

The Small Voices of History and the Middle Class Academia: Notes Towards Promises and Pitfalls

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Prem Kumari Srivastava and Gitanjali Chawla, eds. *Cultures of the Indigenous: India and Beyond* (Vol. I). New Delhi: Authorpress, 2014. 257 pp. ISBN 13-978-8172739232.

Prem Kumari Srivastava and Gitanjali Chawla, eds. *De-territorialising Diversities: Literatures of the Indigenous and Marginalised* (Vol. II). Authorpress, 2014. 278 pp. ISBN 13-978-8172739263.

It is only recently, roughly since the 1990s, that we in the postcolonial contexts have started to develop an awareness of certain alarming pitfalls of the otherwise enticing discourses of modernity and postmodernity. The critical implications of such anthropocentric, Eurocentric and largely urban middle class-centric discourses for nature and an ecologically balanced, harmonious existence on the one hand and for a more inclusive and pluralistic social life on the other have finally started to dawn upon us. This has followed the rise of a salutary scepticism about some celebrated market-driven notions of growth, development, progress, liberty, globalisation and so on, which are intrinsically implicated in the politics of knowledge and power. The dissenting voices today are not necessarily confined to the elite spaces of the seminar-halls and the books brought out by renowned publishers; they are being echoed in the domain of praxis, of activism. Not only are the subalterns being spoken for and about, they have also started to find a few sensitive ears who can think beyond the politics of “sympathy” that subsumes dissent.

The two volumes under review emerged out of the elite, urban, mainstream academic space of the seminar hall; but they are marked by a self-critical spirit which is essential in even conceptually reaching out to the “subjects” of the articles in the volumes – the “folk” and the “ethnic,” the dispossessed and the homogenised, the tellers of stories and keepers of knowledge and wisdom, and upholders of an alternative, marginalised nature-centric paradigm of history and existence. As the editors submit in the

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Introduction, “True to the tradition of *knowledge keeping*, these volumes are an attempt to ‘keep’ some of the knowledge of the cultures and literatures of the indigenous of India and beyond. Always in transition, a process of becoming and not being, *Cultures of the Indigenous: India and Beyond* is the starting point in this series” (19). Most of the fourteen scholarly articles compiled in the first volume of the series and the fifteen in the second volume exhibit this critical self-consciousness.

Yet, the editors are ambitious enough to attempt a capturing of as many diverse aspects of the life and culture of the dispossessed of the world as possible between the covers of two not-so-thick volumes. From orality in the far Northwest Canada to the Bauls of Bengal, from Punjabi Bhangra in the age of information explosion to the political implications of Clint Eastwood films in the Native American culture, and much more, the first volume offers a handful. This volume is particularly devoted to the exploration of various cultural and discursive dimensions of marginalised cultures in India and beyond through an investigation of their re-production in several non-literary artistic media, both non-modern (like folklores, storytelling, folk visual art, traditional performance cultures including music and dance and so on) and modern/technological (like films, animation and the cyberspace). The second volume primarily undertakes an understanding of “others” through the grid of literary narratives from several cultures within and outside India. In keeping with the fluidity and plurality of the vast terrain of “indigenous” cultures and their innumerable discursive manifestations, the editors and contributors of the volumes have had to dabble with heterogeneous theoretical and conceptual frameworks. The task is daunting, to say the least, and the results cannot be expected to be equally satisfactory everywhere in volumes of this nature.

One essay each by one of the pioneers of folklore studies in India, Jawaharlal Handoo, and the eminent anthropologist Julie Cruikshank in the introductory section of the first volume draw up the conceptual framework for the book that would remain pertinent for the sequel volume as well. Invoking the dominant historiographical model embedded in what he calls the “palace paradigm” – “the paradigm of thinking history, writing history and perpetuating ‘history’ [as] essentially a powerful civilising discourse based on the stories of kings... and their palace surroundings” (40) – Handoo forcefully shows in his article “Marginalisation: Folklore and the Discourse of Power, Oppression and Pain” how the same paradigm continues to remain active in “modern political systems” (40). He goes on to argue that historically – from the feudal times of the epics to the modern times of the “bourgeois public sphere” theorised by Jurgen Habermas – the circuit of production, dissemination and reception of knowledge in the Indian context has been informed by the traffic of power between orality and literacy which has functioned within the “palace paradigm.” Professor Cruikshank in “The Ongoing Lives of Stories: Persistence of Oral

