

## Note from the Editor

# Human Responses and Understanding the Emergence of Subjectivity: Agency and Voices Across Time

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This issue of the Summerhill Review (2018) understands the interconnections between human responses (combination of actions and emotions) and reactions, the emergence of agency and an assertive subjectivity, a positive engagement of the self and the collective self with the social context, from not merely an inter-disciplinary but also a broad socio-historical perspective. This large canvas highlights the complexities and challenges in our everyday life and those that shape the nature of the political and its connections with negative experience of social marginalization and the positive end of achieving happiness and inner well-being. Hence, the contributions comprising this issue cover a wide-range encompassing the development of political abilities and movement towards inner well-being, the actor's (individual and collective) responses to everyday life and political processes, local and national level developments (such as colonialism, religious conversion, hydropower development, the appropriation of adivasi lands, enforcement and violation of human rights, citizen's litigation and organization of public protests) and towards national and global movements revolving around mindfulness and fostering inner peace. This issue collates article submissions made by fellows and associates of the Indian Institute of Advanced Study Shimla over the last few years, and other emerging scholars. At first glance, these articles stand in isolation with little common ground, but when we dive deeper into their narrative then we realize the

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common thread that ties them together and helps us understand the complexity of our everyday, predicament of the collective and our political life. As a collection, these six articles indicate the connections between several pertinent social themes, geographically diverse social contexts, an increasing use of distinctive methodologies that no longer are confined to disciplinary boundaries and local contexts. Broadly, the issue is looking at the nature of the socio-political in historical contexts, the recent encounter between amalgamating eastern-western contexts and ideas, and locating them in the extensive debates of our humanities and social sciences. The issue is about diversity and grappling with the human condition.

The issue begins by presenting the 'subaltern', who is an ignored agent of political processes, who are often not heard rather than being termed a missing voice. To recover their political agency and subjectivity may require recourse to other histories, and drawing on biographical narratives, as mainstream political narratives may tend to marginalize or submerge their concerns. Hence, recovery and understanding of tribal women's agency is pre-eminently a political concern for us. This may necessitate listening to stories, and re-reading histories and acknowledging biographical accounts. Methodologically, by opening up to voices from below our authors (Arora, Jacob, and Rohmingmawii's papers) seek to fill gaps in our understanding across time and understand conversion, alienation, and political subjective expressions among tribal communities in colonial and post-colonial contexts.

Methodologically, biographies are emerging as a critical arena to understand how the personal and political are deeply intertwined and interlaced in events, and places. A strong autobiographical perspective is

afforded by Jacob's discussion on C.K. Janu's *Mother Forest: The Unfinished Story* as it highlights a narrative of a feminist struggle for survival and dignity, and a petition for understanding the difficult milieu in which adivasi agency has emerged in Kerala. In Janu's own words, 'no one knows the forest as we do. The forest is mother to us. More than a mother because she never abandons us' (2004: 5 cf. Jacob). Painting a very romantic image of tribal as the guardian of the forest, the author narrates how the encroachment of tribal burial lands paved the way for political mobilization and adivasi struggle against a Communist regime. In doing this and advancing such imagery, Jacob's paper inter-connects with Vibha Arora's contribution in this issue. Jacob underscores how an incomplete biographical narrative published as *Mother Forest* highlights the predicament of the tribal communities in Kerala who have been transformed from forest dwellers to forest encroachers in their own land. It narrates a partial life story of an empowered politically conscious adivasi woman who played an important role in the socio-political scenario and raising a strong voice against exploitation as part of state-directed development programs. Jacob argues how emergence of women's agency is one important indicator and mediator of socio-economic changes, and Janu's autobiography although an unfinished one demonstrates the power of change, and emergence of self-confident strident agency among Kerala's tribals in the emergent context of development conflicts. Janu's life testifies how 'instead of being conditioned to be passive objects of dominant history, they have realised the need to be active subjects shaping their own history' (cf. Jacob). The emergence of subjectivity is dominating discussions of historical events, colonial encounters, and expression of political agency; this is especially on the margins of the Indian state that are often neglected by us. Jacob, Arora and Midya's papers focus on and describe development conflicts that are similar across divergent locales ranging from peninsular Kerala to Himalayan Sikkim and North Bengal.

