



HISTORICAL EVOLUTION AND THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS OF SUBALTERN LITERATURE IN INDIA

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Abstract

The term "subaltern" travelled a long way before it settled in Indian literary criticism: from Antonio Gramsci's prison notes on the fragmented history of Italy's subordinate classes, through the revisionist historiography of the Subaltern Studies collective, to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's deconstructive question about whether the subaltern can speak at all. This article traces that passage and argues that the literary field it produced in India cannot be understood as a mere application of imported theory. Long before the concept arrived, anti-caste devotional poets such as Kabir, Ravidas and Chokhamela, and colonial-era reformers such as Jotirao Phule and B. R. Ambedkar, had fashioned a vernacular archive of protest whose questions anticipated those of postcolonial theory. The analysis follows the twentieth-century phases of this archive—progressive realism, the Dalit Panther moment in Marathi poetry, Mahasweta Devi's fiction of Adivasi resistance, Dalit autobiography and testimonio, and the recent wave of English translation and Adivasi self-representation—and reads them against the theoretical frameworks that have claimed them. It contends that the most productive theory of subaltern literature in India has emerged from within the literature itself, in Sharankumar Limbale's Dalit aesthetics and in Gopal Guru's insistence on the epistemic authority of experience, both of which unsettle the representational assumptions of the Subaltern Studies tradition. Subaltern literature, the article concludes, is best described not as the speech of the silenced but as a contested practice of self-authorisation that continually renegotiates who may theorise, translate and read.

Keywords: subaltern; Dalit literature; Subaltern Studies; Spivak; Adivasi writing; testimonio; Dalit aesthetics

1. Introduction

Few critical terms have been asked to carry as much weight in Indian literary studies as "subaltern". It is used to name a body of writing—Dalit poetry and autobiography, Adivasi fiction, the testimony of labouring women—and simultaneously to name the impossibility of that writing being heard on its own terms. This doubleness is not accidental. It is the residue of a conceptual history in which a word for a junior military rank was adopted by an imprisoned Marxist, reworked by historians of peasant insurgency, and finally turned by a deconstructive critic into a figure for the limits of representation itself. When the term reached the classroom and the literary review, it brought all of these layers with it, and critics have rarely paused to ask which layer they are invoking at any given moment. The present inquiry follows this history with two aims. The first is genealogical: to set out, in their proper sequence, the intellectual moves that made "subaltern" a literary category in India. The second is argumentative. A common narrative presents subaltern literature as a late-twentieth-century phenomenon made legible by postcolonial theory, as though the theory had discovered the writing. The analysis advanced here reverses that order. The vernacular anti-caste tradition, from the medieval *sants* to the Dalit Panthers, produced its own theory of voice, authority and aesthetic value, and it is this indigenous theorisation—articulated most sharply by Sharankumar Limbale and Gopal Guru—that best explains what subaltern writing does. Postcolonial theory remains indispensable, but chiefly as an interlocutor whose blind spots the literature itself exposes.

The discussion proceeds in five movements. It first reconstructs the concept from Gramsci to Spivak; it then turns to the pre-modern and colonial antecedents that predate the concept; it follows the twentieth-century phases of subaltern writing through a series of close readings; it examines the frameworks through which that writing has been read, including testimonio, Dalit aesthetics and the Dalit critique of the term subaltern; and it closes by considering what the politics of translation and recognition mean for the field today.



2. The Making of a Concept

2.1 Gramsci and the Fragmented History of Subordinate Groups

Gramsci's use of "subaltern" in the *Prison Notebooks* has sometimes been read as a censor-proof euphemism for "proletarian", but the notes on the history of subaltern classes suggest something more precise. For Gramsci, subordinate groups are defined less by their place in production than by their exclusion from the state and from the unifying work of hegemony. "The history of subaltern social groups is necessarily fragmented and episodic," he wrote, because their activity is always interrupted by the initiative of ruling groups and surfaces in the record chiefly when it rebels (Gramsci 1971). Gramsci accordingly asked the historian to gather every trace of independent initiative, however slight, since the coherence that ruling groups enjoy is precisely what the subordinated lack.

