Introduction

Subaltern Citizens and Their Histories

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The essays presented in this special issue have emerged out of conversations between scholars of the USA and India, which began at two workshops held in October 2006 and December 2007,[1] and have continued through subsequent exchanges via e-mail as well as in smaller meetings of several of the scholars involved. The conversations were centrally concerned with the question of changing modes of disenfranchisement, and the historical struggles over them, in the different locations of South Asia and North America.

An important part of the discussion focused on languages of class (or, more generally, privilege), and how these intersected with (i) constructions of caste/race/ethnicity and (ii) gender and sexuality. The issue for many participants was how one or another dimension of these divisions came to be privileged over others, and what such privileging tells us about the history, politics and self-consciousness of these different societies. The larger task we set ourselves was to open up the question of how Americanness and Indianness (Indian and American 'exceptionalism') was — and is — constructed, and to investigate the roles assigned or allowed to the subordinated and the marginalized in such constructions.

Claims of American and Indian exceptionalism are tied of course to questions of modernity and nationhood, and to debates about democracy and justice, pluralism and secularism; and, with these, to particular languages of representation and of morality. It is

noteworthy that official discourse and popular history alike have long emphasized the idea of tolerance and openness in both India and the US — the idea of the melting-pot, of syncretism and of assimilation; *not* the exceptionalism of slavery or the obliteration of indigenous nations (in the US) or untouchability (which, in India, has marked relations not only among people designated as Hindus, Sikhs and Christians, but between the bulk of Hindus and Muslims too). The question we have been tempted to ask, as against this, is how effective democracies are to be established in these deeply hierarchical and unequal societies.

For India, this comes as a question in a society with a long inherited regime of inequality. In the USA, the regime of extreme inequality (the institutionalized subordination of slavery and of Native American reservations) is erected at the same time as the regime of freedom. For all that, 'modernity' is not seen as a problem — or question — in American history and society; America is modern by definition. By comparison, the relation to modernity, and the ambition to be modern, is a much more anguished one in India. What does this tell us about the common-sense understanding of modernity, and of history, of remembered pasts and forgotten futures?

What we might ask, in this context, is not the question that Americanists and colleagues from other parts of the world have sometimes asked South Asian subalternists, 'Why should we use the word "subaltern"?' For there is no call upon any body of scholars to do that. The more pertinent question is this: what is there in the historiographical traditions and political conditions of India and the USA, for example, that seems to throw up — even necessitate — such an umbrella term for the subordinated and the marginalized in South Asia, whereas the same kind of investigation can take

place comfortably under the rubric of labour history, African-American Studies, Native American, Latina-Latino Studies, or LGBTQ in the case of the US?

The purpose of this collection, as of the workshops out of which it comes, is to initiate a conversation across very different world areas — between scholars who do not generally address one another — in the hope that this will produce new conversations about each, and beyond both. The juxtaposition of different bodies of scholarship and differing debates should help to bring about a new awareness, not only of shared histories and shared struggles in the making of the modern world, but of particularities and facets of our different histories and societal conditions that we have simply assumed as being well understood, and hence taken for granted. By that means, it might make for a new kind of comparative history: one in which we deal not in universals already understood, but in the assumptions that underlie our individual histories — and thence our 'universals'.

With that as preface, let me turn to the figure of the subaltern as s/he has appeared in recent investigations of history and society classed under the rubric of subaltern studies.

The peasant paradigm

For a quarter of a century now, in this project of a new critical history that originated in South Asia, the archetypal figure of the subaltern has been the Third World peasant.[2] 'Historiography has been content to deal with the peasant rebel merely as an empirical person or member of a class,' wrote Ranajit Guha (1983b: 2), 'but not as an entity whose will and reason constituted the praxis called rebellion.' The task of subaltern

historiography was to recover this underdeveloped figure for history, to restore the agency of the yokel, recognize that the peasant mass was contemporaneous with the modern — a part of modernity, and establish the peasant as (in substantial part) the maker of his/her own destiny. 'What distinguished the story of political modernity in India from the usual and comparable narratives of the West,' as Dipesh Chakrabarty (2002: 19) put it in a retrospective account of the Subaltern Studies project, 'was the fact that modern politics … was not founded on an assumed death of the peasant. The peasant did not have to undergo a historical mutation into the industrial worker in order to become the citizen-subject of the nation.'

