

## The After-life of Social Movements

*El más allá de los movimientos sociales*

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**Abstract:** Probing the nature of social mobilization of minorities germinating from the COVID-19 crisis is the focal point of this paper. While medico-scientific discourses to fight the Pandemic gained ground in Global North, the Global South is still grappling with pseudo-knowledge/occult science narratives. The BJP displayed spectacular political opportunism during this Pandemic by prescribing traditional health practices to gain a hegemonic sway over the masses who became objects in this pedagogical discourse, often coupled with islamophobic propaganda birthed conspiracy theories binarily structured on ‘Otherness’. The purpose of this paper is to reveal findings of a self-conducted survey of the social activities of a former squatter colony based in Kolkata to examine subaltern consciousness/agency demonstrated through gaps and fissures of negotiation with power structures. Often alternate translational spaces showed possibilities of articulation from such indeterminacy and dissent. This paper’s crux is built on such collective activities like propitiating Corona Devi through religious rituals that draw precedent from similar subaltern community movements during the British Raj to counter epidemics by the worship of ‘Sitaladevi/Salabai’. The paper traces historical contingency in subaltern resistance within the domain of conflicting relations between tradition and rationality.

**Keywords:** Subaltern; Agency; Contingency; Islamophobia; Translation.

**Resumen:** Sondar la naturaleza de la movilización social de las minorías que germinan a partir de la crisis del COVID-19 es el punto central de este artículo. Mientras que los discursos médico-científicos para luchar contra la pandemia ganaron terreno en el norte global, el sur global todavía está lidiando con narrativas de pseudoconocimiento / ciencia oculta. El BJP mostró un oportunismo político espectacular durante esta pandemia al prescribir prácticas de salud tradicionales para ganar un dominio hegemónico sobre las masas que se convirtieron en objetos en este discurso pedagógico, a menudo junto con la propaganda islamófoba que dio origen a teorías de la conspiración estructuradas binariamente en la ‘otredad’. El propósito de este artículo es revelar los resultados de una encuesta realizada por uno mismo sobre las actividades sociales de una antigua colonia de ocupantes ilegales con sede en Calcuta para examinar la conciencia / agencia subalterna demostrada a través de las brechas y fisuras de la negociación con las estructuras de poder. A menudo, los espacios de traducción alternativos mostraron posibilidades de articulación a partir de tal indeterminación y disensión. El quid de este documento se basa en actividades colectivas como propiciar Corona Devi a través de rituales religiosos que sientan precedentes de movimientos comunitarios subalternos similares durante el Raj británico para contrarrestar las epidemias mediante la adoración de “Sitaladevi / Salabai”. El artículo rastrea la contingencia histórica en la resistencia subalterna dentro del dominio de las relaciones conflictivas entre tradición y racionalidad.

**Palabras clave:** Subalterno; Agencia; Contingencia; Islamofobia; Traducción.

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## 1. Introduction

This paper's crux is based on a self-conducted survey of a subaltern community during COVID-19 to highlight how members of this class have the capacity of autonomy and independent action in response to State propaganda. The National Lockdown implemented in March 2020 provoked disparate forms of social movements of the subaltern in Indian society, which can be cast as models of defiance and resistance to state imposition of a uniform cultural code. The B.J.P. Government formulated certain cultural rituals to mobilise a distraught public to homogenise cultural practices. Unlike the discourses of Science and Medicine that pervaded western societies, Nation-States in the Global South increasingly resurrected ancestral cure from traditional episteme. Nevertheless, the state's interventionist strategy of structuring local practices in the Pandemic failed as it interestingly opened up hidden crevices of subaltern alterity. This survey's results proudly pronounce the death knell of monolithic and unitary cultural codes sanctioned by state propaganda in favour of alternative forms of subaltern articulation and heterogeneous responses. Through cultural mistranslation, the subaltern agency produces surrogate translational spaces that can provide remarkable evidence in cultural studies to prove that these marginalised groups of people can serve as autonomous actors and subjects in their counter-hegemonic histories.

"Just as the manifestations of life are intimately connected with the phenomenon of life without being of importance to it, a translation issues from the original - not so much from its life as from its afterlife" (Benjamin, 1968).

Jaffrelot maintains that 'the dictates of Hindutva prescribed that Indian Culture was to be identified as Hindu Culture and the minorities to be assimilated by their paying allegiance to the symbols of majority as those of the Nation.' According to Jaffrelot, this doctrine called "Hindutva" which had "Hindu, Hindi, Hindustan" as its audacious motto, seemed to resonate with several European Nationalisms of the time based on shared religious, linguistic and racial identity (Jaffrelot, 2007, p. 1).