Two features of this formulation proved decisive for India. The first is the link between subalternity and the archive: the subaltern is known through sources produced by others, and the historian's labour is therefore one of reading documents for what they were not designed to reveal. The second is Gramsci's attention to common sense, folklore and popular religion as sites where subordinate groups elaborate a conception of the world that is incoherent yet not empty. In India, where popular religion has been the principal idiom of lower-caste protest for centuries, the second feature would prove at least as important as the first, though it took the historians some time to recognise it.

2.2 The Subaltern Studies Collective

When the first volume of *Subaltern Studies* appeared from Oxford University Press in Delhi in 1982, Ranajit Guha opened it with a short programmatic statement that has been cited more often than almost any other text in South Asian historiography. Its claims can be summarised as a set of interlocking propositions:

- **The charge of elitism.** Both colonialist and bourgeois-nationalist historiography had represented the making of the Indian nation as the achievement of elites, British administrators in one version and Indian leaders in the other (Guha 1982).
- **An autonomous domain.** Parallel to elite politics there existed "the politics of the people", an autonomous domain that neither originated in elite politics nor depended upon it for its existence (Guha 1982).
- **A relational definition.** The subaltern was defined negatively, as "the demographic difference between the total Indian population and all those whom we have described as the 'elite'" (Guha 1982), so that the same group could be dominant in one region and subordinate in another.
- **The failure of the nation.** The central problem of modern Indian history was, for Guha, the historic failure of the nation to come into its own, because neither the bourgeoisie nor the working class had been able to lead the people as a whole.

The method that followed from these propositions was to read colonial records against the grain, treating the administrative prose of counter-insurgency as an unwilling witness to the consciousness of rebels who left no writing of their own. Studies of peasant revolts, tribal uprisings and the memory of violent events treated rumour, myth and narration as historical evidence, and in doing so collapsed the boundary between archive and text. This is why the collective proved so attractive to literary critics: its historians were, in effect, close readers.

As the project matured over twelve volumes, its centre of gravity shifted from recovering subaltern consciousness to questioning the categories through which any consciousness could be recovered. Partha Chatterjee examined how anticolonial nationalism had claimed an inner, spiritual domain of religion, family and language as its sovereign ground, thereby subordinating the claims of women, peasants and lower castes to a unified national self. Dipesh Chakrabarty argued that the categories of historical explanation themselves were European in provenance and could not accommodate pasts in which gods and spirits act. Gyan Prakash described the whole trajectory as a convergence of *Subaltern Studies* with postcolonial criticism. Notably absent from these debates, until late, was sustained engagement with caste as a structure of domination—a gap that Dalit critics would later make central to their objections.

2.3 Spivak and the Question of Speech

The turn toward the conditions of representation received its most influential statement in Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?", published in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* in 1988. The essay's argument is often reduced to its final sentence, but it moves through three distinct claims:



1. **Against transparent representation.** Western intellectuals such as Foucault and Deleuze, in claiming to let the oppressed speak for themselves, concealed their own role as representers, conflating representation as political proxy with representation as portrait (Spivak 1988).
2. **Against recuperation.** The Subaltern Studies project, by seeking a positive subaltern consciousness, risked constructing that consciousness in the image of its historians, even as its practice of reading revealed the subaltern as an effect of discourse.
3. **The gendered double bind.** In the debate over the colonial abolition of *sati*, the woman was caught between the imperialist claim condensed in the sentence "White men are saving brown women from brown men" and the nativist claim that the women wanted to die; in neither did she appear as a speaking subject (Spivak 1988).

Spivak's culminating example was the 1926 suicide of Bhubaneswari Bhaduri, a young woman in North Calcutta who, having failed to carry out a political assassination entrusted to her, timed her death to coincide with menstruation so that it could not be read as the outcome of illicit pregnancy. Even this carefully encoded act was misread by her own family. Hence the conclusion, "The subaltern cannot speak" (Spivak 1988), which was a claim about the failure of a speech act to be completed by a listener rather than about an incapacity to utter. In *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* Spivak revised the essay, describing that blunt sentence as inadvisable and clarifying that subalternity names a position without identity, removed from the lines of social mobility (Spivak 1999). For literary criticism, the decisive consequence was that the question of subaltern literature became a question about reading: whether critics could learn to hear what was being said without reinscribing it into their own frames.

