

# Subalternity and Difference

Investigations from the North and  
the South

*Edited by*  
**Gyanendra Pandey**



Intersections

# Subalternity and Difference

Focusing on concepts that have been central to investigation of the history and politics of marginalized and disenfranchised populations, this book asks how discourses of 'subalternity' and 'difference' simultaneously constitute and interrupt each other. The authors explore the historical production of conditions of marginality and minority, and challenge simplistic notions of difference as emanating from culture rather than politics. They return, thereby, to a question that feminist and other oppositional movements have raised, of how modern societies and states take account of, and manage, social, economic and cultural difference. The different contributions investigate this question in a variety of historical and political contexts, from India and Ecuador, to Britain and the USA.

The resulting study is of invaluable interest to students and scholars in a wide range of disciplines, including History, Anthropology, Gender and Queer and Colonial and Postcolonial Studies

**Gyanendra Pandey** is Distinguished Professor of History at Emory University, USA, and is the series editor of the *Intersections: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* book series at Routledge. He is one of the leading theorists and originators of the subaltern studies approach and has published widely in the field of colonial and postcolonial studies.

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First published 2011  
by Routledge  
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon, OX14 4RN

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada  
by Routledge  
711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business*

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*British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data*

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

*Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data*

Subalternity and difference : investigations from the north and the south /edited by Gyanendra Pandey.

p. cm. -- (Intersections: colonial and postcolonial histories ; 4)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

1. Postcolonialism--Social aspects. 2. Minorities. 3. Racism. I. Pandey, Gyanendra, 1949--

JV51.S83 2011

325'.3--dc22

2010051481

ISBN13: 978-0-415-66547-6 (hbk)

ISBN13: 978-0-203-86852-2 (ebk)

Typeset in Times

by Taylor & Francis Books

**For Anjan Ghosh  
colleague, comrade and friend  
in memoriam**



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# Preface and acknowledgements

The present anthology is the second to emerge out of a series of conversations between scholars of the USA and India, and now more broadly the North and the South, begun in meetings in Emory University, Atlanta (USA), and continued in a number of workshops held in Mumbai, Hyderabad, Kolkata and Delhi (India) in the summer of 2009, as well as in a variety of other exchanges. The conversations, concerned broadly with questions of enfranchisement and disenfranchisement through history, focused in the initial stages on “Subaltern Citizens and Their Histories” (the theme of a first volume published by Routledge in 2010), and have gone on (in this volume) to investigate the question of “difference” in its relation to subalternity.

Except in two cases, those of Michael Fisher and Colin Johnson who were not part of the gatherings in India but were subsequently invited to write for the present volume, the chapters that follow all originated in draft presentations made at four workshops in India in August 2009. For the convenience of the reader, and as a rough and ready guide to the range of issues addressed in this anthology, we have arranged the chapters in three different sections, dealing with issues of gender and sexuality, the politics of belonging, and the discourse of liberalism. I need to make the point straightaway, however, that the chapters could easily have been presented in another order, or under different rubrics, for many if not most of them consider a wide range of issues and speak to many of the themes and questions highlighted in different sections of this collection. The questions that all the contributors address, through investigations from India, the USA, Britain and Ecuador, may be summed up as follows. What happens to the category of difference when “difference”/minority is not already visible as a historically or biologically (or ideologically) established truth, but is instead given a history? How is minority/difference produced as a “cultural” category by those in power, and sometimes as a political category by the subordinated, the marginalized and the disenfranchised (in the

broadest sense of those terms)? How do notions of subalternity and difference intersect with, enable, or complicate one another in this context? What, in a word, are the politics of difference?

I wish to take this opportunity to express my gratitude once more to Emory University, and especially to the Provost's Office, the Race and Difference Initiative, the Halle Institute, Emory College and the now disbanded Institute for Critical International Studies, for their generous support in the organization and funding of the workshops held in India. We are deeply obliged to Provost Earl Lewis, Dean Robert Paul, Dr. Holli Semetko and Professor Bruce Knauff for their continued support and enthusiasm.

