

Short Essay

WHO CAN SPEAK, OR WRITE, FOR WHOM?:
MEDITATIONS ON THE QUESTION OF
VOICE IN HISTORY

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Since anti-foundational histories forcefully raised questions about the denial of voice to marginalized persons and groups in mainstream history writing in South Asia in the early 1980s, progressive histories where those who are writing are not writing about themselves – as in their clearly identified communities – have suffered from the guilt of ‘co-opting’ subaltern voices and have become confused about the way forward. This has happened in the shadow of the rise and rise of identitarian politics, historically shaped by colonial frameworks of knowledge production and governance, neo-colonial continuation of these regimes under newer-looking, often ‘democratic’, dispensations, and the inherent and attendant tensions of capitalist expansion, in a comprehensive sense, that underlie these systems. One of the most difficult to resist pressures for an identitarian view of the world has come from subaltern mobilizations where urgent life-and-death matters cannot be sublimated for the sake of academic, even if historically legitimate, nuance.

Very simply speaking, can men write histories of women, or even general histories for everybody? Can caste historians write histories of the subaltern castes and tribes? Can the rich write histories of the poor? To these questions, I want to pose another set of questions that are often not articulated because they are politically incorrect. Can rich, upper caste women write histories of poor, subaltern caste women? Can subaltern caste men write histories of the women in their communities? Can rich, elite tribal persons write histories of poor, subaltern tribal people? Can heteronormative people write histories of those who are of other sexualities? Can human beings write histories of the environment? To quote a young scholar, to

whom his professor posed a question: Can we historians, who live in our times, speak for those who lived in other times?

It is possible to keep cancelling out persons, groups, peoples in this way until no one can speak for anyone. In a world where conflicts over shrinking resources are likely to intensify and become messier, this 'politics of revenge' is bound to be counter-productive. We know too much about 'Revolutions' to wait in hope for them, or to expect them to be anything other than what they literally mean, and have historically turned out to be, the re-inscription of structures of power in new guises.

In a world where progressive thought has wider currency than ever before, and where within the academia there is considerable self-reflexivity, it might be possible to build alliances among the empathetic to increasingly write in ways that both attend to the concerns of on-the-ground subaltern struggles as well as try to escape the infrastructural traps that come with identitarian positions. What I am thinking of is 'strategic anti-essentialism', not as a stop-gap, temporary position, but as anticipation of long-term, inherent and fundamental critiques of structures of power.

And this should not be construed as a ruse of the established elites, or forces of neo-liberal capital as sometimes argued in criticisms of post-colonial writings, to reinscribe older structures of power while appearing to be progressive. For the majority of us, who are from historically dominant groups and continue to inhabit, in many ways, those structures of power, but are genuinely keen to deepen our mutual freedoms, equalities and diversities – and I deliberately mention these in the plural – it is important to not get bogged in self-doubt. The only way forward is to continue to reach out and expand alliances of empathy. I believe that there are many on the other side, or what has been made to appear as a rigid, unfordable divide, reaching out. In fact, as all of us know from our 'daily' experience, conversations, and connections, are being made across this putative divide all the time because of the fundamental nature of subjectivities and societies.

My argument is based on the assumption that identities always lie at the intersections of other identities; and are always multiple and irreducible. Here I will draw from the writings of J. N. Mohanty to make my point. Modern ways of looking at the world are based primarily on the premise that identities are unitary, pristine and fixed. Writes Mohanty:

The theory of inter-subjectivity requires that the concept of the human subject as a self-enclosed ego, a Leibnizian windowless monad, autonomous sovereign self in

*its own world, be given up and be replaced by a subjectivity which is open to others, has windows to the world, is responsible and sensitive to others.*¹

Later he adds:

*It would be as much a mistake to regard each culture to be a self-enclosed world. A culture is not an identity, but differences held together by history and not logic. Not being self-complete, it opens out to others.*²