This was an insightful and important departure. The 'peasant' was historical, no less than the working class or the insurance company. In recent times, indeed, the peasant archetype itself has been confounded in many respects. Large numbers of peasants have become part-peasant/part-worker, moving between the rural and the urban on a regular or cyclical basis, and even between continents, owing to colonial displacement, economic imperatives and labour conditions. The societies of the 'Third World' are contemporaneous with those of 'Europe', not a relic from the past. They are produced in tandem with the advanced industrial West, and productive of it. Once the argument is made for South Asia, its application to the historical experience of other parts of the world, including Europe, is readily evident: and colleagues working on Africa and Latin America have generously cited the South Asian initiative as they have pursued some of the same questions in relation to the histories of their continents.

The aim of the subalternist intervention, as the South Asian *Subaltern Studies* project made amply clear, was not simply to recover a neglected underside of human

experience, and to announce that subaltern groups also counted in the unfolding of history, but to rethink the pattern of historical development as a whole, grasp the contradictions that lay at its heart and outline political possibilities that had been lost to view or remained to be elaborated.

Looking back at this attempt to rewrite the subaltern experience, and with it the whole colonial and liberal construction of history, one might suggest that it has had to contend with an insufficiently acknowledged obstacle. This has to do with a subterranean faith that persisted, perhaps even in the writings of many subalternist scholars, in the lack of fit between the peasantry and industrialized bourgeois society, in the 'incipience' of peasant political (hence, historical and cultural) consciousness, and in the belief that peasants have to *advance* — towards modernity and full cultural and political citizenship of the modern world.

Whatever its achievements, the attempt to recover the peasant subaltern for history has had to live with an enduring view of peasants as passive objects, or what one might call the inertia of modern political thought, premised to a large extent on the passing of 'traditional' society. Seen as the pre-political survival of a pre-industrial social order in a whole variety of social and political analyses, from Marx's *Eighteenth Brumaire* to Gellner's discussion of the passage from an agrarian to an industrial age (Marx 1852, 1963; Gellner 1983), the peasant has been the object of all kinds of radical social engineering throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Peasant, 'the adjective used for describing the masses,' still stands for backwardness in society and state, as several commentators have noted (Bacik 2001: 56).

There is an additional dimension to this difficulty. Many (one might even say, most) modern peasants and agricultural labourers do not wish to remain peasants or agricultural labourers. They seek to live in the cities, with the amenities of modern civic existence – comfortable homes and jobs; running water, electricity and access to power (of all kinds); motorized transport; good schools and hospitals; and leisure time that they may organize in a variety of ways.[3] That was the burden of the dalit (or ex-Untouchable) leader, B. R. Ambedkar's argument against M. K. Gandhi's romanticization of 'village India', and the significance of his choice of the western gentleman's suit and hat over Gandhi's peasant loin-cloth.

There are numerous other aspects of the clash over prestige and power that this oppositional scholarship has brought to the fore. The condition of subalternity, of impoverishment (cultural and social, as well as economic) and humiliation, attaches to individuals and groups and who are not simply at the bottom of a giant social heap, and even to some who might be described as subaltern elites. No less important, as so much recent research has demonstrated, the relation of dominance and subordination is always negotiable, and negotiated. It is the struggle to overcome the marks of an inherited subalternity on the one hand and to re-institute it on the other that lies at the heart of subaltern history.

Consequently, subalternist scholars have sought to engage with histories of the homeless, the uninsured and the marginalized (terms that are not to be understood in a merely literal way; they are always relative, as we know very well); as well as, to use another frame, with those of materially more comfortable citizens who are even so not allowed to be part of the polis, that is to say, citizens in the classic sense.

