

**STUDYING SUBALTERN THEATRE/ THEATRE OF MARGINALITY WITH  
SPECIAL REFERENCE TO MANOJ MITRA'S *HONEY FROM A BROKEN HIVE***

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**ABSTRACT**

*Indian playwrights and other theatre practitioners have frequently seized upon and subjected to superbly imaginative treatment the various issues that directly or otherwise impinge upon the existence of subaltern peoples, and groups which reside on the margins of society. It is however a curious academic conundrum that this immensely significant cohabitation of theatre and subalternity has seldom been taken up for a thoroughgoing study. Still more curious is the fact that Manoj Mitra, in spite of having won the highest honour in the field of 'theatre and other performance studies' in India—namely, the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award (1985)—has hardly received any critical attention from theatre scholars working with the English language. Mitra's long theatrical career is a saga of deep and constant creative association with the "voiceless" of society and it is to the expression of their angst, fears, and happiness that he has dedicated his immense creative energy. In this article I critically engage with Manoj Mitra's *Honey from a Broken Hive* which I hope will allow me to place the play in the category of what may be called the Subaltern Theatre/ The Theatre of Marginality and the playwright as an unwavering champion of the same.*

**KEYWORDS:** Subaltern, marginality, insurgency, resistance, subaltern solidarity, subaltern consciousness, indigenous knowledge, power etc.

In his preface to the first volume of the *Subaltern Studies*, Ranajit Guha clearly explicates the semantic significance and the logic that dictates the use of the term—"Subaltern" (borrowed from Antonio Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks*) in the project of radically re-evaluating the nationalist historiography of South Asia: "The word 'subaltern' in the title stands for the meaning as given in the *Concise Oxford Dictionary*, that is, 'of inferior rank'. It will be used in these pages as the name for the general attribute of subordination in South Asian society whether this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office or in any other way." (Guha 1982, vii) In the following pages, I expressly take cue from Dipesh Chakrabarty in writing the expression 'Subaltern Studies' "in two different ways. When I do not italicize the expression "Subaltern Studies", I refer to an ongoing field of studies—not dead or extinct by any means; *Subaltern Studies* on the other hand, refers to the series of publications initiated by Ranajit Guha, a series that has now closed." (Chakrabarty 2013, 23) Guha's expatiation on the subtitle (Writings on South Asian History and Society) serves to expand the scope of this project to a great extent: "The words 'history and society' in the subtitle are meant to serve as a shorthand for all that is involved in the subaltern condition. As such there is nothing in the material and spiritual aspects of that condition, past or present, which does not interest us." (Guha 1982, vii) Guha's elaboration on the subtitle is deeply meaningful and significant, and serves to attribute the *Subaltern Studies* initiative an identity independent of ( a total reliance on) classical

Marxist theory with its espousal of a strictly materialistic and secular philosophical working premise. By leaving “nothing in the material and spiritual aspects of that (i.e. Subaltern) condition, past or present” out of the purview of *Subaltern Studies*, Guha essentially makes it more responsive to the Subaltern condition and, thereby more relevant and meaningful. Gyan Prakash highlights the restricted nature of the Marxist position and its limitations in adequately addressing the Subaltern issue: “Unable to take into account the oppressed's "lived experience" of religion and social customs, Marxist accounts of peasant rebellions either over- looked the religious idiom of the rebels or viewed it as a mere form and a stage in the development of revolutionary consciousness.” (Prakash 1994, 1477) This observation leads Prakash to an interesting and strategically important conclusion: “Thus, although Marxist historians produced impressive and pioneering studies, their claim to represent the history of the masses remained debatable.” (1477) This epistemological lacuna was, therefore, sought to be filled by the *Subaltern Studies* initiative. Priyamvada Gopal appositely refers to Guha’s work to underscore the *Subaltern Studies*’ critical move in curving out a philosophical position not entirely deduced from the classical Marxist position:

In its study of “specific” peasant consciousness, *Subaltern Studies* distinguishes itself from most Marxist historiography by paying particular attention to what Guha calls “religiosity”. For by appropriating peasant actions to larger histories of revolutionary action whose “Ideal” subject has a deeply secular consciousness, Marxist historiography had generally either evaded “religiosity” or explained it away as “clever but well-intentioned fraud”; this inclination had rendered the received Marxist historiography “ill equipped to cope with contradictions which are indeed the stuff of which history is made. (Gopal 2004, 143)

Prakash thus aptly sums up the genesis of the *Subaltern Studies*: “Accusing colonialist, nationalist, and Marxist interpretations of robbing the common people of their agency, it (i.e. *Subaltern Studies*) announced a new approach to restore history to the subordinated.” (Prakash 1994, 1477)

Colonialist, elite-nationalist, and Marxist perspectives on the role of the Subaltern in the historical continuum, deliberately or otherwise, denied any agency to the Subaltern, attributing instances of subaltern revolt/insurgency to violent and spontaneous expression of un-nurtured minds. Any decisive Subaltern action ostensibly aimed at altering the conditions of subordinated existence was seen as indicative of a sudden spurt of unrestrained emotion not mediated by conscious and thoughtful minds. *Subaltern Studies* sought to undo this prejudiced and fundamentally flawed interpretation by recognizing an active Subaltern consciousness capable of acting, independent of any elite/ ‘intellectual’ intervention, or without any attendant ‘pathology’ of the mind. It would however be wrong to construe that *Subaltern Studies* conferred agency to Subaltern existence; it merely *recognised* what hitherto had gone unaccounted for. Ranajit Guha’s observation on numerous peasant insurrections in Colonial India, published in his article “The Prose of Counter-Insurgency”, adequately illuminates the gravamen of the Subalternist argument: “They had too much at stake and would not launch into it except as a *deliberate*, even if *desperate*, way out of an intolerable condition of existence. Insurgency, in other words, was a *motivated* and *conscious* undertaking on the part of the rural masses.” (Guha 1983, 2) [emphasis-my own] Guha, in the same article, slams the patronising attitude of dominant perspectives on the subaltern offered by errant narratives of Colonialism, elite-nationalism, and Marxism: “... insurgency is regarded as *external* to the peasant’s consciousness and Cause is made to stand in as a phantom surrogate for Reason, the logic of that consciousness.” [emphasis- original] (3) Guha here makes a persuasive case for an autonomous peasant consciousness that eventually became a launching pad for the project to take off. Prakash further notes that “while reading records against their grain, these scholars (belonging to the *Subaltern Studies* initiative) have

sought to uncover the subaltern's myths, cults, ideologies, and revolts that colonial and nationalist elites sought to appropriate and that conventional historiography has laid waste by the deadly weapon of cause and effect." (Prakash 1994, 1479) Such radical research practice afford these scholars to penetrate hitherto unexplored realms of Subaltern social and political existence that have been found to be constantly and defiantly at odds with elitist readings of confrontations as narratives ever-definable by 'cause and effect' rationale. Thus, elitist interpretations of peasant insurgencies denied the Subaltern any autonomous, thinking political consciousness and thus effectively refused them the status of a subject even in their own narratives. *Subaltern Studies*, as corrective to insufficient/improper representation of subalterns, endeavoured to retrieve the essential subaltern consciousness and project the same in its proper light not tinged by the elitist vision. However, such an attempt soon invited just opposition from within the *Subaltern Studies* collective itself: it was quickly pointed out that the present project of retrieving the "essential consciousness" of the subalterns was a self contradictory effort to subvert and dismantle a positivist reading by another brand of the same. The very idea that something like a pure subaltern consciousness existed and was retrievable effectively validated all previous discursive practices that aimed at essentializing and stereotyping the subalterns, and espoused the possibility and justifiability of subjecting the subaltern existence to a grossly positivist reading of history, something that the project paradoxically had set out to discredit in the first place. However, the intrinsic contradiction proved to be of an immensely generative nature and catalysed massive expansion and fanning out of scholarly interest in the category of the subaltern. Partha Chatterjee closely maps the contours of this development:

The new turn in *Subaltern Studies* began more or less from the fifth and sixth volumes published in 1987-9. It was now acknowledged with much greater seriousness than before that subaltern histories were fragmentary, disconnected, incomplete, that subaltern consciousness was split within itself, that it was constituted by elements drawn from the experiences of both dominant and subordinate classes. Alongside the evidence of autonomy displayed by subalterns at moments of rebellion, the forms of subaltern consciousness undergoing the everyday experience of subordination now became the subject of inquiry. Once these questions entered the agenda, subaltern history could no longer be restricted to the study of peasant revolts. Now the question was not 'What is the true form of the subaltern?' The question had become 'How is the subaltern represented?' 'Represent' here meant both 'present again' and 'stand in place of'. Both the subjects and the methods of research underwent a change.

(Chatterjee 2010, 295-96)

This altered intellectual orientation and scholarly quest opened up Subaltern Studies to the appropriation of various disciplines and cast new light on the category of marginality as represented in myriad cultural and artistic productions including theatre. The reconstituted intellectual priorities of the *Subaltern studies* with its renewed interest in the question of subaltern representation makes it all the more germane to literature and the intensely convoluted forms of aesthetic response to and representation of the issues of the subalterns.

All these subaltern issues have been subjected to superbly imaginative treatment by Indian playwrights and other theatre practitioners who in their aesthetic projects of representation of nationalistic issues (that made their presence felt in the wake of anti-colonial movements in the country), issues relating to class, caste, gender etc. have engaged with marginality to different degrees. The subalterns at different points in country's social, political, and economic life have

participated—sometimes physically and sometimes morally—in the process of shaping the history of the nation in varied ways. The potential of the subalterns in galvanizing socio-political movements have been tapped from time to time to bring about radical changes. While on occasions such changes have been violently wrenched from the tightly clenched fist of the status quo through physical (read ‘armed’) struggles at the grassroots level, they have also been done in a more nuanced but equally effective ways through theatre. This indeed is testimony to the immensely significant marriage of theatre, and subalternity with other concomitant issues of marginality. It is my considered intention to study this intensely consequential cohabitation of theatre and subaltern issues and look upon it as a generative union from the highly engaging and deeply illuminating theoretical perspectives offered by the *Subaltern Studies*.

I shall now turn my attention to the study Manoj Mitra’s *Honey from a Broken Hive* which I hope will allow me to place the play in the category of what may be called the Subaltern Theatre/ The Theatre of Marginality.

Manoj Mitra is one of the most noted playwrights of Bengal who, in spite of having won the highest honour in the field of ‘theatre and other performance studies’ in India—namely, the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award (1985)—has hardly received any critical attention from theatre scholars working with the English language. While this has hardly bothered the enviable reputation of the playwright in his own state and among the cognoscenti, he is hardly studied at Indian universities. This non-canonical status of Mitra is grossly unjust. This becomes evident, when a proper study and appraisal of his work is done which easily places him in the hallowed company of noted playwrights like Karnad, Dutt, Tanvir, Sircar, Tendulkar et al. with whom, in spite of certain differences in technique, Mitra shares many of his preoccupations and technical virtuositities.

Indian theatre has often found itself at the forefront of social movements polemically fashioned to bring about desired and overdue changes in the country. Its impact, unlike other forms of literature, is always more immediate and is thus best suited to effect mass mobilization of people at the grassroots level which is an indispensable part of social, political or, any other form of revolution. Protest theatre and the Theatre of Roots (along with Street Theatre) may be specially mentioned for their close association with the “popular” as opposed to the “elitist” culture. They aim at politicizing the masses thereby prodding them to participate in revolutions aimed at transforming society for the good.