A volume like this is always the product of extended and wide-ranging collaboration. I owe special thanks to Bruce Knauff and Ruby Lal for their unstinting exertions throughout the proceedings that have led up to it, and for their work as co-leaders of the Emory faculty trip to India in 2009. Warm thanks also to Debjani Bhattacharyya, wonderful student and research assistant, and to the staff at Routledge for their ongoing interest and efficiency in the publication of our work.

Finally, I wish to acknowledge with gratitude the extraordinary support and hospitality of our colleagues and hosts in India – Ram Reddy, editor of *Economic and Political Weekly*, and S. Parasuraman, Director of the Tata Institute for Social Sciences (in Mumbai); Maya Pandit and Abhai Maurya, at the time Pro-Vice Chancellor and Vice Chancellor respectively of the English and Foreign Languages University (in Hyderabad); Anjan Ghosh, Tapati Guha-Thakurta and their colleagues at the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences (in Kolkata); and Mushirul Hasan, then Vice Chancellor, and Lakshmi Subrahmaniam, Professor of History, at Jamia Millia Islamia (in Delhi).

Anjan, a close friend since 1980, an unusually gifted intellectual, generous colleague and committed citizen, was snatched away from us but a few months after he organized the workshop and played host to us in Kolkata. This volume is dedicated to his memory.

Gyanendra Pandey  
October 2010

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*Fragments, Histories* (2006); and, as editor, *Subaltern Citizens and Their Histories: Investigations from India and the USA* (2010).

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# 1

## INTRODUCTION

### The difference of subalternity<sup>1</sup>

*Gyanendra Pandey*

In a recently published anthology, *Subaltern Citizens and Their Histories: Investigations from India and the USA*,<sup>2</sup> my colleagues and I sought to re-affirm and radicalize the received notion of subalternity. We reiterated the position that “subalternity,” like “belonging,” is constantly negotiated (and differentiated), and stressed that it is not organized along a single axis, such as that of the economy. We also underlined the relevance of the concept to advanced liberal democracies and bourgeois societies today, no less than to the so-called developing and underdeveloped countries of the Third World or to pre-industrial and pre-modern times. What we do in this volume is to re-examine the idea of “difference,” in order to extend and deepen our investigations of subalternity, and to return more sharply to the question that feminist and other oppositional movements have raised, of how modern societies and states take account of, and live with, difference.

In undertaking this task, it will help to prise away the notion of difference from the rather impoverished sense of “diversity,” of segments revolving around a center (as minorities supposedly do in the nation-state), a move that assumes that the structure of society, the social organization, and range of political possibilities is always given from the start. I want to trouble this assumption in two ways. The first, which I hope will be readily conceded, is to recognize that “difference” is by definition manifold and fluid. Like subalternity, only perhaps more obviously so, the idea of difference cannot be thought or organized along a single (say, cultural or biological) axis. Distributed along multiple grids, it comes in innumerable forms, appearing differently in different places: malleable, evolving elements and tendencies that come into view and disappear, change, coalesce, and reappear, in other forms, amid other networks, in other contexts. Thus, the idea of difference signals fundamentally, and importantly, a history and politics of *becoming* – not of the already normalized, stable and relatively immutable.



Second, as already indicated, I relate the issue of *difference* – commonly conceived of as “deviance,” or “discrepant minority” (woman versus man, black versus white, African or Oriental against European, Muslim versus Hindu, Jew against Christian, lesbians, gays, bisexuals, trans-sexuals as against heterosexuals), and involving the pronouncement of radical alterity, allegedly based on “natural,” “biological” dissimilarity or long-established and deeply rooted conditions of apartness – to that of *subalternity*, i.e. articulations of dominance and subordination, and the hierarchical ordering of social, political and economic power. What happens to our account of emancipation/assimilation, and the accommodation of “difference,” if the paradigmatic example of the history of difference is taken to be, not as it has been since the nineteenth century, the Muslim or Jew, but, say, dalits, blacks or women – other important assemblages that have often been described as “different” in modern historical and political discourse?

