Interrogating 'Dalitness'

The Making of a "Subaltern" Community in Postcolonial Odisha

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Abstract

Working with the framework of "structure and agency", this paper seeks to interrogate what it means to be a "Dalit" in modern India. While agreeing that there exists a dialectical relationship between social structure and subaltern agency, the interrogation traverses through the terrain of modernist scholarship, and challenges the "mainstream" Dalit political conceptualization regarding who is a "Dalit" and who is not, or what constitutes a "genuine" Dalit assertion and what does not.

The paper is based on an ethnographic study of a Dalit community (the Nirvediā-Bāuris) in coastal Orissa, and points out the importance of understanding the process of the making of a subaltern community in a historical context. The attempt is to understand the lived world of the Nirvediās that reflects the complex interplay of agency and power, religion and politics, the state and the community, resistance and domination, and the use of history and myth in the construction of a subaltern identity. While attempting to argue for a non-essentialized understanding of Dalit ideology, I point out that there exists enormous diversity in the way subaltern communities as agents of history engage with power. Our task is to recognize that diversity rather than out-rightly reject the subjective experience of people as "traditional", "non-modern" or "inauthentic". The paper also points out the inadequacy of understanding Dalit agency through Ambedkarite discourse that so zealously clings to a modernist framework.

This paper is based on an ethnographic study of the Nirvediā-Bāuris, a small fraction of the larger Dalit community called the Bāuris. The larger aim here is to observe the dialectical relationship between the dominant social structure and subaltern agency. More specifically, I am looking at the agency of the Nirvediās that is involved in the *making* of the Nirvediā as a subaltern community in a historical context. Through this work, I am trying to dismiss the notion of a romanticized, essentialised or dehistoricised subaltern agent. Instead, I try to understand the lived world of the Nirvediās that reflects the complex interplay of agency and power, religion and politics, the state and community, resistance and domination, and the use of history and myth in the construction of subaltern identity.

The Bāuris are mostly poor and landless, living in coastal Odisha, India. A few years after India's independence, Radhamohan Das, the guru of this community, floated the idea of a new Dharma called "Jagannātha Dharma". According to the principles of this new Dharma, Jagannātha, the most popular Hindu deity of Odisha, was to be accepted as the supreme deity. Other high-caste Hindu deities were rejected, so also the authority of the Brahmans and the Vedas. Since they did not respect Vedic rituals, they were pejoratively called the *Nirvediās* (literally, people with no Veda) by the high caste people. However, gradually the term gained currency among the followers, and they started referring to themselves as the Nirvediā-Bāuris, or simply the Nirvediās, and their Dharma began to be called the Nirvediā Dharma. They claimed that they were 'pure' Hindus unlike the Brahmans. They also reworked the history of the community to claim that they were the non-Aryan ruling caste in ancient times, but the Brahmans (the Aryans), by means of treachery, usurped power and the Bāuris were rendered 'untouchables'.

The nationalist movement led by Gandhi had left a deep impact on this community and they were hopeful of a significant change after Independence. However, they could not see their dream taking shape anywhere. This led to disillusionment towards the new state, and Radhamohan rejected the authority of the state and formed a parallel 'caste-government' as a monarchical form of polity. At the same time, he also petitioned numerous memoranda to various state authorities seeking remedies for the helpless Bāuris. He died in 1972, and the Nirvediās preferred to keep silent and tried to keep away from the state. However, since 1990s, with the introduction of *panchayati raj* forms of local governance, and other developments in government policies, the Nirvediās' engagement with the state has changed significantly.

The fieldwork was conducted in two phases for about a year during 2006–2008. The main site of fieldwork was Sundargan village, located in the district of Cuttack. However, I had to visit many other villages spread over three other coastal districts for collection of data. Ethnographic data was collected

through participant observation, interviews and observation. The case study method was also used to collect in-depth stories of a few individuals. In addition to this, data was collected from various other sources such as newspapers, gazetteers, census reports and secondary sources.

There are three broad themes through which I have tried to unravel the relationship of subaltern agency with the structures of power. Through our understanding of the Nirvediās as a subaltern community, we need to understand the relationship between social structure and the subaltern agent, and various theoretical positions on thereon. The second thematic discussion is the nature of the relationship between communities and the modern state. The third theme is Dalit politics in contemporary India where we try to locate the Nirvediās as a "Dalit" community.