3. Antecedents before the Concept

3.1 Bhakti Voices and the Critique of Hierarchy

If the theoretical genealogy begins with Gramsci, the literary one begins several centuries earlier. The medieval devotional movements produced a body of poetry in which artisans and untouchables spoke in their own names, in the vernacular rather than Sanskrit, and frequently against the priestly order. Three voices are especially important for any history of subaltern writing:

- **Kabir.** The fifteenth-century weaver of Banaras assailed the authority of both Brahmin and mullah, mocking ritual purity, scriptural learning and the idea that birth confers holiness. His poems in the *Bijak* often address the *pandit* directly in a combative, interrogative voice that refuses deference.
- **Ravidas.** A leatherworker and Kabir's near-contemporary, Ravidas offered something rarer than critique: an image of an alternative society. His song of Begumpura, the "city without sorrow", imagines a place without tax, toil, fear or rank, and it has become the founding utopia of a modern anti-caste lineage.
- **Chokhamela.** A fourteenth-century Mahar devotee of Vitthal at Pandharpur, Chokhamela composed *abhangs* in which devotion and the pain of exclusion are inseparable; his wife Soyarabai, sister Nirmala and son Karmamela also left verses, making his family an early instance of collective untouchable authorship.

Modern Dalit critics have been divided over this inheritance. Some celebrate Chokhamela as an ancestor of protest; others regard his tone of supplication, his acceptance of a god who receives him while the temple keeps him at the door, as evidence of how devotion could absorb grievance without transforming its causes. The dispute anticipates a later and central question: whether speech permitted within a dominant idiom is subaltern speech at all. Bhakti shows that the oppressed could speak; it also shows how readily that speech could be canonised, Sanskritised and absorbed into the very order it challenged. Kabir is now a national poet, quoted in school textbooks with his anti-Brahmin edge often blunted.

3.2 Colonial Reform and the Writing of Slavery

The colonial period produced the first systematic prose critique of caste by a writer from the oppressed castes. Jotirao Phule's *Gulamgiri* (1873), written in Marathi as a dialogue between Jotirao and a questioner named Dhondiba, recasts Indian history as the conquest and enslavement of the indigenous Shudras and Atishudras by Aryan Brahmins, and dedicates itself to the people of the United States in admiration of their struggle against slavery (Phule 2002). Its historical claims are polemical, but its literary strategy is precise: it reinterprets the avatars of Vishnu as episodes of conquest, so that the boar, the man-lion and the dwarf become figures of invading violence and King Bali becomes the dispossessed sovereign of the indigenous people. Phule thus does in 1873 something very close to what Guha would theorise a century later. He reads the dominant record against the grain and discovers in it the history of the



dominated. The dialogue form matters too: Dhondiba's questions model the awakening of a reader, making the text a pedagogy rather than a treatise.

B. R. Ambedkar's *Annihilation of Caste* (1936), the address prepared for the Jat-Pat Todak Mandal of Lahore and printed by its author when the organisers balked at its content, gave this tradition its philosophical core. Against the defence of caste as a functional arrangement, Ambedkar replied that the caste system "is not merely division of labour. It is also a division of labourers" (Ambedkar 2014). He argued that caste destroys public spirit and the possibility of fraternity, that it rests on the sanction of the scriptures, and that reform which leaves that sanction intact is futile. The text's address is itself significant: it speaks to a reforming upper-caste audience while refusing the terms on which that audience offered help. It was Ambedkar's movement, rather than any literary school, that created the public, the institutions and the vocabulary from which modern Dalit literature emerged, and his conversion to Buddhism in 1956 gave that literature a new symbolic horizon.