Eco-political subjugation and cultural imperialism are often inter-twined, and culminating in the disappearance of indigenous cultural heritage. A large number of scholars, historians, ethnographers and not necessarily only those belonging to the different states of India's North-east region are increasingly documenting the colonization of different ethnic nationalities residing here, and their cultural-political resistance and armed opposition to expansion of British Imperialism and the Christian missionary activity that followed the imperial flag. The colonial state and the Christian missionaries legitimized their socio-political dominance and interference as an integral part of their white man's burden to civilize the

savage (the head-hunting Naga warrior epitomizing such a cultural stereotype), and transform these warring unruly tribal communities. Political subjugation was accompanied by overall socio-cultural subordination and strong psychological impulses to civilize these 'heathen' communities.

Christianity and its denunciation of 'heathen' practices among the tribal groups and other ethnic communities played a powerful role in bringing social change, influenced nature of political leadership, created new elites, and basis of legitimacy. It will be erroneous to homogenize this process and encounter, and to understate sectarian competition. It is interesting how different sects of Christianity carved their spheres of influence, undermined and interacted with the local tribal religious traditions and led to their disappearance. Contested histories are emerging from these ethnic constituencies and scholars are examining and reinterpreting the colonial encounter, and contextualizing its pervasive influence in the contemporary. Due to widespread religious conversion, many other scholars are providing a critical perspective on missionary activity in contemporary Manipur, Nagaland, Meghalaya, Sikkim and Mizoram.<sup>1</sup>

Historicity, historic representations, and history have become major concerns as the contemporary tribal focuses on asserting their origins and tracing migration histories, documenting lost and disappearing indigenous traditions and symbols of particular difference, affirm their cultural politics and analyze the impact of religious conversion and spread of western education during the colonial period. Some of this emerging literature is being written in tribal languages and published by the vernacular press and getting circulated within the community and Dr Rohmingmawii's article in this issue also makes extensive use of this popular literature.

Contemporary Mizoram presents a very important ethnographic locale as Christianity permeates the socio-political fabric of society and influences the shape and direction of politics. Following protracted violence, Mizoram became an Indian state after the Mizo accord was signed with the Mizo National Front (MNF) in 1986. The Presbyterian Church and the Baptist church are the largest denominations in contemporary Indian state of Mizoram, and this undulating landscape is absolutely dominated by Christian population. Sometimes this political agency has taken on a distinctively vernacular expression in the post-colonial Indian and supposedly 'secular' context. The current President of (MNF) Pu Zoramthanga sought and was actively backed by the Church and became the tenth Chief Minister of Mizoram. When the new Chief Minister was sworn on December 15 2018, according to newspaper reports, after the national anthem was sung, the Leprosy Mission

Choir Mizoram performed George Frideric Handel's 1741 composition "Hallelujah Chorus" and passages from the Bible were read-out. Furthermore, 'a prayer was led by Reverend Lalmingthanga, the chairman of the Mizoram Kohhran Hruaitute Committee, the body of 16 major churches in the state.'<sup>2</sup> All this took place as part of an official oath-taking ceremony on 2018. This amalgamation is representative of both politics, agency and a permissive indigenization of routine democratic processes of electing leaders. Is this a novelty or part of an older political pattern and response?

Cultural extinction, expressions, revivalism, and resurrection of ethnic symbols were central to the political turn among the tribal in the past as a response to imperialism and not surprisingly identity politics and claims coalesce with each other even in the contemporary post-colonial context India. Dr Rohmingmawii's article in this issue contributes to this growing literature understanding of colonial expansion in the frontier areas of Northeast India and Southeast Asia asserting the indigenous was not a passive recipient of proselytization zeal and cultural influences, but actively resisted a top-down approach. The church in early stages had prohibited the use of drums in worship, and the traditional Mizo songs and dances had been banned given their intimate and obvious association with what clergy regarded as 'heathen' practices and prohibited the widespread consumption of rice-beer among<sup>3</sup> the converts. But not for too long as waves of cultural revival gradually reinstated them into the cultural life of the Mizo. Rohmingmawii's discussion on cultural revival in Mizoram during 1906-1937 details the indigenization of Christianity in Mizoram and dwells on revival as the 'state of being awakened', and conspicuous ecstasy. Cultural revival and religious hybridity was marked not merely by preaching of ideas and performing prayers, as gradually it began to incorporate communal activities of singing, body movements, speaking in different tongues, shivering and quaking, and intense emotional expression sometimes even in the form of trance in the ambience of the Church (which were somewhat contradictory to Protestant Christian doctrine and practices). This revival was not led by any charismatic figure and Rohmingmawii emphasizes, 'it was the people who led and directed the movement. There were actions and instances that could be interpreted as being anti-establishment during this revival movement.' The missionaries found it difficult to accept the rising composition of indigenous hymns and tunes among the Mizos, accompanied by extensive use of drums and dancing, communitarian participation in prayers (mass prayers) and community celebrations that included offerings of domestic animals (pigs for instance) as a thanksgiving. Several educated Mizo

