nationalism in the film treatment of Tukārām, a sixteenth-century untouchable Maharashtrian saint. Recent dissertations, such as that of Shandip Saha "Creating a Community of Grace: A History of the Puṣṭi Mārga in Northern and Western India (1470–1905)" (2004), also use some Subaltern Studies methods to write new histories of the various *bhakti* movements (see also his 2005). Hawley's later *Three Bhakti Voices* (2005) develops some of the basic insights in *Songs of the Saints* to

discuss the modes of protest and resistance within both the poetry and hagiography of individual *sant*s.

The Subaltern and Hinduism: Recent Work and Unresolved Questions

One of the most important pieces of basic work is that of recovery of lesser-known Hindu saints who may well have contributed to forms of social resistance. Eleanor Zelliot and Rohini Mokashi-Punekar's recent edited volume, *Untouchable Saints* (2005), practices a basic hermeneutics of recovery to bring to light the low-caste saints who have been treated less thoroughly than their mainstream counterparts, such as Mira and Sur. Tirupan Alvar and Nandanar in South India have a quite small corpus of songs attributed to them but are remembered in legend and still held as models of piety. In Maharashtra, the saint Chockamela, his wife Soyrabai and son Karmamela, and Chockamela's sister Nirmala and Banka, her husband, constitute an entire family of devotion, now near-forgotten by the contemporary Dalit movement. In North India, the more well-known Ravidas-Raidas, is also known as Rohidas in the Maharashtra Chamarkar population. The volume features previously untranslated songs and poems of each of these sants, analyses of the dynamics of the sants' lives and movement, and assessments of how and why they "survived" or were "forgotten" in subsequent *bhakti* movements.

Increasingly larger, more general studies of South Asian history, anthropology, and sociology of religions have incorporated ideas friendly to, if not identical with, the ideas of Subaltern Studies.[7] Recently, for example, Lorenzen's *Religious Movements in South Asia 600–1800* (2004) makes a plea for studying religious movements not only as systems of symbols and metaphysics but as social structures and organizations with particular relationships to power—whether that be the empire or the state. R. Champakalashmi's essay, "From Devotion and Dissent to Dominance: The Bhakti of the Tamil ĀÆvārs and Nāyanārs" (2004), and Burton Stein's "Social Mobility and Medieval South Indian Hindu Sects" (1968, 2004), both chronicle the gradual process of decline of dissent within these movements. In his "Rāmāyaṇa and Political Imagination in India" (1993b, 2004), Sheldon Pollock argues that the emergence of *Rāmāyaṇa* images and tales in the period of the twelfth to the fourteenth centuries CE is an imaginative attempt to construct a way of representing the strife between Hindus and Muslims during the period. Richard Burghart (1978, 2004) argues that the rise of the Rāmānandī tradition had as much to do with competition between traditions for scarce resources (devotees, pilgrimage routes, and political patronage) as it did with the actual *sant* himself. P. D. Barthwal (1978) argues that Kabīr and similar *sant* movements arose from a double and not a single oppression: in his view, both the punitive policies of Mughul rulers and the discriminatory practices of high-caste Hindus led to the formation of the Kabīr movement. Though many of these authors do not use explicitly subaltern terms in their work, their concerns with the political contexts and social agency of the various groups falling under the Hindu religion is very much consonant with the Gramscian views of the subalternists.

The discussion of subalternity in Hinduism is not truly complete, however, without a brief discussion of the relationship between Hindus and Dalit theology.

Much of the concern with Dalit theology has to do with its double rejection of both high-caste Hindu oppression, such as that articulated as early as B. R. Ambedkar and studied by Zelliot and many others, and high-caste Indian Christian theology, which they viewed as a legacy of missionary Christian theology. Both modes are irrelevant to the needs of Dalits, as James Massey writes:

> Many felt that the theological task of India need not be the preserve of the "Brahmanic Tradition" within the Indian Church, which had always used "intuition, inferiority oriented approach" to theologising. Dalit theologians were of the opinion that the theological and cultural domination of Brahmanic traditions within Indian Christianity, ignoring the rich cultural and religious experience of the Dalits had to be ignored, if not rejected completely (1995, cited in Oommen,2000:22).[8]

As a result, many tribal and scheduled caste writers and thinkers are interacting both with and very much against Hindu (and mainstream Christian) ideas and practices as they develop their own liberational ways of thinking. Oddly enough, this explicitly religious usage is somewhat consonant with Spivak's recent, and rather remarkable, statement that subaltern theology (religious thought as a form of political resistance) cannot be ignored, for if it is then Subaltern Studies becomes a matter of law enforcement rather than "agency in the active voice." (1999: 8ff; see also 2000: 326-7).