4. Twentieth-Century Phases of Subaltern Writing

4.1 Progressive Realism and Its Limits

The Progressive Writers' Association, founded in 1936, made the poor and the outcaste central subjects of Hindi and Urdu fiction. Premchand's late stories, such as "Kafan", and Mulk Raj Anand's English novel *Untouchable* (1935) are landmark representations of caste suffering. Yet they share a structural feature: the untouchable is depicted from outside, and redemption—through Gandhian reform, a missionary's gospel or, at the close of Anand's novel, the flush toilet as a technological solution to scavenging—arrives from elsewhere. Bakha, Anand's sweeper boy, is observed with sympathy, but his inner life is largely the novelist's projection. The progressive phase therefore matters to the history of subaltern literature less as its origin than as the representational regime against which Dalit writers later defined themselves, and much of the force of Dalit realism comes from its refusal of the outsider's compassionate gaze.

4.2 The Dalit Panthers and the Marathi Explosion

The rupture came in Maharashtra. Marathi Dalit writing had grown through the 1950s and 1960s in the wake of Ambedkar's conversion, but it was the formation of the Dalit Panthers in Bombay in 1972, by Namdeo Dhasal, J. V. Pawar, Raja Dhale and others, that turned it into a cultural insurgency. Taking their name from the Black Panthers of the United States, the Panthers fused militant politics with literary production. The period's emblematic short story, Bandhu Madhav's "The Poisoned Bread", in which a Mahar boy watches his grandfather die after eating stale bread received from an upper-caste farmer, captured a social order whose very gifts are toxic.

Dhasal's *Golpitha* (1972), named after the red-light district of central Bombay, remains the decisive text. In Dilip Chitre's translations its innovations can be described under several heads (Dhasal 2007):

- **A new lexicon.** The slang of pimps, addicts, sex workers and municipal labourers entered Marathi poetry for the first time as its primary idiom rather than as local colour, violating the decorum that had governed the language's literary register.
- **The city as wounded body.** Bombay appears not as a site of modernity but as a festering organism of hunger, disease and sexual commerce, an image that refuses both the devotional consolation of the *sants* and the progressive promise of the industrial future.
- **Speakers who refuse pity.** Dhasal's personae curse, boast and prophesy; they do not ask the reader for sympathy, and so they withdraw from the economy of compassion on which the progressive novel had depended.
- **Prophetic rage.** The poems move abruptly from obscenity to apocalyptic vision, imagining the destruction of an unjust world and a new humanity in its place, a structure that recalls Ravidas's Begumpura recast in the idiom of the slum.

The poetry thus answers Spivak's question in advance, though not as she framed it. The subaltern here speaks loudly and in his own name; the difficulty lies in the literary establishment's inability, for some years, to classify that speech as poetry at all. What Dhasal exposes is that the failure of hearing is institutional before it is epistemological.

4.3 Mahasweta Devi and the Fiction of Adivasi Resistance

Mahasweta Devi, an upper-caste Bengali writer and activist, occupies a pivotal and uneasy place. Her stories about



Santhal, Oraon, Munda and Lodha communities were translated by Spivak and so became, for international readers, the paradigmatic literature of subalternity. "Draupadi" is the most discussed of them. Dopdi Mejhen, a Santhal woman involved in the armed insurgency of the early 1970s, is hunted by the officer Senanayak, a man who prides himself on understanding the enemy he pursues. When she is captured, he orders her to be "made", and she is raped through the night in custody. In the morning she refuses to put on her cloth, tears it, and advances naked and bleeding on the officer, who for the first time is afraid of an unarmed target (Devi 1997).

The story's force lies in two inversions. It inverts the *Mahabharata*, in which Krishna miraculously replenishes Draupadi's sari to save her modesty; here no god intervenes, and the woman turns her exposed body from an object of shame into an accusation. It also inverts the epistemology of counter-insurgency, which Senanayak embodies as the liberal expert who reads his adversary's texts and claims to know her. The final scene shows that this knowledge was only a technique of capture. Read alongside Spivak's essay, the story dramatises a subaltern utterance that cannot be absorbed by the representer: Dopdi speaks, in a Santhal-inflected Bengali, but what she communicates is a refusal of the categories through which she has been seen. In the same collection, "Breast-Giver" turns Jashoda, a Brahmin wet-nurse whose body sustains a wealthy household until she dies of untreated cancer, into an allegory of exploited reproductive labour.