It is obvious now, perhaps even to many of those who would have had doubts on this score earlier, that the themes of subalternity, marginalization, and the political conflicts that flow from these are ones that need to be addressed not only in regard to countries of the erstwhile Third World, but also in advanced industrial (and post-industrial) societies like the USA. One thinks of Los Angeles 1992 and the experience of New Orleans in the face of hurricane Katrina, of questions regarding the policing of the U.S.-Mexican border, and of voting in recent U.S. Presidential elections. It is in this context that I propose the recasting of the figure of the subaltern subject into the paradoxical category of the subaltern citizen.

The subaltern as subaltern citizen

The subaltern is, by definition, a political construct. Citizen is not the ideal term for a rendering of the inherently political character of subalternity. But, until we think of another more suitable alternative, it may help to work with this.

For the purposes of the present statement, it is 'citizen' that qualifies subalternity, not 'subaltern' that qualifies (or describes) the status of citizenship. My use of the phrase 'subaltern citizen' is not primarily intended to suggest the subordinate status of certain citizens, though of course it can be used precisely to describe such a condition in particular times and places. Nor is it used to describe a historical process of moving from a status of subalternity to one of citizenship, although again such a process may indeed be traced in different parts of the world, not least in the context of the anti-colonial struggles of the eighteenth to twentieth centuries. I am concerned in the main with a somewhat different proposition, having to do with the potential that the subaltern possesses (or the

threat s/he poses) of becoming a full member of the community, the village, the ward and the polis.

Thus, the point in the re-presentation of the subaltern as subaltern citizen is not in the first instance about the technical question of citizenship, statutory or anticipated, of the kind that has been accessible in democratic or quasi-democratic societies over the last two centuries. For this has plainly not been an issue for most human beings for the major part of recorded history. The claim is rather about historical agency broadly defined, and about *belonging* — in a society and in its self-construction. That is to say, it is about the *living* of individual and collective lives, and the limitations on that living: about the potential for life and creativity in given historical circumstances, and the restriction of that potential.

One immediate advantage of the use of the term 'subaltern citizen' is that it prevents the easy erection of a barrier between *us* (citizens, the people with history), and *them* (the subalterns, people without), as well as that between *our times* (the time of equality, democracy, the recognition of human worth) and *earlier times* (the time without such reason and such understanding). The move may be of advantage in certain other ways as well. The re-designation works of course as a description of a widely encountered political circumstance. It should also serve as a re-statement of a philosophy of history and historical change. And it points to a strategy of reading that a critical historiography perhaps needs to espouse more generally.

The first of these propositions should be relatively uncontroversial. The term subaltern citizen accurately describes what is a fairly common contemporary condition, the situation of lower class, lower caste, immigrant and other minority communities —

women, gays, lesbians and other sexual minorities, to take one kind of example — who have been granted the status of citizens (rights-holders, inhabitants, subjects of the state) without becoming quite 'mainstream'. In the second half of the twentieth century, especially, subaltern groups have been granted formal citizenship in many parts of the globe. Even where they have not — as in the case of illegal immigrants, refugees, 'guest' workers and floating assemblages of many other kinds — their existence as relatively stable populations has been secured (not to say necessitated) by the essential character of many of the services they provide, and they have been able consequently to make certain kinds of claims on state and quasi-state resources.

In recent decades, several scholars have sought to examine the history and politics of elite groups linked with historically subordinated populations: the African American and the dalit middle classes in the US and India, for example, the 'black bourgeoisie' and 'dalit brahmins' as they have been called, white but not quite (in Homi Bhabha's powerful and widely travelled phrase), groups that are under pressure simultaneously to be citizens of the modern world (national, meritrocratic and middle class) and to speak for their still under-privileged communities: in other words, 'not to forget where they come from' (Frazier 1957; Landry 1987; Shaw 1995; Lewis, this volume; Isaacs 1964; Sacchidanand 1976; Ram 1988; Pandey forthcoming). With some change of emphasis, one could take up for investigation what Partha Chatterjee has called 'political', as distinct from 'civil', society: populations of slum dwellers, domestic servants, cheap labour in hotels and small businesses, construction workers, road builders, seasonal labourers on farms, whose legal standing remains uncertain, who may seek and obtain a

degree of protection and support from the state and ancillary institutions, but who can scarcely be counted as members of civil society (Chatterjee 2004; Odem, this volume).