Historians and other social scientists have in recent times generated significant research and debate around the ideas of subalternity and difference. In the main, however, work around these concepts has led to two different, not to say autonomous, narratives – one concerned primarily with “subalternity,” the other with “difference.” One of the more unexpected examples of this split may be the discourse on African Americans in the USA, where the history of one and the same individual body, and a social assemblage identified as “black,” repeatedly tends to get channeled into several distinct streams: the history of the African American Freedom Movement, the black women’s struggle, labor history. Notwithstanding the appeals for intersectional analysis in investigations of issues of race, class, gender and so on, one or other of these (say, race) is often reduced to another (class), or vice-versa, in a great deal of academic and political analysis.

Consider Robin Kelley’s comment on why “history from below” has had little impact on the study of African Americans. “There are those who might argue that all black history is ‘from below’, so to speak, since African Americans are primarily a working-class population.” In consequence, he writes, “Many scholars concerned with studying ‘race relations’ folded the black working class into a very limited and at times monolithic definition of the ‘black community’”; or, as Nell Painter has it, converted the black working class into “representative colored men.” “The civil rights and women’s movements persist[ed] in keeping their agendas separate,” Jacqueline Jones noted in 1985.<sup>3</sup> How might we muddy the waters of these discrete streams?

Much critical scholarship, feminist, postcolonial and other, has called for engagement with the “mosaic of quotations” and the “variety of writings (in multi-dimensional space)” that go to make up texts of (in this instance) subalternity and difference.<sup>4</sup> Simone de Beauvoir famously pursued the twin questions of “otherness” and “subordination” in her inquiry into the category of woman. Sander Gilman has written of how blackness and Jewishness feed on each other in defining the qualities of their difference. Gayatri Spivak has, in her extensive writings on feminist difference and gendered subalternity, always insisted on the intimate connection between the two.<sup>5</sup>

I suggested in my introduction to *Subaltern Citizens and Their Histories* that the foregrounding of differences of gender, sexuality, caste, race, etc., at the hands of the state and the dominant classes, has long been a way of organizing – and naturalizing – subalternity. Thus:

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 [or ex-Untouchables] who are. White Anglo-Saxon Protestant [we should add: heterosexual] 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 Aborigines are.

Difference becomes a mark of the subordinated or subalternized, measured as it is against the purported mainstream, the “standard” or the “normal.” What we are presented with are two terms in binary opposition, “hierarchically structured so that the dominant term is accorded both temporal and logical priority.”<sup>6</sup> It is in the attribution of difference, then, that the logic of dominance and subordination has commonly found expression. The proclamation of difference becomes a way of legitimating and reinforcing existing relations of power.

What the disadvantaged, the marginalized and the subordinated – women, blacks, dalits, sexual minorities, conquered indigenous peoples, migrants and dislocated populations – have done, in response, is to deploy the very category of difference to demand a re-arrangement if not an overturning of prevailing structures of access and privilege. For 200 years and more, the political exertions of the subaltern could be 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 end inherited structures of discrimination and denial, and gain a greater share in public resources and state power. By the later twentieth century, however, the battle has been self-consciously extended to encompass another demand: the demand for an acknowledgement and even privileging of certain kinds of difference.

In this move, I might add, the deployment of difference marks something of a departure from a commonly described politics of identity: and this is how many academic theorizations of difference have posited its terrain. For the argument about difference as developed by subalternized groups may be seen as a strategic deployment of a term derived from the dominant political discourse – another example perhaps of what Spivak calls “strategic essentialism,” advanced in a “scrupulously delineated ‘political interest,’”<sup>7</sup> although here such a strategy, if that is how we describe it, is not that of scholars studying subaltern groups and their histories, but of subaltern constituencies and assemblages themselves, seeking to access, appropriate, transform and be transformed.