Mahasweta's prominence nevertheless illustrates a structural irony that later Dalit and Adivasi critics pressed hard. The most celebrated "subaltern literature" of the 1990s was written by an elite author and mediated by a diasporic theorist, whose prefaces and afterwords framed how a generation of readers encountered it. The question was unavoidable: did the category describe the speech of the oppressed, or a literary-critical effect produced around them by others?

4.4 Autobiography and the Ethics of Witness

From the 1980s onward, the dominant genre of Dalit writing became autobiography, and it answered that question by placing the author and the subject in the same body. Omprakash Valmiki's Hindi *Joothan* (1997), in Arun Prabha Mukherjee's translation, takes its title from the leftover food the Chuhra community collected from upper-caste wedding feasts (Valmiki 2003). The narrative builds its indictment through scenes of precise humiliation: the boy made by his headmaster to sweep the school grounds for days instead of attending lessons, until his father intervenes; the family's labour of skinning a dead bullock; the mother who, after years of gratitude for scraps, throws a basket of leftovers back at the host who refuses her children fresh food. That gesture of the mother is the autobiography's ethical centre, because it marks the moment when dependence turns into dignity, and it anticipates the narrator's own movement through education and Ambedkarite thought.

Bama's Tamil *Karukku* (1992), translated by Lakshmi Holmström, joins caste to the experience of a Dalit Christian woman (Bama 2012). Its turning point comes in childhood, when the narrator sees an elder of her community carrying a packet of food by its string so that his hands will not touch what is destined for an upper-caste landlord, and her brother explains that this is untouchability. Later, as a nun, she discovers caste inside the Church and leaves the order. The title, the serrated edge of the palmyra leaf, is explained by the author as a figure both for the wounds of caste and for the cutting edge of a voice that has learned to resist. Formally, *Karukku* is non-linear and thematic rather than chronological, and its prose carries the rhythm of spoken Paraiyar Tamil, a choice that itself challenges the standard literary register.

Sharankumar Limbale's *Akkarmashi* (1984), translated as *The Outcaste*, completes this triad of foundational autobiographies. Its narrator, born to a Mahar mother and an upper-caste landlord, belongs fully to neither community; the title, meaning "half-caste" or illegitimate, makes his very birth a record of caste-sexual violence. Taken together, these narratives establish the features that would come to define Dalit life-writing: the substitution of community for individual development, the minute recording of everyday humiliation, and an orientation toward the reader that is less confessional than juridical.

4.5 Adivasi Self-Representation in English

The most recent phase is the emergence of Adivasi writers who represent their communities in their own names, in English as well as in Santali, Kurukh, Gondi and other languages. Hansda Sowvendra Shekhar's *The Adivasi Will Not Dance* (2015) is a striking example. Its title story is narrated by Mangal Murmu, an elderly Santhal musician whose troupe is asked to perform for the President of India at a ceremony inaugurating a power plant that will



displace his people. His decision, which gives the book its title, is to declare before the dignitaries that the Adivasi will not dance; he is beaten and removed (Shekhar 2015). The scene is the antithesis of the spectacle of tribal culture so often demanded by the state, and it reverses the logic of "Draupadi": the gesture of refusal now comes from a narrator who also controls the narrative.

Other stories in the collection deliberately refuse the expectation that Adivasi fiction should depict only victimhood or resistance. Migration to cities, sexual relationships across community lines, ambition and internal hierarchy are all present. The collection's banning by the Jharkhand government in 2017, on the ground that one story depicted Santhal women demeaningly, and the subsequent lifting of the ban, show that Adivasi self-representation is contested from within the community as well as from outside it. Where Mahasweta wrote of Adivasis, Shekhar writes as one, and the difference transforms the ethics of representation that had dominated the earlier critical discussion.