Social Structure and Subaltern Agency

Through the study of the ideas and practices of the Nirvediās as a subaltern community, I shall engage with some significant concerns in modern social theory. While it is significant to ask how historical specificities inform the analytics and politics of a subaltern endeavour, at a broader level it is important to take into account questions of the dialectical interrelationship between social structure and human agency. When we are talking about a Dalit community in the hierarchically ordered Hindu society, the nature of the engagement between the agent and the socio-cultural forces has to be taken into account as the latter tend to dominate and dictate the conditions of engagement.

The Nirvediās' choice of a new Dharma and the struggle to create and hold on to a new religious identity directs our attention to the complex, dynamic and dialectical interrelationship between structure and agent. As subaltern agents, the Nirvediās have not accepted the caste order passively. They have questioned the legitimacy of such an exploitative order and also struggled to imagine and fashion a new social order, an order that would be informed by their own understanding of history and social morality. For them the divide between the sacred and the secular is artificial, as religion and politics help visualize each other and together shape the way the agent engages with other social agents. In this regard the works of Bourdieu (1977) and Comaroff (1985) is of immense importance for our understanding of agency. While Bourdieu focuses on the transformative capacity of the actor through engagement with the structure, Comaroff draws our attention towards a dialectical relationship between the two.

Thus, our understanding of agency counters the classical Marxist understanding of agency that remains subsumed within the dominant material structure. Though the Gramscian approach addresses the questions of 'hegemony'

and 'false consciousness' in a far more nuanced manner to include the possibilities of production of counter hegemonic ideologies, it continues to give primacy to structural conditions over subaltern consciousness. However, the works of E. P. Thompson (1963) attempted to 'rescue' the (subaltern) peasant agency. The endeavour of the Subaltern Studies led by Ranajit Guha (1983) was precisely to bring back such subaltern agencies that have been neglected by nationalist and Marxist historiography. Of course, the authors in the Subaltern Studies have been criticized for focusing only on peasant agency, and neglecting the voices of Dalits, minorities and women as subalterns. Nevertheless, from the sixth volume onwards, the authors did take 'corrective' measures to take into account other voices of protest and subversion. Moreover, Veena Das (1989) has criticized the preoccupation of the Subaltern school to study peasant agency with a 'rationalist' approach. The project of understanding the subaltern as the subject of their own histories is grossly undermined when the so-called non-rational and affective actions such as religious rituals, supernatural experience or affective actions are not considered 'genuine' expressions of subaltern agency.

State and Community

The Nirvediās' relationship with the state was complex and multi-dimensional. As a poor and untouchable community it was concerned with a radical change in their material and social conditions of living. This included removal of untouchability, availability of land for cultivation, freedom from moneylenders, and a share in political power. Gandhi's charismatic influence and the promise of a *Rāmarājya* (the kingdom of Rāma) to ensure the politics of equality and justice had shaped the way they imagined the post-colonial state and adopted non-violent means to demand their share of power. However, as promises remained unfulfilled, the community developed distrust towards the bureaucracy, and consequently formed a monarchical system of parallel 'caste government'. Similarly, Shah (2007) points out that the Mundas, a tribal community of Jharkhand, prefer to keep away from the state as it has been exploitative and distant. It is significant to study these dialectical processual relationships between the state and the subaltern community.

It becomes apparent that the study of the relationship between the state and the people as subject-citizens in construing and constructing each other should be explored. The Subaltern School authors have given us a rich body of literature that has enriched our understanding of the way various subaltern groups experienced the state during colonial and subsequently the post-colonial phase. Sourabh Dube's (1998) work *The Untouchable Pasts* is significant in this direction. However, anthropological documentation of the

specific experiences of Dalit communities in the post-colonial state has been lacking. This paper, while trying to fill the gap through an ethnographically nuanced study, would point at the structural forces, and the cultural idioms, that impregnated the world of the Nirvediās.