The altered terms of the subaltern argument about difference grow out of an awareness not only 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. The new stance follows from a recognition that “difference,” and the very deployment of ideas of difference, has been the ground for claims of identity, unitariness, priority and privilege. Much feminist work has refused to accept any simple dichotomy between claims to equality and claims to difference, and argued instead that equality requires the recognition and inclusion of differences. “It is not our differences which separate women,” as Audre Lorde put it, “but our reluctance to recognize those differences and to deal effectively with the distortions which have resulted from the ignoring and misnaming of those differences.”<sup>8</sup>

Such oppositional scholarship calls for a fundamental critique of the ways in which the idea of difference is deployed, and of the operations of categorical difference – an operation that of course marks out only particular “differences” as relevant to the making of our broader social and political arrangements.<sup>9</sup> It leads us to ask how discourses of subalternity and difference simultaneously constitute and interrupt each other. How, I want to ask, is *the difference of subalternity* itself constituted? And what might this tell us about the deployment of arguments about difference in general?

### Difference, “deviance,” and subalternity

A prominent theme in the history of the world since the eighteenth century has been the promise of emancipation, including the emancipation of societies and groups marked out as “backward,” or disadvantaged, or simply adrift from the “mainstream” of human history and progress, as it is conceived after the Enlightenment. In the context of new discourses of nationhood in nineteenth-century Europe, the problematic of difference takes the political form of the “Jewish Question”; and Marx’s essay on that question becomes a lasting comment on the impossibility of the political emancipation of the Jew as Jew, that is, of political emancipation in a liberal mode – “tolerating” difference but demanding uniformity. The supposedly enlightened, tolerant, civil society of modern Europe, and with it the idea of the abstract citizen subject in the rational, universal order of the nation-state, is challenged by the very existence – and individuality – of the Jew, who is seen as being too particularistic and yet too global, too rooted and yet too dislocated, at one and the same time.<sup>10</sup> This is of course a very specific, “nationalist” contextualization of the question of difference, but it informs a more pervasive discourse of the political.

It is necessary to note that the Jewish Question is a metaphor for far more than the Jews. It is Muslims, to make the point bluntly, who are the Jews of the later twentieth and early twenty-first century – once again, too narrowly community-centered and too world-wide, too parochial and too deracinated, to fit in as responsible (read unmarked and naturally belonging) members of the nation-state. This is not to deny the critical differences between the history of the Jews – a consistently tiny minority in Europe, perceived as racially other, as killers of Jesus, as

the only religious minority until the post-Reformation era, a people without a state until the formation of modern Israel – and that of Muslims, substantial populations that have controlled large territories and had state power in many places from the inception of Islam until today. In that respect, the parallel between Jews and homosexuals may be somewhat more tenable – with their similar histories of being small minorities that are persecuted in Christian Europe (the experience elsewhere was perhaps more mixed) until late modernity, culminating in the Nazi Holocaust. My point, however, is about *metaphor*: of a minority that never quite fits, and is seen as dangerous to the nation/state: hence, the Jewish Question in nineteenth-century Europe, and the “problem” of Muslims today.

Yet, if the Muslims are the Jews of recent decades, the unrecognized Other of the era of modern states from the eighteenth century onwards have been slaves and Untouchables, women and other “invisible” groups, whose existence and particularity mount an equally important challenge to the existing discourses of civil society, uniform civil rights and the abstract citizen subject of the new national and democratic order.<sup>11</sup> The Jew/Muslim is viewed very quickly as a fully formed, alternative culture and dangerous Other, whereas the precise status of women or slaves or Untouchables as Other (or as minority) is itself in doubt. Several consequences follow, therefore, if we substitute the paradigm of the dalit/black/woman for the Jew/Muslim in our investigation of political emancipation and the making of modern societies and states.