5. Theoretical Frameworks

5.1 Testimonio and the Collective Subject

The Latin American concept of testimonio, associated above all with *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, has offered critics one way to read Dalit life-writing. Sharmila Rege adapted the category in *Writing Caste/Writing Gender*, gathering Marathi testimonios by Dalit women such as Baby Kamble, Shantabai Kamble, Kumud Pawde and Urmila Pawar (Rege 2006). Her adaptation highlights several features that distinguish these texts from conventional autobiography:

- **The representative self.** The narrator speaks as a witness for a community rather than as an exceptional individual, so that the life recounted is exemplary rather than unique.
- **Testimony as evidence.** The truth claim of the text is political and juridical: it testifies to a collective injustice and asks the reader to respond as a witness would to evidence.
- **The inseparability of caste and gender.** Dalit women's narratives record violence from upper-caste men and patriarchal control within the community at once, refusing to subordinate either axis to the other (Rege 2006).
- **Pedagogy.** Many of the texts, Baby Kamble's above all, address younger generations directly, preserving memory of pre-Ambedkarite degradation so that the gains of the movement are not taken for granted.

The framework is illuminating but not exhaustive. Testimonio presumes a mediating intellectual, as in the case of Menchú's narrative recorded by an anthropologist, whereas many Dalit narratives were written and published without such mediation, often by writers who were themselves teachers, activists or civil servants. To read them only as testimonio risks reinstating the very structure that Spivak criticised, in which the subaltern supplies experience and the intellectual supplies form.

5.2 Limbale and the Aesthetics of Dalit Literature

Limbale's *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature*, translated by Alok Mukherjee, is the most systematic attempt to theorise subaltern writing from within (Limbale 2004). Its argument can be set out as a sequence of propositions:

1. **The inadequacy of inherited aesthetics.** The traditional aesthetics of Sanskrit and Marathi poetics, organised around beauty and the pleasure of the cultivated reader, cannot evaluate a literature whose purpose is to expose suffering and provoke change.
2. **Ambedkarite values as criteria.** Dalit literature should be judged by its fidelity to equality, freedom, justice and fraternity, values drawn from Ambedkar's thought rather than from the canon (Limbale 2004).
3. **Social effect over pleasure.** The worth of a work lies in its capacity to awaken readers to their social condition and to move them toward transformation, not in the delight it affords.
4. **Authorship and consciousness.** Dalit literature is literature written by Dalits with Dalit consciousness, a criterion that excludes sympathetic writing by non-Dalits however powerful, and that would place Anand and even Mahasweta outside its boundary.

Limbale's position has been criticised as essentialist, and its fourth proposition in particular raises difficult questions about mixed and contested identities, questions that his own *Akkarmashi* dramatises. Yet it accomplishes something postcolonial theory had not. It moves the question from whether the subaltern can speak to who has the authority to judge the speech. Rather than conceding aesthetic judgment to an established canon that then graciously includes or excludes Dalit texts, Limbale relocates the standard of value in the community of writers and readers whom the



canon had excluded. Dalit aesthetics is, in this sense, the critical counterpart of Dhasal's poetic break.

5.3 Experience, Theory and the Dalit Critique of the Subaltern

Dalit scholars have also asked whether "subaltern" is the right word at all. Their objections can be grouped under three heads:

- **Dissolution of caste.** The breadth of the category, which allowed historians to include peasants, tribals, workers and women without pre-deciding their relations, also dissolved caste into a generic condition of subordination and made it easy to overlook.
- **The location of the scholar.** The term allowed upper-caste scholars to speak about the oppressed without examining their own social position, so that the critique of elite historiography could itself be produced by an intellectual elite.
- **The connotation of silence.** A name that signals the incapacity to be heard sits awkwardly with a literature that has been loud, prolific and theoretically articulate, and which prefers the self-chosen political name "Dalit".

Gopal Guru gives the sharpest form to these complaints in *The Cracked Mirror*. Indian social science, he argues, has been organised as a hierarchy between "theoretical Brahmins", who produce concepts, and "empirical Shudras", who supply data and experience (Guru and Sarukkai 2012). His dialogue with the philosopher Sundar Sarukkai turns on whether lived experience of humiliation confers a privileged claim to theorise it, and Sarukkai's more cautious responses about the communicability of experience make the book a genuine debate rather than a manifesto. Guru's argument reframes Spivak's problem. For Spivak, the subaltern's speech fails because no one completes it; for Guru, the more immediate failure is that those who do hear it reserve for themselves the right to convert it into theory. Suraj Yengde's *Caste Matters* extends the critique to the present, arguing that progressive academic and activist spaces continue to reproduce caste privilege, and that Dalit intellectuals must claim both the authority of experience and the discipline of theory, while also scrutinising class divisions within Dalit communities themselves (Yengde 2019).