The subalterns of society have always had a close association with theatrical stage. Manoj Mitra’s theatre is deeply sensitive to the subaltern issues; but what is remarkable about Mitra is his novel and resolute artistic stance that does not blindly obey any one particular theoretical framework or philosophical position. In the following paper I shall consider Mitra’s play *Honey from a Broken Hive* (1972) which I believe would adequately demonstrate his creative engagement with subalternism. The very little critical writings available on the play (which are mostly in Bengali) are curiously hell bent on highlighting only the glaring class conflict that permeates the text. The critical intention of such writings is to place it within the classical Marxist framework, which in total ignorance of other more nuanced and equally significant aspects of the play seem to over-determine its aesthetic implication as captured by an ideologically bound critical interpretation. Mitra however does not confine himself to the prescriptive straightjacket of Marxism in exploring the hydra-headed complexities that permeate the subaltern condition. Mitra does not look for signs of troubled existence of marginality only in its encounter with the centre; rather he explores the interstices of deeply complex relationships that the dramatis personae share among themselves and, through them define each other in terms of the wider world around. Mitra’s reading of violence is not confined to the stock theatrical trope of inter-class conflict as he finds vestiges of violence and pathological jealousy even in intra-class transactions and existence.

*Honey from a Broken Hive* (written in 1969, revised in 1971, and finally performed for the first time in 1972) is about a rural community of snake charmers (the *ojhas*) located in an island of the Sundarbans. The play opens with the pregnant Badami eagerly waiting for her father Matla Ojha to return home with some food. Badami has been starving for the last three days and is hardly in her senses. Matla returns with a pitcher which he says is filled with fresh honey. However it is soon revealed that the pitcher contained no honey but a little serpent which Matla had captured in the jungles. Badami, frustrated and enraged, enters into a scuffle with Matla. As the first instance of explicit violence in the play, Matla hits Badami: “Matla (turns around and slaps Badami). Damn girl! Let your tongue die out for ever.” (Mitra 2007, 121) Mousumi Roy Chowdhury’s reading of this kind of violence is interesting but not entirely accurate: “... Manoj Mitra shows violence within a community of extreme poverty as erupting from forces that cannot be contained within an ideology or a rationalized will to act.” (Roy Chowdhury 2007, 4) Roy Chowdhury here argues that Mitra through this father-daughter confrontation shows a kind of violence that is not engendered by inter-class but intra-class conflict precipitated by hunger and extreme privation and, therefore, may not be amenable to Marxist interpretation of the scene. While Mitra does shirk all impulses to blindly adhere to any one particular theoretical premise, this scene is too complex and aesthetically nuanced to be seen as reflective of the playwright’s reluctance to be tied to any constricting prescription of a philosophical position. A deeper reading of the opening scene of domestic violence would generate meaning not captured by Roy Chowdhury: apparently the scuffle between father and daughter is precipitated by intense privation and the father’s inability to bring an end to it, but this tortuous existence is surely the handiwork of ceaseless perpetuation of injustice and exploitation by an inflexibly classified society which eventually becomes evident in the course of the play. Therefore, to limit the cause of this transient incendiary moment to the destitute little world of the *ojhas* would be an incorrect and myopic reading of the lived experience and subalternity of these characters. Mitra certainly does not intend to do that.

This is soon followed by the news of a snake bite, the victim being the blood-sucking money-lender Aghor Ghosh. The body of the dying man is brought to the dilapidated house of Matla in a palanquin (“*duli*”) as it is only the poor *ojha* who with his indigenous knowledge of de-potentiating poison can now save Aghor Ghosh’s life. Mitra, here, shrewdly proposes a situation in which the centre must turn to the margins for its survival. This is a wonderful way of underscoring the critical role played by the margins in the formation of the identity of the centre: the centre must now turn to the periphery for its survival and thus sustain its identity. And it is within this power structure, turned upside down, that Mitra recognises the subaltern agency. Matla and Jata (Matla’s uncle) however do not take up arms to make the best use of Aghor’s present physical vulnerability to express their agency; their anger against their class-enemy is made explicit in a more oblique way. Matla and Jata make funny excuses to kill the all-crucial time and facilitate Aghor’s death. They are very clear about their future plan of action:

Matla. Let the bugger die!

Jata. Die ... die ... we’ll live if he dies. (Mitra 2007, 125)

They further give vent to all their frustrations which serve to give us a potted history of exploitation of the entire community. By making his characters reminisce, Mitra avoids being preachy and does not hammer his message thereby saving his audience from the pontificating air of propaganda plays:

Matla. ... What when we cannot pay the interests and he writes  
our land off in his own name ...