There is, however, much more to be done. With the exception of Sheldon Pollock (1993, 2005),[9] whose work on precolonial Orientalism is sympathetic to subaltern concerns, there are very few studies of culture in ancient or even premodern India that look at questions of subalternity as such. A fresh analysis of the *sudra* in ancient India and the relationship between *sudra*s and women could be a real contribution from a Subalternist perspective. Aloka asher-Sen's *Subordinate and Marginal Groups in Early India* (2004) is an excellent beginning toward this massive project.

Pandey[10] more generally and Wakankar[11] among others have opened up the overall question of how the precolonial has been framed by the "postcolonial" worldview, including Subaltern Studies, and this is an excellent beginning. Wakankar and Zelliot and Mokashi-Punekar's recent work (2005) untouchable *sant*s raises the issue of why some untouchable religious movements are remembered and some are not, and these kinds of questions deserve full analysis as we juxtapose the precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial movements. Indeed, the *sant*s are in a certain sense figures that could push subalternists beyond their traditionally colonial and postcolonial emphases.

As mentioned above, the thorny question of the authenticity of religious experience is raised by Christian Novetzke (2006) has yet to be fully engaged by theorists on both sides of the issue. As mentioned above, Subaltern Studies writers have acknowledged the possibility of religious language and rhetoric as a kind of historical agency of resistance. However, whether they would acknowledge the basic validity of

an inner experience that moves beyond historical agency, as many religionists do, is another issue. Zelliot and Mokashi-Punekar's volume (2005) and the essays by Prentiss, Lochtefeld, and others in that volume assume the validity of religious worlds of the *sant*s. Many scholars of Hinduism do not feel the need to use categories of subalternity precisely because they want to assert the validity of such religious worlds. Subaltern scholars might argue that they are unwilling to troubled their own assumptions about the "givenness" of these worlds.

In addition, the idea of the subaltern as it might move across Hindu diasporic boundaries is another fresh venue for research and theoretical engagement. How might we rethink the questions of relative subalternity in complex situations wherein Hindus are a "minority" in one country and a majority in another? Though this issue has been raised in recent shorter works (see, for instance, Patton and Ram-Prasad 2006), it has not been fully treated in a full-length historical study.

Real theoretical and historical engagement between the ideas of the subaltern citizen and the ideas of Hindu thought and practice has just begun. These two intellectual traditions are still very rarely discussed in the same classrooms of academe. It is our hope that, in the narrow meeting place where "agency" and "religious identity" are one and the same, the two traditions be discussed together more frequently but without tiresome repetition of the centuries-old opposition between Gramscian-Marxist and religious perspectives. The next generation of scholars of South Asia would greatly benefit from the mutual critique and enlightenment that would be sure to ensue.

Notes

1 The key members include (in alphabetical order) Shahid Amin, David Arnold, Gautam Bhadra, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Partha Chatterjee, Ranajit Guha, and Gyan Pandey.

2 For "strategic essentialism," see Spivak (1988). For critiques of the Collective's work, see Ludden 2001; Masselos 1992; O'Hanlon (1988).

3 The idea of the "secret history" of India is much evident one year later in Chatterjee 1993, especially in the final chapter. See also Chatterjee's other essays in the series' volumes (1984, 1994). On Rāmakṛṣṇa, see S. Sarkar (1985, 1993).

4 Dube is not studying the earlier Satnāmī tradition, founded in the sixteenth century, which is a more syncretic mix of Hinduism and Islam.

5 Religion is more fully explored in Mayaram's monograph, *Against History, Against State* (2003).

6 Smith and Caldwell (2000: 708–9) argue that though subaltern views claim to speak for the other and reject Western scholarship, they are still using Western modes of argumentation to make their points. See also Illaih (1996); Omvedt (1995), where she discusses the Dalit rejection of Sanskrit Hinduism and colonial curriculum of FIRST NAME ton and the Bible.

7 For a larger scope anthropological study that engages the issue of subalternity and the nation, see Narayan (2005); Shah (2006).

8 For an overview and a list of important thinkers in this field, see Oommen (2000). See also Omvedt (1995), wherein the same critique is made; Das and Massey (1995); Massey (1995); Nirmal (N.d. 1989). More "insider" Christian perspectives might include Clarke (1998: 40); see also Nirmal (1994).

9 However, "religion" as such is not Pollock's concern nor a category he wishes to engage.

10 Pandey's compelling recent paper, "Subaltern Citizens and Their Histories" (2006) is an excellent suggestion that, to move away from an essentialized view of the "peasant" consciousness as discussed earlier in this chapter, we open up the idea of the subaltern and look at relative questions of power in any given relationship within the state. Re-presenting the subaltern as subaltern citizen gives us new lens on the possibilities of agency and belonging.

11 Wakankar (2006a,b) looks at early modern *bhakti* movements as a kind of anti-state sensibility that gets written out of the nationalist movements of the nineteenth century.

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