The question of legitimacy is intimately linked to the relationship between the state and the community living within its jurisdiction. It is not useful to assume that the newly independent democratic state would have acquired unconditional legitimacy from the subaltern classes. The legitimacy granted to Gandhi, the Congress, or the independent state, was also not unconditional. Radhamohan's radical readings of the state and its symbols of power were a reflection of the state having lost its legitimate claim over the Nirvediās. Italo Pardo's insightful comment on the idea of legitimacy needs to be mentioned here- 'In democracy, however corrupt, the power to rule needs authority, a *conditio sine qua non* in the necessary negotiation among different moralities. Authority, in turn, desperately needs trust' (2000: 7). Within the socio-political situation, when the trust between the state and the people was lost, what the Nirvediās envisioned were the possibilities of a "moral society" where the ruler is a figure of benevolence.

However, these forms of contestation and reimaginings of the state are quite different from that of mainstream Dalit politics. The question remains- do we grant agency to these diverse forms of resistance or do we characterise them according to some a priori criteria? Through the analysis of the lives of the Nirvediās, I would try to engage with this question.

Subaltern Agency and Dalit Politics in Contemporary India

During the colonial rule, many subaltern communities such as tribals, Muslims and the lower castes negotiated with the British government for their political right. Phule, Periyar, Mangoo Ram and Ambedkar are a few such names who were influential in leading low-caste communities in various parts of India. In southern and western parts of India, the lower castes were more active in taking to modern institutions such as educational and political administration at various levels. In the post-Independence phase, political mobilisation grew and Ambedkar, after his death, emerged as the iconic figure around whom Dalits, in most parts of India, mobilised themselves to demand equal rights and dignity of life. However, the impact of the pre-independence Ambedkarite wave was minimal, or even absent, in certain parts of the country. Odisha was one such state where Gandhi's influence amongst the Dalits was rather strong. Even long after Independence, the Ambedkarite movement had not influenced Odisha. Of late, it is slowly spreading among educated Dalits in some urban areas.

Before finalizing the topic of my research in 2004, I met one of the Dalit activists in Odisha. One of them suggested that the Nirvediās are not 'worth studying' as a Dalit community. This is because, he reasoned, they have refused to incorporate Ambedkar into their consciousness even when an attempt was made by some Ambedkarite groups in this regard. The Nirvediās, despite their recent active participation in the state processes, profess allegiance to the framework of a moral society in contrast to the civil society framework of the contemporary Dalit movement, and this 'disqualifies' them from being considered 'modern Dalits'. The Ambedkarite mode of Dalit politics within the framework of 'civil society' has become normalised, thus ignoring the rich and complex nature of subaltern reaction to the state of subjugation. At least, there is a form of hierarchisation of agentic expression- some are 'genuine', while some are still under the influence of 'false consciousness'. Ambedkar's resistance is 'authentic'; Radhamohan's vision is 'illusion'.

In this thesis, while trying to engage with these positions vis-à-vis Dalit agency and subjectivity, I would attempt to answer the following questions: what were the terms used by the Nirvediās to negotiate the structures of a hierarchical Hindu society and the modern state? What were the different modalities of the agency that were operative in these negotiations? What difference does it make analytically if we attend to the terms internal to the discourse of negotiation and struggle? And finally, what challenge does it pose to the notions of agency, performativity, and resistance presupposed within the Marxist, liberal, post-modernist, and Ambedkarite scholarship?

For this, we need to qualify subaltern action. Should it be 'positional', *i.e.* should the action of an agent, by virtue of being located within a subaltern community, be regarded as 'authentic subaltern action'? Or, should it be 'qualitative' in nature? That is to say can we judge what constitutes 'genuine' subaltern agency by some a priori set criteria of what action is anti-structure or anti-hegemonic and what is not? In that sense, can the Nirvediā-Bāuris 'qualify' as 'genuine' subalterns who are 'worth studying' as 'subaltern agents'?

I try to answer these questions through my paper.

Nirvediās and the construction of 'Dalitness'

Various authors have discussed 'modernisation of caste' during and after colonialism, which was influenced by colonial projects of census, communal reservation of seats and the independent state's initiatives through constitutional safeguards. Rudolph and Rudolph (1969) have discussed the changed nature of caste under colonialism with the formation of caste associations. It started

with south Indian caste associations – both high and low castes asking for government attention to their respective problems. Lower caste mobilisations became intense after Ambedkar's entry into the political arena in colonial times, and gained momentum especially after his death in post-independence India. This is true of most parts of north India, south India and Maharashtra; political mobilisation led to the formation of a strong anti-Brahmanic senti-ment, and transformation of the 'untouchables' into 'Dalits', the latter term being suffused with political connotations of claiming equality, justice and political rights in modernist terms.