Tradition in Canada's Far Northwest" shows how oral narratives in the process of forming their mutable textuality negotiate several contexts and "horizons of expectations" involving narrators and listeners. Not only do they emerge out of these tellers, listeners, contexts and their social relations, they also act back upon reality by shaping such relationships.

The thematically organised next three sections of the volume offer some insightful discussions that have their theoretical moorings in the conceptual framework drawn up by the first two essays. The first of these three, titled "Tangible and Intangible," comprises four essays: Anjali Gera Roy's essay on the resurgence of Punjabi folk dance form Bhangra in the late 1980s traces its journey from rural Punjabi harvest ritual to a globally popular "mainstream" mode of entertainment in the age of technology and cyberspace. In the process, Gera Roy argues that it negotiates multiple modes of literacy and orality and renders easy compartmentalisations like those of country and city, tradition and modernity, natural and technological somewhat banal. Nina Sabnani and Sutapa Dutta in their respective essays focus on two marginal communities: the displaced women embroidery and appliqué artists of Kutch in Gujarat and the itinerant singers of the Baul sect of Birbhum in Bengal. The essays deal with the endangered collective identity of both these communities through crass commodification and exoticisation of their arts and lifestyles by the mainstream society. One can of course, take issue with the central argument of Ragini Bhat's essay that the institution of museum can be an apt "conduit" space for studying indigenous cultures in the classroom, for, as Edward Said has argued in *Orientalism*, museum as a space acts through objectification, classification and stratification that imply closure. It is important for us to remain conscious of its negative implications while dealing with the cultures of the indigenous that rely on fluidity and endless renewal.

The second section, "Re-stor(y)ing," again consists of four interesting essays. Ronald Strickland discusses the political implications of Clint Eastwood's films in the cultural self-fashioning of the Native American Cherokees. Depending primarily on episodes of the life history of an Inuit seamstress, Nancy Wachowich stitches together an enjoyable article on the manufacture of Inuit mittens and the intricate consumption pattern and social relationships they inspire in the Canadian Arctic region. Samuel Dani's essay on the Indian Dalit folk-musical form, Dombaja, and Bidyarani Asem's article on Shumang Leela, a courtyard theatre form from Manipur, are rich in their exploration of ethnographic politics and its positioning within conflicts between local and national searches for subjectivity and certain globally operative hegemonic forces. The last section of the first volume of the series, "The Neglect," foregrounds the mainstream homogenising politics of marginalisation, suppression and subsequent oblivion/cultural obliteration of endangered groups in India and abroad. From Ramesha Jayaneththi's exploration of the

relation between the erasure of the Rodyas and Sri Lankan historiography, through Ruchi Kumar's account of the gradual painful impoverishment of the plural Indian cultural landscape through oblivion of local communal heritages like that of the Bhils of Rajasthan, and Ketaki Datta's informative discussion of the Totos of the northern West Bengal, to Adiba Faiyaz's invocation of the necessity of mnemonical renewal of the rich Indian narrative and cultural legacy through nurturing its fast vanishing paradigm of storytelling, this section makes a fitting finale to the book that has successfully argued for cultural diversity and ethnic heterogeneity through the grids of knowledge-keeping, memory and informed critiques of the existing nexus between power and knowledge.

In the introductory essay – “Fleeting Words and Imagined Bodies: Oral Narratives and Women” – to the second volume, that primarily explores the literary iconography of ethnicity, marginality, erasure and the politics of production and dissemination of knowledge, Malashri Lal discusses the pitfalls of capturing the essentially fluid and feminine world of orality in the “frozen,” rigid, “masculine” medium of the written word. She explores the women-centric aesthetic of folklores among Santhals in West Bengal, the popular scroll tradition of Rajasthan, the culture of oral narratives among Chamba women in Himachal, and finally takes a turn to the plural “pan-Indian” motifs around the figure of Sita. Investigating the dialectic of the regional “little narratives” and the Indian “great narratives,” Lal sets the tone of the volume by introducing the problem of “search for methodology for capturing orality without destroying the spirit” (56).

