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Gyanendra Pandey (ed.)

*Subaltern Citizens and their Histories:*

*Investigations from India and the USA*

Londres, Routledge, 2010, 230 p.

Gyan Pandey's transfer from University of Delhi, via Johns Hopkins (Baltimore), to Emory (Atlanta) set the stage for this original and inspiring collection. Pandey is one of the founders of the Indian school of 'subaltern studies.' Over time he helped to give new dynamics to the subaltern concept in a series of seminal books on the forging of communalism in colonial India, the horrors of partition in the South Asian subcontinent, and on 'routine violence' more generally.<sup>1</sup> At Emory he works together with colleagues from African-American studies. This inspired the present volume, comparing the histories of notably the dalits ('non-caste' groups) in India and former slave populations in the USA. Surely an audacious comparison, yet it works: it highlights more or less implicit assumptions in historical studies of these marginalized groups, and it helps notably to further deepen the notion of subaltern histories in all their differences and correspondences.

The tone is set by Pandey's imaginative introduction – notably by the way he links 'subaltern' to citizenship. The central notion 'subaltern citizens' – Pandey calls it a 'paradoxical category' – is programmatic. It heralds a switch from the vision of Rahit Guha, the guru of the subaltern collective during earlier decades, of the subaltern as a peasant rebel, whose capacity to

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<sup>1</sup> *Routine Violence. Nations, Fragments, Histories* (Stanford U.P. 2006); *Remembering Partition – Violence, Nationalism and History in India* (Cambridge UP, 2001); *The Construction of Communalism in Colonial North India* (Oxford U.P., 1990).

forge his/her own history had to be salvaged from under the dominant vision of nationalist and modernist history. The present-day inclusion of peasants in new settings – even if it is part-time – makes the very idea of subaltern as in opposition to citizen dated. The question is rather how subalterns have acquired citizenship ‘without becoming quite mainstream.’ Inspiring for the present collection is notably Pandey’s linking of this trend to the question of difference. The more or less precarious inclusion of subaltern groups into citizenship raises immediately the question to what extent there remains scope for their difference. Obtaining equality is no longer the sole question, inclusion of difference becomes also urgent. This might lead to affirmation of elite domination (emphasis on difference for new forms of marginalization) but also to new dynamics. Here Pandey (p. 6) evokes the vision of both Hegel and Marx of the slave’s particular potential to ‘conceive and build new worlds.’

It is impressive how much Pandey manages to cover in little more than ten pages: a powerful set of ideas, developed with considerable sophistication, yet in his usually elegant and accessible prose. Another concept that really works in this collection is his suggestion to historians to focus on the ‘fragment’ – as ‘a disturbing element... that resists the whole (the narrative)’ (p. 6). Such starting points make for fascinating diptyches from Indian and USA history. I very much liked, for instance, the juxtaposition of M.S.S. Pandian’s analysis of dalits’ propensity for poetry – which he does not see as an effort to compensate theoretical deficiency, as suggested by dominant discourse in social sciences, but rather as a critique of this theoretical discourse – to Leslie Harris’ text on New Orleans’s history as the loss of a ‘subaltern city.’ The topics may seem to be completely different. Yet, Harris’ text similarly highlights how important it is to work from the language of participants, rather than from the dominant categories in a given discipline (in this case urban studies). The same convergence emerges from Colin R. Johnson’s text on same sex relations – as a form of ‘subaltern sexuality’ – among casual laborers in rural USA that risk to remain invisible because of the urban emphasis in the field of sexual (gay) studies.

Similar complexities behind uni-dimensional visions are highlighted by Earl Lewis’s analysis of the ‘multi-positionality’ of black schoolteachers, in line with W.E.B. Du Bois’s vision of African Americans ‘...having two warring souls, one black and the other American’; and by Ruby Lal’s analysis of how the focus on the figure of the ‘girl-child/woman’ helped to make women as historical subjects disappear from both colonial and nationalist discourse in India. Milind Wakankar studies the historical traces of the Kapilikas, a now extinct low-caste sect, as ‘a pre-history of suffering’ that speaks directly not only to the Ghost Dance among Native American groups but also to present-day African American novels as ‘rites of

mourning.’ Prathama Banerjee discusses the quite surprising sequence of different stereotypes of dalits – peasant rebels to their landlords, labourers to capitalists, potential revolutionaries to Marxists, carriers of local knowledge to ecologists.

Sudipta Sen shows the difficulties of discovering ‘disarticulated, resistant subjects’ behind the paternalist legal discourse that imposed ‘a grammar of subjection’ from the very beginning of British rule in Bengal. Mary E. Odem’s chapter formulates some sort of answer from a completely different setting, showing how undocumented Latino immigrants’ claims to citizenship in the USA by simply ‘being there’ are almost impossible to ignore completely. For an earlier period Steven Hahn highlights that even during the high time of slavery in the American South, slaves were politically active despite all odds. Of course, a very important statement. Yet one can wonder whether his opening statement that ‘... in historical accounts, slaves rarely, if ever, make their appearance on the political stage as participants...’ does not reflect a certain narrowness of view: from all over the world – from Rome to China to Africa and Latin America come many examples of slaves playing highly important political roles, behind the screens but also openly. This precisely highlights the need to overcome a radical opposition of ‘subaltern’ and ‘citizen’, with full attention to unexpected articulations of (in)equality and difference.

The collection is closed by again two contributions by Partha Chatterjee and Jonathan Prude. The former places the notion of subaltern citizens in a new setting by emphasizing the impossibility for the state to ignore the massing effect of subalterns in urban slums; hence its obligation to take responsibility for them and protect them from ‘primitive accumulation’ as an ongoing process. Prude, in his overview of the collection, emphasizes particular traits of American exceptionalism as possible answers to the question Pandey raised in the beginning: why did Indian historians study different modes of dispossession under one enveloping rubric like ‘subalterns,’ while Americanists did not? (p. 2 and 212). The interest of the comparison – and of the collection as a whole – is that it highlights in most concrete terms the broader implications of both approaches. A seminal collection that makes the comparison of apparently quite disparate topics work because of inspiring points of departure.

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