Jata. Takes all our pots and pans and sheets and covers and mats  
and leaves the room empty ...

Matla. Takes my old pig to the market and sells its meat ...

Jata. Takes my shirt off and lashes me ...

Matla. Don't we then feel pain? Sorrow? Humiliation? (155)

It is in withholding their life-giving care and refusal to exercise indigenous knowledge that they intend to avenge the injustices done to them and other hapless people of their ilk. Badami's intervention at this juncture is highly significant since it marks the beginning of the second cycle of violence that ends up opening a hitherto undiscovered side of subaltern resistance in the play.

Badami here emerges as the voice of conscience as she importunately reminds Matla and Jata about their sacred obligation to save anyone from the fatal consequences of a snake-bite: it is an *ojha's* duty sanctified by the divine authority of Ma Manasha, the goddess presiding over the serpent world: "Don't you know that you'll lose all at the curse of Ma Manasha?" (155) Priyamvada Gopal rightly points out how subalternists unlike classical Marxists pay "particular attention to what Guha calls "religiosity"." (Gopal 2004, 143) Mitra, quite in keeping with the subalternist tradition lets Badami freely invoke the intrinsic "religiosity" of the community and allows the same to ultimately change the recalcitrant heart of Matla. Badami tries her best to reason with the men folk of her household, threatens and cajoles them, and persuades them to respond to their call of duty which, she knows, would require them to overlook Aghor's identity of an unrepentant torturer, a tormentor who is also the architect of their marginal and devitalized existence. Homi Bhabha rightly notes that "it is from those who have suffered the sentence of history – subjugation, domination, diaspora, displacement – that we learn our most enduring lessons for living and thinking." (Bhabha 1994, 246) Here, Mitra seems to creatively aestheticize Bhabha's observation in thus offsetting the incredible magnanimity of the subalterns against the "massified" heartlessness of the moneyed and the powerful.

Mitra in this play also foregrounds the closely knit community-life of the subalterns that is held together—despite other forms of differences—by the common condition of socio-economic marginality. Mitra very tactfully describes Phukna as "a Muslim farmer" (Mitra 2007, 126) who gleefully welcomes Aghor's death and makes a common cause with Matla and Jata in celebrating an anticipated better life in the future after the demise of their common tormentor:

Badami. Pa! (*For a moment, everyone is taken aback by the tremor in Badami's voice*) A man lies dying and you all make merry!

Phukna. Now we'll only live to make merry! Aha, the pir-gaji Has done *mushkil aashan*, the pir's ... aha *mushkil aashan*. (*Goes out singing.*) (126)

It is indeed interesting to note how Mitra recognises the overwhelming impact of an economically emasculated social system of existence that renders 'religion' an irrelevant and ignorable category of identity. Phukna's religious identity does not come in the way of his making a common cause with Matla and Jata. This unswerving solidarity—an inextricable part of subaltern identity—is generated by empathy that overrides all parochial categories of caste, religion, profession etc. Mitra efficiently explores the various facets of subaltern solidarity not so much in the collective conduct of the community as in the complex vicissitudes of interpersonal relationships that constitute the deep humanity of the subaltern world. This is further elaborated in Dakkha's empathy for Badami as she asks Matla not to grudge her a rupee that she had given Badami to buy a fish:

Matla (to Badami). Bitch! Greedy for shoal fish! I'll brand your tongue with hot iron. Throw that *taka* away.

Dakkha. Let go of her, Matla, let go. Let her take it and buy herself some fish ...

Matla. No!

Dakkha. Let her. A pregnant woman, five months ... If only you could understand her hunger! (136)

Here, women, caught in the excruciating double bind of class marginality and gender marginality, empathise with one another. We are immediately reminded of the indefinable and indeterminate social status of Dakkha whose real identity—enmeshed in social taboo—is that of Aghor's mistress which she desperately attempts to obfuscate by referring to Aghor as her 'brother'. Thus, as a member of the hapless collective of socio-cultural rejects, Dakkha is no stranger to subaltern angst and, therefore can easily connect with Badami on a shared psychological plain of helplessness, disempowerment and painful humiliation.