Taken together, these interventions support the following claims, which the history traced above bears out:

1. Subaltern writing in India is not belated. Its central concerns—the authority of scripture, the right to speak, the forms of collective memory—were articulated by the *sants* and by Phule long before postcolonial theory named them.
2. The literature has repeatedly produced its own theory, from Ambedkar's critique of scriptural sanction to Limbale's aesthetics and Guru's epistemology, and that theory is better attuned to its texts than the general category of the subaltern.
3. The decisive question is not whether the subaltern can speak, but who controls the institutions—publishing, translation, the university—that decide whether speech counts as literature or as theory.

6. Translation, Recognition and the Present Field

The present configuration of subaltern literature is shaped by its circulation in English. Translation has been an instrument of emancipation, giving writers such as Dhasal, Valmiki and Bama national and international audiences, and allowing Dalit and Adivasi writers in different languages to read one another across the barriers that had separated regional movements. It has also introduced new forms of mediation, and its effects can be distinguished along several lines:

- **Selection.** The texts chosen for translation have frequently been the most harrowing narratives of humiliation, which risks producing a market in suffering and confirming the reader's expectation that Dalit writing is documentary rather than imaginative.
- **Framing.** Introductions, glossaries and prefaces by translators and editors shape interpretation, sometimes reproducing the outsider's authority that the texts themselves contest.
- **Flattening.** Regional idioms, such as Bama's spoken Paraiyar Tamil or Dhasal's Bombay street Marathi, are difficult to carry into standard English, and their loss can blunt the challenge to literary decorum that was central to the originals.



- **Recognition.** Against these risks, translation has made possible a pan-Indian and diasporic Dalit and Adivasi readership, and a generation of writers, Shekhar among them, now compose directly in English, refusing the role of the translated other.

A second feature of the present field is that the category of the subaltern is being reclaimed and contested simultaneously. Writers insist on the complexity of Dalit and Adivasi lives—sexuality, ambition, migration, internal hierarchy—against the expectation that their fiction should depict only victimhood or heroic resistance. The history of the concept thus loops back on itself. A word that Gramsci used for those whose history was fragmentary and episodic now designates writers who have produced an extensive, self-conscious and theoretically articulate archive, and who frequently prefer to be named by their own political vocabulary rather than by a term that implies their silence.

7. Conclusion

The trajectory reconstructed in this article runs in two directions at once. In one, a concept travels from Italian prison notebooks to Delhi historiography to American deconstruction and finally to Indian literature departments, acquiring at each stage a sharper sense of the difficulty of recovering the voices of the dominated. In the other, a vernacular tradition of protest runs from Kabir's challenge to the *pandit*, Ravidas's Begumpura and Chokhamela's *abhangs*, through Phule's rereading of myth and Ambedkar's attack on scriptural authority, to the Panther poetry of Dhasal, the autobiographies of Valmiki, Bama and Limbale, and the fiction of Shekhar. The two lines meet in the critical present, and their meeting is uneasy.

The argument advanced here is that the second line has the better claim to define subaltern literature in India. Guha and Spivak provided an indispensable vocabulary for thinking about archives, representation and the failure of speech to be heard, and Mahasweta Devi's fiction showed how that vocabulary could be dramatised. Yet the theoretical achievements most closely fitted to the literature have come from within it: Limbale's relocation of aesthetic judgment, Rege's recognition of collective testimony, and Guru's demand that the producers of experience also be recognised as producers of theory. Subaltern literature in India is therefore best understood not as the speech of the silenced, retrieved by sympathetic critics, but as a long and continuing practice of self-authorisation. Its history is the history of oppressed communities taking possession of the means of representation, and its theory is, in large part, the theory they wrote for themselves.



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