Let me labour this point through examples of my experience during fieldwork in 2011-12. At that time, I was doing fieldwork for my doctoral dissertation at Emory in the areas of the erstwhile princely state of Kanker in central India (now in the state of Chhattisgarh), during which I was seeking to explore the ways in which the mixed tribe-caste communities of the region spoke about the princely state and its raja in the oral accounts given in the course of their ancestral deity practices.³ The express task was one of ‘recovering’ tribal voices to write a history of the afore-mentioned colonial-princely state, a ‘history from below’. But the legacy of anthropology, and works of critical theory that doubted if the subaltern could ever speak, cast a deep shadow over my project. My enterprise was doubly doomed as I was the scion of the princely family in question, ceremonially in the position of the raja – however anomalous that position was in post-colonial India – in these ancestral deity rituals which had a strong royalist aspect. Conceptually, I was the entity to whom, in fact *against* whom, ‘resistance’ was to be expressed in these accounts. How could I represent these communities if I inhabited a location as historically antagonistic as one could be? Surely, I was likely to read all the prejudices of my historical position back into the new narrative I was weaving; and the very task I had set out to accomplish would get undone. Even friends, genuine academics all, were sceptical about my position and found a ‘conflict of interest’ all too evident and unavoidable in this endeavour.

The way out was suggested by the peoples in these communities. Though princely states merged with the Union of India in 1947-48, and princely exceptionalism was abolished in 1971, the memory and practices of the princely system, deeply woven into local lives historically, still provided for a remarkable continuance of princely roles in local ‘cultural/religious’ activities, one such set being these ancestral deity rituals.⁴ What I found was that in these rituals and their attendant accounts, the people articulated their conceptions of their past; and within them, their understanding of the colonial-princely polity. The presence of the raja in these rituals, as I found out, must have been a powerful means of engaging the state in

earlier times. My ritual presence in these practices now, often actively solicited, although it was also customary, was mnemonic in recalling that engagement and speaking about it.

Whether I wanted or not, I was already a part of that world of ancestral deities in these communities' imagination of their cosmos. And often in a role that was not necessarily antagonistic. The raja's ancestors were often joined to tribal ancestors in the conception of the community, or *bhumkal*, meaning 'people of the land'.⁵ In one of the key rituals of the lives of these communities, called *madai*, meaning the union of forces for the protection of the land, celebrated each year across the region but beginning with a central fair in the capital of Kanker town, the ancestral and other benign powers array the raja alongside them for the safeguarding of the land, or *bhum*, against the forces inimical to life and nurture, or the *bairasu*.⁶ Together, the *bhumkal*, their ancestors, and the raja, clear land for cultivation, rid the people of the menace of wild animals, propitiate the elements for plentiful rainfall, and settle dispute and resolve problems among clans, in the daily life of the villages and during exceptional calamity.⁷ Apart from the royal family's claim to exalted lineage in separation from the people, there is a popular belief about *kala* raja, or the 'dark-complexioned king', one that suggests common ethnicity.

Of course, you find instances of antagonism too. There is a tradition about the raja's brutal punishment of hanging transgressors on top of the hill towering above Kanker town (Garhiya Pahar or Fort-Hill), in full view, for people to see and take lesson.⁸ There are accounts of many conflicts between the raja and the people over land, forests and animals, among other things.⁹ There are ritual taboos that bar the access of the raja to sacred places and persons, including the almost impossible condition of sacrificing a goat on each step of the Garhiya Pahar, in many account representing the centre of the world, to reach the top where, in the instance cited above, the raja shows his power through the public hanging of criminals.¹⁰

But the raja and the *bhumkal* are not hermetically sealed off from each other, but part of the same field of forces where their subjectivities are enmeshed. The forms, structures, content and textures of the ancestral deity practices include the raja in a variety of roles that far exceed the limits of the ruler-ruled binary, and conceptions of identity that is self-contained. The ruler-ruled divide is 'logical' but not 'historical'. In the historical, the contingent, there are always negotiations of power, and the range of possibilities there require a wider vocabulary than that of 'domination-subordination' and 'oppression-resistance'. Also, the binarized view of the world is

generalized and puts forward what should be expected, it does not allow for the differences and contingencies of the actual, lived world. As has been demonstrated, identities were fuzzy and fluid in South Asia, and communities and hierarchies similarly historical before the colonial gaze shaped a homogeneous, unitary, singular and unchanging framework for understanding and even living exclusivist identities. This is not to deny hierarchy, oppression, injustice, and pain, but to take a historical view of things, and to recognize the significance of historically changing relations of power – or what is called ‘politics’ – in determining social relationships, communities and identities. Though new directions in the analyses of texts have opened up the field, ethnography gives access to the everyday in a way that allows us to catch culture, and indeed identity, as ‘differences held together’, and need I say constantly scattered, ‘by history’.

