

## Note from the Editor

*Modernity is the transient, the fleeting, the contingent; it is one half of art, the other being the eternal and the immovable.*

—Charles Baudelaire

The theme of this issue is *Modernity and Marginality*. The first of these terms ‘modernity’ is protean, as versatile as it is common. Along with its affiliates – multiple modernity, counter-modernity, post-modernity, etc. – it comprises a conspectus of ideas that represent arguably one of the most fundamental struggles concerning the visions for our world. Its dominant understanding, as a condition of time and an aspiration of life, constitutes a view of the world which has spawned myriad marginalities. And hence our second term, ‘marginality’, which, though definitionally less fraught, is nevertheless quite open-ended and capacious, requiring us to constantly attend to the experiences of alienation that emerge at the ever-fragmenting edges of our societies.

A word from Late Middle English, the root ‘modern’ is derived, through Late Latin ‘modernus’, from Latin ‘modo’ or *just now* (OED). From this, I believe that modernity is most originally and inclusively available as an idea that describes the here and now of our world, and the almost endlessly diverse and contingent ways in which we envision and live our lives. Opposed to this conception are ranged historically powerful forces that take an exclusivist view of our shared destinies, and use the idea of modernity to marginalize subjectivities and aspirations that are not in sync with their position.

In this volume, we are interested in the ways in which the experiences of marginality within hegemonic discourses of modernity in history and other imbricated epistemic practices, and the realities that they represent and inform, are produced, negotiated and contested. The disciplinary practice of history, where the dominant idea of modernity as a temporality is centrally inherent and thus constitutive of its many alterities, serves as an entry point for our discussions but does not limit them. The interview, essays and reviews cover a wide spectrum

of necessarily inter-disciplinary possibilities around the question at hand.

The volume opens with an interview with eminent historian and anthropologist Gyanendra Pandey, currently Arts and Sciences Distinguished Professor at Emory University. A founder member of the Subaltern Studies collective, whose intervention marked a critical point in the Humanities and Social Sciences scholarship on South Asia, and if I may add, to some extent the Global South, Pandey’s large and significant body of writings has at one level been fundamentally concerned with the relationship between modernity and marginality. Several of Pandey’s works, including *The Construction of Communalism in Colonial North India* (1990), *Remembering Partition* (2001), *Routine Violence* (2006) and *A History of Prejudice* (2013), have problematized and challenged our understanding of history, representation, politics, democracy and citizenship within the framework posited here. Immensely topical and always thought-provoking, uncovering deep connections in seemingly disparate phenomena, and relentlessly opening new doors for the critique of power and for dialogue across cultures, Pandey’s writing has always forced us to rethink our assumptions about ourselves and the human condition in general. Here, Pandey answers a range of questions concerning, among other things, the Subaltern Studies project, the state of South Asian historiography, the craft of the historian, the movement and direction of his work and the present conjunctures in the world. He identifies the ‘qualifications for and pre-conditions of modernity’ as the key question still insistently engaging historians of South Asia, and by extension that of the Global South.

In his response to Pandey, but more correctly to Subaltern Studies, Sanal Mohan looks at the ways in which, in the context of the reception or otherwise of Subaltern Studies in Kerala, academic influences travel, connect, get creatively read and re-read, and are woven into the web of scholarship we are all a part of.

In this process, theoretical adaptations have unintended consequences and produce surprising twists in the tale, as it were. In another response, Ravikant remembers his experience of the entry of Subaltern Studies in University curricula and discussions; and in his innovative mining of film archives from the internet in the context of the caste question, shows us the exciting journeys scholars undertake.

The essays that follow these responses are all in one way or another concerned with the manner in which dominant modernities of knowledge, identity and personhood are engaged by their consequent marginalities. Located in the interstices of recognized disciplines, even if contextualized with strong historical backgrounds, the essays are as much an interrogation of accepted epistemic boundaries and lethargies as the subjects they concern themselves with are seized of their dilemmas and predicaments.

In her essay 'The Intersecting Triad: the Man, the Snake and the State', K. P. Girija looks at three moments in the colonial and recent history of the medicinal knowledge-practice of *vishavaidyam* or toxicology in Kerala where 'modern' attitudes, knowledge frameworks and regulatory systems have sought to control a variegated, flexible, nuanced and open set of practices concerning the treatment of poison to its near-extinction. Collecting vignettes from colonial writings, vernacular literature and related readings of geography, Tathagata Dutta attempts a 'pre-history' of the Rohingyas, peeling away the layers of colonial and post-colonial (re)constructions of a beleaguered people's otherness. In her thick and complex analysis of two paintings of a pilgrim artist at the Gond shrines and fairs of central India, Mayuri Patankar examines the interwoven world of Gond iconography and popular literature to study a marginalized community's self-fashioning and assertion around the idea of a homeland. Abhinaya Harigovind's ethnography of the life and travails of Kashmiri labourers in present-day Shimla delves into the history of colonial labour, the later regimes of marking and invisibilising a subaltern group and its occupation, and contemporary prejudices about belonging, to bring focus to lives in the underground. In all these essays we get anxious intimations of lives made marginal to the imperious certainties of normative modernity.

The book reviews attempt to comment on writings that

deal with the questions of modernity and marginality as well, although the canvas of both the analyst and the writer is broader here. In his review of Madhu Ramnath's *Woodsmoke and Leafcups: Autobiographical Footnotes to the Anthropology of the Durwa* (2015), Budhaditya Das marks the manner in which Ramnath reverses the gaze to look at how the Durwas of Bastar make their world. In another piece, Alok Prasad points out how Badri Narayan's *Fractured Tales* (2015) has examined the fissures within Dalit politics in Uttar Pradesh to show up resulting new marginalities. In her review of Mini Chandran's work on censored writers, *The Writer, The Reader and the State* (2017), Devika Sethi exposes the question of marginality to a complex reading. Martin Kämpchen draws our attention to K. L. Tuteja and Kaustav Chakraborty edited *Tagore and Nationalism* (2017), one of the few recent books on Tagore that provides a focused and topical discussion of Tagore's meditations on nationalism. In his reading of Hulas Singh's *Rise of Reason* (2016), Mayank Kumar foregrounds, like the author, the need to both challenge the Enlightenment's monopoly of reason and point out the pitfalls of taking an essentialist view of other kinds of reason, in the process joining in interrogating one of modernity's abiding fetishes. Ratnakar Tripathy's review of Bhangya Bhukya's *The Roots of the Periphery* (2017) calls attention to the book's exploration of the rich political experience of the Gonds in central India, and its attempt at demolishing the commonsense that tribal people are 'pre-political', and their struggles for political autonomy illegitimate and unreasonable. In his *Rule by Aesthetics* (2015), according to Mathew Varghese, Asher Ghertner investigates the fashioning of neo-liberal urban aesthetics and the consequent discounting of subaltern materialities and aspirations.

In the contributions to this volume, modernity emerges as a site of struggles to describe and shape our world. The vital point is that we in the academia should continue to pursue, as Pandey stresses, new archives and histories, in order that we continue to show up the irreducible hybridity of our shared time, the powerful forces that seek its reduction into the singular and universal, and the subaltern refusal to submit. Even as we do this, we need to be wary of the ways in which we could easily fall prey to new shibboleths of the eternal and the immovable that are always lurking around the corner.

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