Unavoidably, however, given what I have said above, the term citizen will appear in two very different senses in the following pages: first as the bearer of the legal right to residence, political participation, state support and protection in a given territory; the second, a more diffuse sense of acceptance in, and acceptance of, an existing order and existing social arrangements. This second usage requires some elaboration.

As already stated, I have used the term ‘citizen’ as a modifier for ‘subaltern’, an indicator of the political quality of all subalternity (and all dominance). To explicate the point, let me turn for a moment to perhaps the most influential philosophical explanation of the motor of human history and the sources of social change from early times to today, namely, Hegel’s discussion of ‘Lordship and Bondage’. For Hegel, the saga of history is the unfolding of the Spirit and the development of self-consciousness. It is in the formation and consolidation of the lord/slave relationship that the seeds of self-consciousness are sown. ‘Self-consciousness exists in and for itself when, and by the fact that it so exists for another’ (Hegel 1977: 111). That is, it exists only in being recognized.

The outcome of what Hegel calls the life-and-death struggle between master and slave is a one-sided and unequal recognition. What confronts the master now is a ‘dependent’ consciousness that leaves him unsure of himself. The lord, having gained recognition, remains restless, desirous of recognition from an equal, yet unable to do anything about it for fear of losing an established superiority. Not so the slave. ‘The *truth* of the independent consciousness is … the servile consciousness of the bondsman,’ who

through his fear and his work can attempt to bring about the dissolution of all that is stable around him (Hegel 1977: 117-118).

For Hegel, as for Marx, the slave has the greater potential to think beyond current conditions, to achieve a higher level of self-consciousness, and conceive and build new worlds. For Hegel, it is not the lord but the bondsman who will perform the historically necessary task of transcending the conditions of his/her present existence. ‘Through absolute fear and enforced work he … [begins] to acquire a coherent self and an enhanced consciousness of it. He can think now about what freedom means for the individual and what kind of world will enable that freedom to be’ (Connolly 1988: 96). For Marx, in a parallel move, it is not the bourgeoisie but the proletariat that is the universal class, the sign of the future, in the age of capital. The subaltern is the seed of progress — in life and, crucially, in thought.

What follows is a history of exertion to maintain or alter conditions of production and reproduction, comfort and want, control and subjugation. It is a battle between the privileged and the unprivileged, ‘citizens’ and those who would be ‘citizens’, over the rules of appropriation, accumulation, preservation (and destruction) of resources, power, prestige and more; a struggle to institute and perpetuate subalternity, or to put it in other words, relations of dominance and subordination.

In such a reckoning, the fact of citizenship, statutory, anticipated or feared, must be written into the condition of subalternity. The subaltern as potential citizen is the condition of history. Without ‘citizenly’ potential, the slave cannot be there to recognize the master. That is the conundrum for the ruling classes. How to deny the slave, and maintain the subalternity of the subaltern, without which dominance and privilege are

immediately lost? How to perpetuate his or her disenfranchisement, using that term in its broadest sense? It is the struggle over multifarious and ever-changing forms of enfranchisement and disenfranchisement, then, that constitutes the political history of the world, past and present, and the heart of our investigation of subaltern histories.

Finally, the use of the altered phrase, subaltern citizen, also points to a particular strategy of reading, based on the apprehension of fragments that interrupt historical/political narratives. I have written at some length elsewhere about the place of the fragment in a subalternist reading of history. The 'fragment' in this usage is not just a 'bit', the dictionary's 'piece broken off', of a pre-constituted whole. Rather, I have suggested, it is a 'disturbing element, a disturbance, a rupture … in the self-representation of particular totalities and those who uncritically uphold them. The mark of the fragment is that it resists the whole (the narrative). It cannot be assimilated into the narrative and its claims to wholeness…' (Pandey 2006a: 66-67 and passim).