church leaders doubted and nearly all the Missionaries questioned these practices, nonetheless it is revivalist tendencies and the indigenization of Church practices are singularly responsible for widespread conversion in the region. Cultural revivalism did not result in conflict but transformed western Christianity and practices outlawed earlier got actively incorporated and reconstituted these sects and their following in the region. Armed resistance to colonial powers was difficult with demilitarization of the Mizo warriors, so resistance took an indirect form in the cultural-political realm and through the indigenization of Christianity. The author argues that Mizo agency was directly expressed in this cultural revivalism, and powerful symbolic incorporation of indigenous symbols and practices as part of Church practice. In my perspective, and understanding some contemporary developments, this was instrumental in framing a colonial subjectivity and expressing subaltern agency.

The Rohmingmawii paper on historical conversion and revivalism in Mizoram interconnects with another contribution in this volume which examines the emergence of (eco) political subjectivity in Sikkim. The democratized vocal tribal citizen is demanding a particular right to exercise greater political control over their social life, resources, territory, and demand internal autonomy (Arora and Kipgen 2012, Arora 2013). The eco-warriors of Sikkim proclaim that the Indian state is colonizing their indigenous common resources, and continuing imperial policies of exploiting the under-developed tribal groups of Northeast India.

Religious expression combines with modern environmental thought to galvanize public opposition into a social movement that incorporates narratives of cultural genocide and a variant of colonial oppression and resource appropriation in the post-colonial context of Himalayan Sikkim. Indigenous agency is taking strength from access to and opening of democratic spaces afforded by ICT and the Internet. Vibha Arora's paper elaborates and critically examines the organization of narratives authored and circulated by indigenous subjects themselves as part of their campaigns against the power of the state, and the ideology of hydropower development as being essential to progress in an ecologically sensitive context. Weepingsikkim.blogspot.com is a collective self-publication and biographical narrative by activists, albeit an interactive chronicle. Texts, newspaper reports, visuals, and films were uploaded on the blog namely weepingsikkim.blogspot.com, and it has been internetworked with other online media content and websites. Words, pictures, sounds, and hyperlinks interconnect in cyberspace to narrate a story on weepingsikkim about the Save the River Teesta movement, a narrative among diverse understandings

about the emergence, rise, and decline of this indigenous movement.

Combining ethnography with visual anthropology, Arora highlights how 'photographs of people and activists, various activities and events organized by the activists, the river course and Himalayan landscape and construction activities therein, maps (drawn and digital one's), images of formal communications sent by the government, and banners circulated on this website', construct a tribal as an eco-warrior for the global imagination. This paper examines the self-representation and proclamation of tribal groups as environmental custodians and the energetic framing of the Lepcha/tribal eco-warriors rising to protect their River Teesta from hydropower projects and other outsiders (Indian citizens) who are encroaching on their ancestral landscapes and appropriating them in the name of national development. Youth and women play a vanguard role in fighting exploitative capitalist state driven by need for energy, profit, and development (development that is not inclusive necessarily), but they do with restraint, non-violence, and Gandhian methods; presents quite a contrast to Midya's discussion on tribals siding with the Maoist ideology and justifying use of violence. As Arora argues in her paper, 'blogging enables local politics to network and situate themselves in global politics, overcome their peripheral geographical position, and counteract government apathy by actively carving an alternative public space.'

Increasingly, cyberspace now presents itself as a 'democratic' arena and domain where ethnographic subjects are writing about selves and blurring the distance between the knower and the known through digital activism. Methodologically, self-reflexive and critical in its perspective, Arora emphasizes on the readers: 'selective images can mislead, narrate a fictitious story, unless corroborated by other accounts and circulated as part of a larger body of evidence. Ethnographic fieldwork will continue to be significant as a way to know the world and generate knowledge about it.' She admits the gravity of locating subjectivity and understanding the nature of the political in cyberspace, and how she herself became part of the polyphony of voices documented and chronicled on this weblog. Precisely why the boundaries between ethnographic writing, biographical narratives, and social sciences are increasingly getting blurred in interactive portals on the Internet.