First, our attention should be immediately drawn to the *making* of “difference,” or of a “minority” (or minorities) not already established in their “difference” from the start. Moreover, if we take seriously the proposition that the production of difference, and “minority,” is a process, not a given demographic or sociological condition,<sup>12</sup> it becomes all the more necessary to attend to the *kind* of “minoritization” we encounter in the history of particular states and societies, and to examine the implications of distinct forms of minority existence. Note that “ethnicity” and “minority” are often at odds.

A postcolonial critic, Aamir Mufti, writes of his interest in “how liberalism historically has talked about the modes of apartness of the Jews and the history of their persecution in Western society, and the kinds of solution it has offered ...”<sup>13</sup> Is the same kind of statement even conceivable for dalits, or blacks, or women? Is the dalit/black/women’s question ever so precisely formulated? What would be the “modes of apartness” of dalits, blacks, women? Can the dalit/black/women’s question be posed as a question of emancipation/assimilation by a dominant discourse that already claims to accommodate or include them? To say nothing of the question, how can women – or for that matter, assemblages like dalits or blacks – lay claim to the rights of separate nationhood (although, as we know, both dalits and blacks have done so at certain stages)?

Or again, consider the proposition that nationalism necessarily “unsettles” large numbers of people, rendering the minoritized populations potentially movable, and leading in many cases to the uprooting of entire populations.<sup>14</sup> It is clear that the

minoritization of dalits, blacks, or women does *not* automatically render them movable. On the contrary, given the nervousness about losing their labor in many instances (the American South in the early decades of the twentieth century, or domestic worlds more generally), subordination and minoritization is often a way of *keeping them in their place* – in both senses of the term. On the other hand, the uprooting of populations (in the sense of settled social structures) may be precisely what a subaltern minority calls for in many circumstances.

In rethinking the diverse locations and uses of the proclamation of difference, the example of classically subaltern communities – dalits, blacks, conquered indigenous populations, women – may have something unusual to tell us, given their uncertain and changing status as “minorities,” as insiders/outsidars who are essential to the continuance of a given social and economic order, and yet have to be confined to a subordinate, marginalized and often invisible place within it, precisely for the maintenance of established structures and relations of power. The specific character of the dalit or black, and, stretching the point only a little, also the women’s case, is that it is seen as being marked above all by conditions of subordination and deprivation, as opposed to the Jewish/Muslim case, which is reckoned primarily in terms of what would be described as “cultural deviance.” What then is the mark of subaltern “difference”?

Let me reiterate my proposition of difference as variety, indeterminacy, play. Not as deviance, or disordered or medicalized condition; not as genetic inheritance, but as political aspiration and endeavor. Not a pathology but a politics. Would analysts still suggest that dalit, black or women’s difference stems from a “biological” circumstance? If this was a common belief once, it is not now openly articulated (at least in the academy), except perhaps in the case of women. Might one suggest, alternatively, that it is the socially and culturally marked body that is the locus of the difference of subalternity? Does the body, and the embodied difference of the dalit/black/woman, stand in place of the cultural difference of the Jew/Muslim? Perhaps this tells us something too about the history of the Jews/Muslims, as the paradigmatic cases of cultural difference.

Explicitly or implicitly, the question of embodied difference is one that several contributors (Das, Vanita, Fisher, Crespino, Pandey) engage in the chapters that follow. Several contributors (Odem, Vanita, Das, Johnson, Pandey) examine the routine violence of the everyday, as much as of the media, the law and the state, as the site of the production of difference.<sup>15</sup> Yet others (Banerjee, Krupa, Crespino, Pandey) suggest that a subaltern re-writing of history is crucial to the politics of difference. Following from the above, a point that the volume focuses, and foregrounds, is a *political* rather more than a *cultural* foundation for difference (see Johnson, Banerjee, Odem, Krupa).

In the remainder of this introduction, I pursue the question of the politics of difference as these are played out in a range of recent subaltern histories: namely, the dalit struggle in India and the African American and women’s struggles in the USA. I argue that the example of these struggles enables us to reach beyond the