The fragment, then, may be thought of as an interruption, or what Althusser called 'an answer without a question' (Althusser and Balibar 1970: 28), an answer to a question that has not been posed. A disruptive element of this kind allows a symptomatic reading, against the grain. Indeed, once noticed, it necessitates such a reading. The pairing of the terms subaltern and citizen should accomplish precisely such a disruption, since the idea of the citizen flies in the face of almost everything found in the commonly received narrative of subalternity, which is a description and analysis of a condition anticipated as the condition of the down and out, the miserable, and the victimized (Ludden 2001: passim).

The word *subaltern* plainly reinforces what the charge of a critical historiography — Marxist, feminist, anti-colonial, minority — has long been: the endeavour to recover subject positions, lives, possibilities and political actions that have been marginalized, distorted, suppressed and even forgotten. The term *citizen* helps to underline – in a way that the word 'subject' perhaps cannot, even with a recognition of its split meaning, as 'subject *of*' and 'subject *to'* — the fact of historical agency and political arrangement (or 'persuasion'). It draws attention forcefully to the 'citizenly', the political quality in subalternity. It allows a second reading, wholly different from the first, a reading of that other, not illegitimate, reading of subalternity.

In just this spirit — a necessary part of a critical consciousness and a critical historiography today — one might undertake a second reading of another pair of terms that are central to the ongoing debate on dominance and subordination, and yet not sufficiently acknowledged as belonging together in the same conversation.

Subalternity and difference

For two hundred years and more, the political exertions of the oppressed and subordinated were seen as a striving for recognition as equals. The history of these efforts appeared as a history of *sameness*, and the right to sameness: 'one man, one vote', equal pay for equal work, the need to overturn inherited structures of oppression and discrimination, to capture state power, and so on. From the later decades of the twentieth century, the battle has been extended self-consciously to encompass another demand, a demand for the recognition of *difference*, as the awareness has grown that differences of gender, of communal practices and ways of being, even of incommensurable languages

and beliefs, have provided the very ground for the diversity, density and richness of human experience. One question inevitably follows: how is the long-standing struggle for equality supposed to be folded into this newly asserted right to the recognition of difference?

The answer is hardly straightforward. At one level, the demand for the recognition of difference refines and expands the demand for fundamental human rights, equality and justice. For, until the assertion of a politics of difference by feminists, marginal nationalities and other 'minorities', the proclamation of difference was always a means of containment. Yet, if the latter suggestion is correct, it leads to another, more fundamental proposition about the place of difference in the history of dominance and subordination.

It is my view that there is a critical and still largely unexplored relationship between dominance/subordination and the categorical attribution of difference. *Difference*, in its commonest usage, is the mark of the subordinated or subalternized, precisely because it is measured against the purported mainstream, the 'standard' or 'normal'. It is in the attribution of difference that the logic of dominance and subordination has generally found expression. Men are not 'different'; it is women who are. Foreign colonizers are not 'different'; the colonized are. Caste Hindus are not 'different' in India; it is Muslims, and 'tribals', and dalits who are. White Anglo-Saxon Protestant males are not 'different' in the USA; at one time or another, everybody else is. White Australians are not 'different'; Vietnamese boat people, and Fijian migrants to Australia, and, astonishingly, Australian Aboriginals are.

The point I am making is not that the issue of difference must be added to that of subalternity. It is to recognize that they appear all too often as one and the same thing.

The foregrounding of gender, sexuality, caste, race, etc, in this manner, as so many ways of organizing subalternity, may help to deepen our understanding of social and political power, even as we work to expose the roots of contemporary as well as past prejudice and discrimination.

Ironically, just when the question of difference and its relation to struggles for social justice and equality has been established as a matter for debate and intervention in widening academic and political circles, and it has become clear that the issue of difference has necessarily to be folded into any program of democratic struggle, conservative political and intellectual groups have begun pivoting towards another line of reasoning, one they have long shunned. Right wing forces around the world, who have for ever so long stated their claim to continued power and privilege in terms of innate difference (the superiority of a particular race, caste, sex, etc) now frequently turn to an affirmation of sameness.