How did the Nirvediās see themselves? As 'Dalits', 'Harijans', 'Kshatriyas' or 'Shudras'? This is an interesting question to pose. We observe that they did not see themselves as 'Dalits' in the sense that the Ambedkarite movement made popular across most parts of India after independence. In Odisha, as also in other eastern parts of the country, the Ambedkar wave was very late to reach, and even till date not many people have any idea of Ambedkar, apart from being the 'writer of the Indian Constitution'. Rather, due to the influence of Gandhi, his preferred term for the untouchables – 'Harijan' – is widely used to refer to these castes, both by the upper castes as well as the lower castes. Their caste name 'Bāuri' is often used as a derogatory term of ref-erence by the higher castes, and therefore the Bāuris themselves often prefer the term 'Bhois'. However, in private they would take pride in being 'Bāuris'. The Nirvediās would take particular pride in being Shudras, for Shudras, ac-cording to them, are 'the best amongst the castes'. The identification with a Kshatriya identity takes place occasionally when it is connected to the history of the kings of Puri, or in relation with the marriage ritual that involves break-ing of a bow similar to what the King Rama had done to marry Sita.

In an Ambedkarite sense, it is true that the Nirvediās have not seen them-selves as 'Dalits' but that does not necessarily indicate that they do not have a consciousness of deprivation and marginalisation. In fact, they do use the term 'Dalit' (*daḷ*ita **in Oriya means oppressed) to refer to their state of pov**-erty and marginality. Nevertheless, as Badri Narayan argues, Dalitness is also a social construction, an 'enumerated identity' (Narayan 2006). It happened in the case of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Maharashtra or the south Indian states, in definite ways. In the case of the Nirvediās, the constructedness of mar-ginality as Shudras/Harijans was different. They were marginal in a modern world, but the nature of engagement can be expected to be different given the regional context of Odisha. They followed a path, to react to their state of marginality, of which religion forms the basis. While the 'untouchable' in UP became a 'Dalit' by 'reading and writing' (*padhlikhke*) Ambedkarite litera-ture, and modernist political methods of mobilisation (Narayan 2006: 62),

the Bāuris became "Nirvediās" by following the path of guru Radhamohan Das. While the Dalits in Uttar Pradesh and some other states used print and other modes of political mobilisation of different Dalit castes, the Nirvediās relied more on kinship and local contacts, and limited their exercise to the Bāuri caste only. The sense of deprivation and the consciousness of being oppressed was limited to their historical understanding of their own caste situation. Though other Shudra castes figured in their discourse, that was only peripheral.

If we agree that "Dalitness" is constructed, we can carry forward the discussion on the "Dalitness" of the Nirvediās. In the beginning of the thesis, I had discussed the 'puzzle' that I encountered in the field, during the initial phase, of the way the Nirvediās thought of and imagined the state. This was even more 'puzzling' because the Nirvediās lived in and around Bhubaneshwar, the state capital and a centre of other modern institutions. There was apparently a total disconnect between the state polity and the Nirvediā imagination. However, it would have been unfair to expect the Nirvediās to be 'modern' the way I would like them to be, or to expect them to speak the modern language of structures of exploitation and strategies of resistance as 'modern Dalits' do.

Even then, if Dalitness means a consciousness regarding an oppressive caste order, a willingness to resist that process, or a strategic programme of action to establish an alternative order, the Nirvediās are also Dalits. They have done it all. They tried to do away with the ascribed identity, and thus rejected the religious legitimation of inequality, similar to what 'Dalits' elsewhere have done (Zelliot 1996: 269). They have had the consciousness of being oppressed and expressed it through poems, songs, popular discourses, and in their everyday lives. Rejection of Brahmanical deities and rituals, adoption and innovation of new rituals for themselves, rejection of traditional caste roles has been part of their alternative vision. They also had a strategic action plan to establish an alternative socio-political order, which may be more 'radical' than what modernists would like to accept – to overthrow bureaucracy, to bring in monarchy, give land to the tiller, and drive away the Aryans from the country. However, there was total disconnect between the state and the Nirvediās. Perhaps this was because the languages that the Nirvediās and the state spoke were different, and that led to the disconnection. The state did not understand what the Nirvediās articulated. At least it did not care to understand.