Not always adequately sensitive to such methodological warnings, and thus occasionally stratifying and straitjacketing the complex, fluid, protean domain of “orature,” the next three sections of the volume deal with literary ramifications and mediations of marginal “folk” cultures in India and beyond. The first of these three, “Common/Uncommon Registers,” comprises five essays. Raj Kumar's essay offers a nuanced reading of Gopinath Mohanty's *Paraja* to explore the politics of identity and marginality in the dispossessed Paraja tribes in Odisha. Exploration of alternative historiographies in underrepresented popular consciousness is a common thrust between Kumar's essay and the one by Pin-Chia Feng on popular culture in Taiwan. Nandini C. Sen and Ashma Shamail's articles deal respectively with the politics of multiple retellings of the *Mahabharata* from folk perspectives and the reconstruction of “past” and “home” by people through “folk laughter” – central to Mikhail Bakhtin's idea of the carnivalesque – in two novels by Paule Marshall set in Africa and the Caribbean islands.

In the next section of the volume – aptly titled “Pedagogical Mediations” – four very interesting articles by Beatrice Q. Smith, Kavita Kumar et al, Sucharita Sarkar and Shatarupa Sinha make some crucial timely travails into the contested domain of the interface of pedagogy – reading, writing, criticism,

canon-formation, publication industry and so on – with the cultures of the soil and the indigenous. The inferences and hypotheses in these articles are not always beyond contention, but they succeed in creating a much needed discursive space to thrash out some pertinent problems and conceptual lacuna in the area. The last and final section, “Marginalised Aesthetics,” offers through five nuanced articles by Kalyani Hazri, Koyel Chakrabarty, Debosmita Paul, Subha R. Mishra and Bharati S. Khairnar glimpses into the aesthetics of “self-representation” of the subaltern through the prism of literary works. Together, these last few essays explore the inadequacy of mainstream theoretical paradigms in accommodating voices from the margins, and argue for developing alternative conceptual frameworks to do justice to the rich diversity of popular literary/oral imagination.

Taken together, the essays in the two collections shed light on myriad aspects of the literature/orature and culture of the marginalised, the dispossessed and the subaltern. They successfully locate themselves at the crossroads of available interdisciplinary conceptual paradigms and the need to revisit those paradigms in terms of praxis at the actual grassroots level of reality. Quite consistent with the fluid, inconclusive ethos of folk-consciousness, these volumes rely more on raising certain questions than on complacent academic resolution of the problems. The questions, after all, are as much about the “quest for relevance” – to borrow Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s phrase in *Decolonising the Mind* (wa Thiong’o 87) – of middle class academic interventions as about trying to reconfigure reality, identity and existence from the perspectives of what Ranajit Guha referred to as the “small voices of history” (Guha 304). These volumes take a few important steps in the direction of sensitising the reader towards the necessity of opening oneself up for embracing, inhabiting the “other” in this immense, plural world of “indigenous cultures.”

From very useful and scholarly Introductions to the Notes on contributors, the editors have done a decent job. There are a few printing errors and small goof-ups here and there; for one example, the last note (36) at the end of the Introduction to the first volume is misleading. The title of the proposed third and final volume in the series is put within inverted commas and not italicised (Vol. 2, 37). The styles of Notes and References across various essays could have been better standardised. The picture plates used in some articles enhance their visual and cerebral appeal, but their sources remain mostly unacknowledged/ unmentioned. The paper and printing quality is excellent; but the jacket design could have been aesthetically more pleasing. Indeed, that could be one small tribute to the tremendously rich aesthetic reservoir – visual and otherwise – of the indigenous cultures so succinctly explored in the two volumes. We look forward to the third volume in the pipeline, *Popular Culture and the Indigenous*.

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