We are all the same, this particular version of the argument goes – men and women, heterosexuals and homosexuals, black and white, upper caste and lower caste, Christian, Buddhist, Hindu and Muslim. No one needs to be given any special advantages or state support. Success and advancement depends, and must depend, on merit, individual ability, hard work, and, maybe (just maybe) ‘luck’. And those who don’t make it simply do not deserve to.[4]

The underlying proposition here has to do with the equal rights of all (irrespective of caste, colour, race, sex or creed, as several modern political constitutions declare). Freedom of choice, the ability to decide what religion one follows, what associations one joins, whom one associates with, where one lives, shops, plays, or where one’s children

go to school — these are fundamental human rights, so eloquently articulated in the political revolutions of the eighteenth century and since. It is on this hallowed ground that, in the age of civil rights, the dominant classes in India as well as the U.S. replace claims about race and caste with the language of liberal individualism, equality of opportunity and free choice to try to keep dalits ('ex-Untouchables') and African Americans ('ex-slaves') 'in their place' (Pandey 2006b).

In Hegel's abstraction of the master-slave relationship, the slave has to be recognized in order to give recognition to the master; and yet his or her enslavement has to be maintained. The diversity of concrete conditions compounds the problem. The subaltern is a necessary presence, s/he cannot be wished or spirited away; and yet he or she cannot fully belong. S/he has to be the same — and yet different at the same time. Difference is not to be privileged, yet it must not be entirely denied.

It is precisely the competing demands of 'difference', on the one hand, and the language of equal rights and social justice, on the other, that produced the twisted American slogan, 'Separate but Equal.' So long as African Americans and European Americans both had access to schools, hospitals, hotels and parks, what was the harm in keeping these separate for each 'race'. The proposition of course has a wider provenance, although, as we have seen, its terms are sometimes modified.

Whatever the specific argument, the 'separate' in such propositions are hardly 'equal'. The Muslims of India are like the rest of 'us', they deserve no special privilege or state protection: yet they do not really belong, since they adhere to a 'foreign' religion. It is the same with Latina/Latino migrants to the USA: they can never be truly American, since they cannot dream in English (Pandey 2006a; Huntington 2004). The dalits and the

African Americans belong — in a sense. However, as the familiar elitist proclamation has it, generations of 'low' life — loose living, laziness, the mob mentality of the ghetto — have made the majority of them 'unworthy'. Whatever the discriminations and oppressions of the past, what they need now is to pull themselves up by their bootstraps, not social welfare or state support.

In complex ways, then, the powerful manoeuvre to return the figure of the subaltern to its appointed location: the traditional Third World peasant eking out a miserable existence in Haiti, Rwanda or Bangladesh; the Fourth World indigene living out a stereotyped life of drugs, violence and alcoholism in remote reserves in Australia and the USA; dalits 'unfairly' promoted to college degrees and bureaucratic office (and, even more dangerous, medical practice!) in India; African Americans 'looting' the stores and 'shooting' at relief helicopters in the wake of the Katrina disaster. Much of this would be laughable, were it not part of a widely accepted common sense, resolutely recycled and promoted by the media.

What underlies this effort is the conscious or unconscious attempt to isolate subalternity and assign it to the margins of society and history, 'margins' that have been brought into being by the historical accident of 'backwardness' or 'subordination', and/or the unfortunate inheritance of poverty. This is a move that is both predictable and insidious — in its denial of the politics that goes into the establishment and sustenance of privilege, and in its confining of difference to another discourse which, as the pretence has it, has nothing to do with the business of dominance and subordination.