What is the reason for such huge disjuncts? After 1947, the structural gaps seem to have remained unchanged, but the nature of relationships at the village level has affected the nature of construction of Dalitness so far as the Nirvediās are concerned. During the period from the 1950s to the 1980s, the Nirvediās' challenge to the caste order was not tolerated by the high caste

society. Therefore, they tried to repress the mobilisation, at times even with the help of state agents such as the police. However, with changing socio-economic relationships in the villages, the higher castes are no more interested in countering the Nirvediā rhetoric, as most of them have settled down in cities, and the village is no more central to their lives. Definition of the "elite self" is no more dependent on the otherness of the subaltern. Instead, they have reconciled to a new Nirvediā identity as they become dependent on their labour for the care of the land in their absence. Taking advantage of the situation, the Nirvediās have also asserted their rights. But the problem here is that the new generation is no more comfortable with the language that the previous generation understood, or used in speaking to the state. Modernist forces such as modern education, the Ambedkarite movement, and state policies have influenced the young in a different way.

In the next section, we discuss the history of the making of the Nirvediās as modern 'Dalit' selves in a democratic state, extending the debate to state policy and its consequences for the subaltern masses of Odisha.

The Question of Subaltern Agency

In the introductory chapter, I had raised the question of the search for a 'genuine' subaltern agency. Should subaltern action be 'positional'? In other words, can the mere location of the agent in a subaltern condition be sufficient to qualify the actions of the agent as subaltern agency? Or, should there be some qualifying criteria according to which some set of actions can be characterized as 'genuine' subaltern action, while some other set is disqualified? These questions are relevant for locating Dalit agency as subaltern agency in contemporary Indian politics through our readings of the story of the Nirvediās.

These questions arise mainly from the contemporary mainstream Dalit politics influenced by Ambedkar's philosophy. B.R. Ambedkar, a strong modernist in his philosophical orientation, sought state intervention and mobilisation of the Dalits within the framework of "civil society". Anupama Rao, comparing the works of Franz Fanon and B.R. Ambedkar, aptly points out– 'Fanon and Ambedkar creatively reinterpreted Hegel's narrative of subject-formation through historical particularity- slavery or caste- and situational possibility- revolution or postcolonial transition (2009: 273–74). However, unlike Fanon, Ambedkar did not choose violent antagonism as the creative basis for social transformation. 'Ambedkar's faith that the state, via law as a habit-changing technology, could effectively transform social relations and behavior, reflects his intellectual proclivities. As well, it was a pragmatic

response to the colonial-national context within which he worked to resolve the Dalit question' (*ibid.*: 274). This state-centric model of the struggle of the Dalits in colonial and post-colonial period has been overwhelming in its spread to different parts of the country as Ambedkar also became the iconic symbol of Dalit struggle and emancipation. The conversion to Buddhism was also part of the project of identity formation for the Dalits.

In this context, the question of Dalit agency gets subsumed and normalised within the larger framework of the Ambedkarite movement. Therefore, any other modes of expression of Dalit agency are seen as 'inauthentic' or 'abnormal'. For example, when Dalits accept Gandhi as an emancipatory figure, they are seen as being under the spell of Hindu upper-caste paternalism. The Dalit agency that is reflected in the 13th-14th century poetry of Dalit (Mahar) saints such as Chokhamela and his son Karmamela had been rejected by Ambedkar and the Dalit literary movement of the 1970s (Ganguly 2005: 195). Both the poets were acutely conscious of their status as 'untouchables', and the 'path to salvation for them lay not in any possibility of social change but in loving and total submission to their deity' (*ibid*: 196). Moreover, Ganguly points out a story of post-Ambedkar Maharashtra. It was written by Venkatesh Malgulkar and was translated by Miller and Kale. Here, the portrayal of Bavarya, an aging Mahar, 'who raves and rants at the imminent destruction of his way of life that the conversion of his community to Buddhism brings' tells us the possibilities of multiple expressions of Dalit agency. The end of the story indicates the violence, both physical and symbolic, of the process of normalisation of the Ambedkarite model of Dalitism. Bavarya was beaten to death by his fellow Mahars who were converted to Buddhism and who considered his resistance to conversion as delusional and as a betrayal of the cause of Dalit emancipation. For the anthropologist/translator of the story, 'Buddhist conversion among the dalits was intimately tied to the 1950s vision of a modernising nation' (*ibid*: 200). Ganguly further argues-