Gyan Prakash has noted how the subalternist always aims at uncovering "the subaltern's myths, cults, ideologies, and revolts" in an act of undoing the wrongful treatment of the same by mainstream nationalist historians. (Prakash 1994, 1479) Mitra in a similar vein proposes a world where the efficacy of the cult of ancient indigenous medicine and forms of treatment practised by the *ojhas* is never called into question. Aghor's life is sought to be saved not by having recourse to modern forms of medicinal cure but by the magical charms and elaborate rituals of Matla ojha:

Matla. ... Ma Manasha I pray at your feet ... (*Having made his chants eastward and westward as well, Matla starts his ritual chants while Badami and Jata sing Behula's pachali. It's dark inside the duli. Matla thrusts his hands inside and runs them swiftly over Aghor Ghosh's body. The mantras pour out at lightning speed. At times, Matla waves his hands furiously ...*). Come hither poison, come into my trap Go thither poison, begone with these three slaps You the poison, tearbegar, you the foe, O Hooded One Your venom I turn to water with this my nectared tongue The water gurgles jigirgigir, washes out all trace Take the name of Mansha as I strike the wound's face Ordains who? The Poison God Bishohori Go, go, start your work torighori! ... *In a while, life stirs in the darkness within the duli—Aghor Ghosh's arms, legs and head begin to move.* (Mitra 2007, 167)

This is no atavism but a veritable intellectual/aesthetic mode of countering the widely retailed epistemic violence of modern Western medicine and its sinister attempt at perpetuating the Western hegemony by radically altering the primordial value system of an indigenous community.

Partha Chatterjee in his highly influential book—*Lineages of Political Society: Studies in Postcolonial Democracy* (2011)—notes that "In ordinary times of subordination, the peasant appears submissive and fatalistic, incapable of resisting the conditions of oppression that daily weigh him down. But at the moment of insurgency, the peasant becomes a subject in his own right." (Chatterjee 2011, 149) It is at these moments of revolt and resistance that the elites become aware of the subaltern agency. Mitra here toys with two distinct forms of resistance—one covert or oblique, and the other overt. Matla and Jata initially resist obliquely by refusing to treat the moneylender. Aghor's son Shankar sees the reality: "Shankar. You should know. If you cut your clients' throat every day, some day they will catch you by your beard ... you should know that!" (Mitra 2007, 162) But once Aghor is treated and revived, he shows his true colour. He lays his hands on Badami and attempts to ravish her. Pushed beyond the farthest limits of tolerance, Badami picks up a machete and slashes the incurable lecher to death. This final act of violence is intensely crucial since it provides us with the handle to examine the exact place of violence in subaltern existence and the nature of its creative appropriation by playwrights like Mitra. Badami who had been the catalyst in changing the bruised, revengeful minds of Matla and Jata now takes it upon herself the task of eliminating her class enemy in a gory encounter. Interestingly, Mitra does not present the entire subaltern community as rising up in revolt against Aghor and his obnoxious ways; rather, it's an individual who does it. While violence is here presented as emancipatory and redemptive in nature, it is explored as the last resort.

Thus, unlike the classical Marxist school of thought Mitra does not intend to romanticise violence. However, he also does not entirely desert the Marxist interpretation of social revolution since it is by embracing violence that Badami, who is otherwise an embodiment of humaneness and an incorrigible appreciator of the preciousness of human life, retains her honour and by killing Aghor, re-kindles the hope of a much desired social order, sans exploitation, discrimination, and dehumanization. Thus, it can safely be concluded that Mitra's complex and ambivalent treatment of violence in relation to subaltern existence, sympathetic attribution of agency to the subalterns and the deep understanding of their lived experience unmediated by any philosophical bias firmly situates the play within the theatrical tradition of what may be called the Subaltern Theatre/ The Theatre of Marginality.

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