Arora's paper on tribals' resistance to state-sponsored development interconnects with Midya's paper on the development deficit and marginalization among tribals of West Bengal state; both contexts are natural-resource rich areas and focus of state development initiatives and welfare schemes. Dipak Midya's paper highlights political extremism, violence, and tribal inclinations towards

Maoist ideology due to continued socio-economic marginalization in the post-colonial development context. This anthropological study is based on data collected during 2014-2016 in four village communities (Amlatora, Sangram, Bhimarjun and BhumijDhansola) in Jhargram district of West Bengal, wherein the tribal population is high one and quite marginalized, although they are also living with the non-tribals. He demonstrates how using sentiments of social exclusion and marginalization, the Maoists and/or Naxalites have built up a strong movement 'under the leadership of the proletariat' with the purpose of seizing state power and an annihilation of class enemies and the state has promoted counter-attacks to neutralize these Maoists. He argues that socio-economic isolation and marginalization from the mainstream enabled the Maoists to recruit locals, and incite them into violence. The state launched counter-insurgency operations that culminated in the killing of many activists and their tribal supporters while some others were compelled or persuaded to surrender their guns. In some ways, this paper should have interconnected strongly with N. Sundar's analysis of Maoist infiltration and state-sponsored counterinsurgency operations and civil strife in her book, *The Burning Forest*.

If Jacob, Arora and Midya's paper was about human agency and recovering subjectivity using the political frame for collective well-being, then recent emergence of spiritual awakening and mindfulness techniques point towards how social harmony and inner happiness can be achieved through the religious realm. At the other end of the apolitical spectrum are discussions about the emergence of religious institutions (such as *Radha Soami Satsang Beas*, *Prajapati Bramhakumaris*, *Art of Living*, *Sadhguru and the Sri Aurobindo Ashram*) promoting spiritual awakening. Using the lens of positive psychology the authors demonstrate the differences in their approaches, their leadership, and roots in the eastern values of Hinduism and their strong interconnections with psychological trends in Positive Psychology and promotion of happiness as a way of life. The authors argue on the challenges of scientific validation of these spiritual practices and relevant documentation to showcase their efficacy in promoting human development, mindful coexistence, and social harmony (locally and globally). This paper is a strong contrast with Rohmingmawii's paper on how Mizo people transformed the Christian Church and indigenized it, as it also mentions how these movements and sects have a global appeal and has incorporated others into their fold (sometimes also leading to conversion to Hinduism). Religious revivalism is very much happening and promoting social harmony (in other contexts fundamentalism has also escalated conflict and communalism) for some groups and contexts, and cut-

across class-ethnic divides to unify and consolidate sense of group belonging and collective worthiness.

While many lament the demise of the social, all the six papers attest to the burgeoning expansion of core social selves in post-colonial contexts. The return to focus on the individual and their biographical self and search for happiness and meaning inter-connects with the powerful autobiographical narrative of C.K. Janu's and her inner discovery and struggles. However, the individual and collective self are intimately connected and perpetually shaping each other, as the discussions on ethnic identity in various papers attests. Cultural and political opposition and resistance to the state can take different routes – religious expression (Rohmingmawii), violence (Midya's paper) and non-violence (Arora's paper), and counter-responses and opposition in place (Midya's paper) and cyberspace (Arora's paper). The papers by Jacob, Arora, and Rohmingmawii raise issues of methodology and use of what were earlier termed non-traditional personal-historical and inter-textual sources for circulating representations of both self and the others, and understanding ethnographic and historical developments in space. Social movements can equally deploy violence and non-violence in diverse contexts to organize political protest, and launch opposition or seek patronage and development interventions.

It's a supremely creative impulse that knits the issue together and prompts us, to push us to think through cross-connections, to commence inter-disciplinary conversations, to explore the horizon of the historic and the political, and to understand their constant intersections. Collated together the collection of five articles, and six book reviews this Summerhill issue sensitizes us to the heterogeneity in the human condition, the changing evolving nature of the political, development of ideas and institutions, the emergence of agency and subjectivity across time and in space (including cyberspace). The book review section of this issue again testifies to diversity and scholarship emerging on some important themes and processes.

## Notes

1. It is not possible to review this extensive literature here but I will like to acknowledge its existence and point towards scholars such as Barkataki-Ruscheweyh & Lauser 2013; de Maaker 2007; Lawmsanga 2010; Pachuau and Sarkar 2016; Nongbri 2009; Oddie 2013; Pachuau 2003; Pachuau 2006; Stanley 2003; Thong 2010; Zhimo 2015.
2. Refer to <https://thewire.in/politics/zoramthanga-sworn-in-chief-minister-mizoram-mnf>; <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/zoramthanga-anointed-mizoram-chief-minister-amid-hymns-and-bible-reading-1963194>; <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/First-time-for-Christian-prayers-at-Mizoram-swearing-in-ceremony-45745.html>, accessed on 20 December 2018.

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