> Such an interpretation of the significance of Ambedkarite conversion cannot but see, in Bavarya's intense desire to participate in the traditional activities of the village, a sign of capitulation to upper-caste demands and to a broadly feudal way of life. . . . That sudden change ideologically imposed by agents of moder-nity and modernization need not necessarily and automatically be life-enriching to many even within the so-called oppressed is not an interpretation that curries much favour with liberalism-imbued academic and activist discourses (*ibid*).

She admits that modern liberal values have contributed immensely to-wards alleviating human oppression, but that should not close our minds to

witness the multiple dimensions of human oppression and equally diverse responses to such oppression from the oppressed (*ibid*: 201).

There is another point to ponder. The significance of religion in a 'modern' life has in fact troubled many including Ambedkar who had to look for a 'scientific' religion in Buddhism. This is especially significant for the Dalits as their social status was sanctioned by religion. Similar is the predicament for the Marxists who are also neo-Buddhists- the predicament of integrating religious faith with modern politics of emancipation. The predicament is resolved within the neo-Buddhist movement, through an insistence on a normalised reading of the Buddha and his work, mainly exhorting to the interpretation of Ambedkar. Anand Teltumbde, a Marxist ideologue of the neo-Buddhists, for example criticises the 'upwardly mobile' Dalits who advocate Vipashyana [Vipassana][1] as the essence of Buddhism. He feels that 'Vipashyana-like mind-training methods tend to internalise problems and blind people from the surrounding exploitative reality (2008: 45). 'The middle path of the Buddha may be seen as moderation in order to hold the system perturbations within the range of ultra-stability; when it transcends this range, Buddha, . . . prescribes application of force to restore system tonality. Ambedkar's reading of Buddha as not advocating absolute ahimsa [non-violence] should be seen in this conceptual perspective' (*ibid*).

Therefore, it can be argued that the Ambedkarite perspective is striving to create an essentialised notion of Dalit agency that denies the multiple possibilities of human (re)action against the conditions of oppression. In that sense, the Nirvediās would not 'qualify' to be 'genuine' subaltern agents as their historical subjectivities are not taken into consideration. It is pertinent to bring in the arguments of Ortner-

> Agency is not an entity that exists apart from cultural construction. . . . Every culture, every subculture, every historical moment, constructs its own forms of agency, its own modes of enacting the process reflecting on the self and the world and of acting simultaneously within and upon what one finds there (1995: 186).

Taking all these arguments into consideration, how do we 'evaluate' the Nirvediās' engagement with power? Realising that it is futile to 'evaluate' the agency of a subaltern engagement in terms of 'success' or 'failure', as there is no yardstick to do so, I would bring in Partha Chatterjee's argument. He was 'evaluating' the 'performance' of a rebellious sect among the untouchable Balaram-Hadis of West Bengal. The reason the Balaram-Hadi sect has 'failed' to create a serious impact on the larger society arises from their very conditions

of marginality and claims for exclusivity. 'It was their marginality that may have taken the sting out of their revolt against subordination, and by asserting negativity and exclusiveness of their rebellious faith, they condemned themselves to eternal marginality' (1997:191). Similar to the Balaram-Hadis, the Nirvediās constructed an alternative lifeworld for themselves, but retained the new purified identity exclusively for themselves. The process not only alienated them from other Dalit castes, but also from others within the Bāuri caste who did not accept the new Dharma. Their numerical strength was also not very high that it could have threatened the social arrangement significantly. Poverty and powerlessness were palpable in every step that they took towards critiquing their social position as manifested in everyday life or towards challenging the larger social order. Therefore, Chatterjee may be right to contend that the structural predicaments were so overwhelmingly weighed against the Hadis (or the Nirvediās in our case) that it was almost inevitable that the agential aspirations were doomed to 'failure'.