In reflecting on the power dynamics of my position as a raja-researcher (historian-anthropologist), I have meditated as follows:

I approach my project with the acute consciousness of the power-laden position of the raja through which I gain access to the ancestral deity practices and accounts, and the vision that I necessarily project onto others’ accounts through my narrative as a historian. I am aware that my project is located in and enacts multiple relationships of power. I have to recognize the necessarily ‘partial, committed and incomplete’ character of my vision and the coherence I impose on the ... practices and accounts ... Rather than claiming to give voice to my interlocutors, I see myself standing adjacent and listening to them, and offering my interpretation of what they told me. I am under no illusion that I will be able to present my subjects’ point of view as it is, but would also like to emphasize their attempt to dialogue with me. This is my sense of a world in which my location is continuously fraught, but not hopeless.¹¹

Then I focus more specifically on the questions of identity/subjectivity:

Nothing illustrates the point that our worlds are shared better than my double identity as raja and historian-ethnographer, or more correctly, the impossibility of separating these identities. In relation to the narrative voice in this account I am giving you, several scholar colleagues have expressed misgivings about putting myself so centrally out there. But that is precisely the point: my narrative voice moves between many positions as it will, all the time owing up to its many impulses and desires, and showing up the heterogeneous beings we all are, something that it will not be able to do if it shies away from the ‘I’. Although I cannot claim to have become an “insider,” I also wonder if I can pose as an objective “outsider.” I argue that it is the irreducibly plural nature of ourselves, our inescapable intersubjectivity, that affords us the possibility of dialogue, a possibility that we should not dismiss easily.¹²

The practices and accounts I explore and interpret, despite the clear power-filled location from which I do so, make me part of the cosmos of the *bhumkal* where oppositionality is only one of the many sentiments. In fact, that cosmos reworks the very conception of the world and of being in such a way that my present location, fears and guilt become a function of an alien point of view, whose terms of reference are external, even if connected, to the phenomenon. My argument is that only with a certain conception of the self and the other, of culture, identity and subjectivity, which is in the main modern, Western and colonial, that only those seen as belonging to a community can speak for it. Of course, the identities of women, of subaltern castes and of tribes are all deeply felt subjectivities, but they are also at once heterogeneous, multiple, plural and open at a fundamental level. The struggles against relations of power, and the role of academic writing in it, will not go far until the primary basis of those relations, in the conception of differences as absolute, is not kept in mind.

To return to the question with which I began: Who can speak for whom? I believe that there are commensurabilities between identities and subjectivities. The options before us to either expand and deepen them, or to deny them. Mohanty observes:

*My culture and the other culture (read identity/subjectivity) are not separated as the known and the familiar and the unknown and the unfamiliar, but rather by degrees of familiarity, foreign-ness, strangeness. Sometimes I understand myself only through the other. Sometimes the reverse happens. The boundaries are shifting.*¹³

To this let me add the insights of Mikhail Bakhtin:

*No member of a verbal community can find words in the language that are neutral, exempt from the aspirations and evaluations of others, uninhabited by the other's voice. On the contrary, (the speaker) receives the word by other's voice and it remains filled with that voice. (The speaker) intervenes in (this) context from another context, already penetrated by the other's intentions. (The speaker's) intention finds a world already lived in.*¹⁴

I think it is in speaking together, as many voices as possible, that we have the best chance of getting the world to listen.

Notes

1. Jitendra Nath Mohanty, *The Self and Its Other* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 19.
2. Ibid.

3. My thesis subsequently developed into a book, Aditya Pratap Deo, *Kings, Spirits and Memory in Central India: Enchanting the State* (London: Taylor and Francis, 1921).
4. *Ibid.*, pp. 1-20, 61-76.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 17.
6. *Ibid.*, pp. 121-122
7. Aditya Pratap Deo, 'Of Kings and Gods: The Archive of Sovereignty in a Princely State' in Gyanendra Pandey (ed.) *Unarchived Histories* (New York/New Delhi: Routledge, 2013/14); also, by me, 'Spirits of the State', *Seminar*, April 2021.
8. Deo, Deo, *Kings, Spirits and Memory in Central India* *Ibid.*, pp.132-139.
9. *Ibid.*, pp.129-163
10. *Ibid.*, pp. 132-139
11. *Ibid.*, p. 74.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 75.
13. Mohanty, *The Self and the Other*, p. 19.
14. Quoted from Tzvetan Todorov, *Mikhail Bakhtin: The Dialogical Principle*, tr. By Wlad Godzich (Minneapolis: Minneapolis University Press, 1948), p. 48.