Subalternity at the cusp

One of the ways in which this collection differs from other writings on subaltern conditions and histories is in its deliberate attention to very different geographical locations and historical times, and to different sections of the society (dalits, casual labourers, schoolteachers, women of noble lineage). One other — and this suggests another possible advantage in thinking with the term 'subaltern citizen' — is to investigate the question of subalternity taken at the cusp. Wakankar in this volume, and Gayatri Spivak earlier, describe this as the moment of discernment — the moment of interception when speech is deciphered, or when history and critical practice recognize a relation or a condition, retroactively (Spivak 1999: 309). Willy-nilly, the essays in this collection focus on the moment of recognition of difference or subalternity — of subaltern migrants in a 'nation of migrants', for example (Odem); of black schoolteachers whose 'duty' it was 'to serve, to … make a difference' (Lewis); of the girl-child pledged to 'respectability' in nineteenth century India (Lal).

The moment of our discernment of subalternity is also the moment of discernment (and interrogation) of foundational myths: here, the foundational myths of American and Indian 'exceptionalism'. And there are many such myths in every society and every history. Returning to the idea of the cusp: the following essays push beyond Hegel in seeking to trace the 'prehistory' of this 'moment of history', represented in the foundational accounts of particular kinds of exceptionalism and particular forms of social hierarchy and power. Thus, we might rethink the struggles, suppressions and elisions that result in the birth of the Slave (in recognition of the newly-born Master), or of the self-sacrificing, tradition-preserving, spiritual Indian woman. So, too, with new claims to

exceptionalism based on new foundational stories: such as the overcoming of the ‘original sin’ of slavery in the American South, followed as the tale implies by a national acceptance of the richness of black contribution and culture; or the Bohemian and adventurous life-style of the American metropolis, which comes to stand in at some point for all of modern America (Johnson).

In seeking to extend our enquiries regarding subaltern citizens and their histories, which are at the same time fundamental re-engagements with what qualify as mainstream society and standard history, the contributors listen for ‘echoes from the vast silence that we ascribe all too glibly to the archaic’, as Wakankar puts it in his essay. Naming the shadow of the girl-child, says Lal, (or the trace or fragment, as we might also call it) ‘may be a first step in writing a ‘pre-history’ of the foundational myths of Hindu or Muslim … womanhood, and of the struggles of the historical women these myths attempt to de-historicize.’ The authors urge us at the same time to pluralize the past as we must pluralize the present, finding space for alternative voices, alternative choices and life-styles, against the homogenizing drive of national histories, international capital and one ‘world civilization’. ‘If we are to survive politically in the present, we need as sprawling a queer past as we can possibly write’, as Johnson puts it, in inviting others to join this intellectual quest.

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[2] From Ranajit Guha's insurgent peasant and Bagdi agricultural labour; to Mahasweta Devi's poor tribal peasant women (translated by Gayatri Spivak); to Amin's *otiyars* or peasant volunteers of Chauri Chaura, Prakash's Kamias, Skaria's Bhils and Hardiman's Patidars; to Chatterjee's 'fragments of the nation' in which as one reviewer noted the industrial working class was conspicuously absent; and even in Chakrabarty's study of the Calcutta working class, which underlined the persistence of feudal values, networks and practices in the activities of the jute mill labourers, to take a few examples from the writings in *Subaltern Studies*, it is this figure — superstitious, illiterate, ill-equipped, isolated and non-political as s/he had appeared in much of the received social science and historical literature — that emerges again and again as the paradigm of the subaltern; see Guha 1982-1989; Guha, 1983a; Spivak 1988; Amin 1995; Prakash 2003; Skaria 1999; Hardiman 1981; Chatterjee 1993; Chakrabarty 1989; Pandey 2005.

[3] It goes without saying that modern capitalist farmers not only desire these facilities and comforts, but often enjoy them in full measure, adding the joys of fancy country homes to the resources of the city.

[4] An even more alarming trend in the current climate is the claiming of minoritized difference by demonstrably privileged groups positing themselves as the persecuted underclass. The Hindu Right in India and Christian conservatives in the USA now routinely claim to be an oppressed minority, subject to the anti-religious discriminatory influence of powerful special interest groups, most notably secularists and homosexuals. For the US case, see Berlant 1997, Introduction.

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