However, the Nirvediā endeavour to challenge the caste order has its historical reality. Their religious ideologies may seem to be 'unmodern', their political ideologies may seem to be 'fantasies', but their aspirations, as Thompson says, are 'valid in their own experience; and if they [are] casualties of history, they remain, condemned in their own lives, as casualties' (1963: 12–13). 'Our criteria of judgment should not be whether or not a man's actions are justified in the light of subsequent evolution. After all, we are not at the end of social evolution ourselves' (*ibid*).

Of course, we cannot have a teleological explanation of history. Even then, is it so that the Nirvediās did not 'achieve' anything? Of course, they did, at the symbolic as well as in real life worlds. Through symbols that challenged the hegemonic construction of social world, the Nirvediās created a distinct identity of 'pure' and 'true' Hindus unlike the Brahmans and the Muslims. They changed the way they were treated by the caste Hindus in public, in everyday life, during special ceremonial occasions – thus changing the caste-status and the terms of social intercourse. Nevertheless, all these were accompanied with triumphs, frustrations, oppression and opposition. However, the stirring and churning of the social composition of symbols, metaphors and power relation are significant achievements for the Nirvediā Bāuris who aspire to live a dignified life. Following what Parish says, human beings, as agents and as subjects have to live their life. 'They have no choice. They have to live however incompletely they may grasp the circumstances they find themselves in(1997: 04). The story of the Nirvediā-Bāuris tells us exactly that.

There may be many more examples like this. Another interesting case to be found is amongst the followers Mahima Dharma in Odisha. The Dharma

originated in 19th Century as an anti-establishment religious formation organising vast masses of rural and tribal Odisha against Brahmanical orthodoxy and the landlords. With the passage of time, however, and most perceptibly by the mid 20th Century, it was sanskritised to incorporate Vedantic philosophy to interpret what the first guru had said. In a recently organised conference at Puri on the Mahima Dharma, many intellectuals argued, rather alleged, how Mahima Dharma has lost its anti-Brahmanical stance and has been co-opted by Brahmanical forces. Even the Hindu right wing organisations are trying to woo and use Mahima Dharma to reconvert the Christian-tribals/Dalits. However, none of the participants thought of interrogating the conditions under which the shifts are occurring. There was a kind of assumption that these movements *should* retain its original anti-Brahmanic stance throughout. *It should not change.* During the conference, I also got to know about an interesting turn of events. In a village near Sambalpur town of western Orissa, the followers of Mahima Dharma have now incorporated Gandhi and Ambedkar into their pantheon. How do we deal with these 'inconsistencies'? Can our search for a modernist explanation of Dalit agency accept these Mahima followers as people with a 'genuine' Dalit consciousness? Or should we discard such Dalit subjectivities as 'false consciousnesses', by saying that the people themselves are not being able to understand what they are doing?

Conclusion

The Nirvediās' engagement with religion, the state and other communities has presented a complex and dynamic picture of our social reality. The role of religion in shaping peoples' lives cannot be ignored; it plays a profound role in perceiving other social realities. Jurgensmeyer's (1982) work on the Dalits of Punjab is one such example. The thesis also points out that 'subalternness' or 'Dalitness' is not given, but is historically constructed. However, the rationalist approach to understanding Dalit agency ignores or rejects these possibilities. Thus, the question of Dalit agency gets subsumed and normalised within the larger framework of the Ambedkarite movement. Therefore, many other modes of expression of Dalit agency are seen as 'inauthentic' or 'abnormal'. For example, the Dalits accepting Gandhi as an emancipatory figure is seen as something done under the spell of Hindu upper-caste paternalism. In that sense, the Nirvediās would not 'qualify' to be 'genuine' subaltern agents as their historical subjectivities are not taken into consideration.

In fact, there is a lack of sufficient anthropological work to study these issues of cultural construction of human agency in the postcolonial phase that

could bring out fresh insights to understand the impact of the Gandhian or Ambedkarite movement, or the lack of it, in various Dalit communities across India. This study of the Nirvediā community is an attempt to fill that gap.

Note

1.   Vipassana is a Buddhist meditation technique found in the Theravada tradition

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