Jaffrelot's research points out that it was only under V.D. Savarkar, who became a vanguard of the Hindu Mahasabha Party in the late 1930s, did the extremist Hindu nationalism brand gain momentum. In his treatise, "Hindutva: Who is a Hindu?" Savarkar clearly outlines the Manichean opposites beneath Hindu essentialist identity and how Mohammedans or Christians cannot be recognised as Hindus (Jaffrelot, 2007).

The purpose of this paper is to reveal that though there exists a continuity of political tradition that can display elements of contingency in any given historical framework, the significance of any potent ideology dampens with conflicting and resisting counter traditions. The present COVID-19 crisis has found ideological support from many a ballistic Hindu community. According to an article published in (Ellis-Petersen, 2020), there was ample proof of consistent state-sponsored discriminatory campaign generated against the Muslim minority, accusing the annual gathering of an Islamic missionary organisation, Tablighi Jamaat (held in Delhi, mid-March, 2020), of spreading the virus. This was followed by spreading fake news on social media about the virus being part of an Islamic Conspiracy (#CoronaJihad), the lynching of Muslim aid workers, and vandalizing Muslim businesses.

While medico-scientific discourses to fight the Pandemic are gaining ground in the west, here in the global south, we are grappling with pseudo-knowledge and occult science narratives that exhort the use of ancestral wisdom and magic cure through cow dung/urine, talismans, God-men, Astrology, and Ayurveda. The B.J.P catapulted aggressive state propaganda prescribing traditional cures to counter the COVID-19 crisis. The government recommended certain eccentric cultural practices/rituals imposed from without on a distraught public who became objects in this pedagogical discourse of nationalism. The argument that I have attempted to make in this paper is; how such efforts at cultural homogeneity can fail to shamefully expose vivid gaps and disjunctive subaltern spaces

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that state-interventionist policies cannot universalise. The problem of inappropriate interpretation renders a specific agency and mode of resistance to the subaltern class's scattered social movements. This paper aims to demonstrate how subaltern surrogates subvert and undermine dominant discourses of cultural nationalism.

## 2. Literature Review

While talking about the concept of ideology, one cannot be far from considering Louis Althusser's analysis as supremely influential.

Critiquing Ideological State Apparatuses Althusser points out how 'they are invisibly visible in the form of distinct and specialised institutions, and he lists several of them (Storey, 2018).

The BJP manipulated the Pandemic situation as a political pawn by giving it a nationalist twist through the combination of political ISA (the political system, the party to be more specific) and the communications ISA (press, radio, and television) to structure and regulate public consciousness. The BJP led a campaign on propagating cultural practices with ritualistic connotations was aggressively popularised on electronic, print, and social media.

HT Correspondent (2020) reported how a tweet of Narendra Modi, the Prime Minister sent an entire nation on a sacred mission of banging utensils ringing bells and blowing conch shells: Do remember 5 PM this evening 5 minutes- Be on your terraces, balconies, or windows to express gratitude to all those who are working 24/7 so that our nation becomes free from COVID-19 #Janta Curfew. - The tweet read.

Althusser further points out,

Suppose the ISAs 'function' massively and predominantly by ideology. What unifies their diversity is precisely their functioning, in so far as the ideology by which they function is always unified, despite its diversity and contradictions, beneath the ruling ideology, which is the ideology of 'the ruling class'...To my knowledge, no class can hold state power over a long period without at the same time exercising its hegemony over and in the ideological state apparatuses (Storey, 2018, p. 153).

It is naturally the upper-class Hindus both within the country and the diaspora, which has consolidated the present system of governance's political hegemony.

We can take the argument further by analysing some more exciting components of Althusserian theory as he explains,

The individual in question behaves in such a way, adopts such a practical attitude, and participates in certain regular practices that are those of the ideological apparatus on which 'depend' the ideas he has in all consciousness freely chosen as a subject. If he believes in God, he goes to Church to attend Mass, kneels, prays, confesses, does penance and naturally repents, and so on.....Throughout this schema, we observe that the ideological representation of ideology is itself forced to recognise that every "subject" is endowed with a 'consciousness' and believing in the 'ideas' that his 'consciousness' inspires in him and freely accepts, must 'act according to his ideas', must therefore inscribe his ideas as a free subject in the actions of his material practice. If he does not do so, 'that is wicked'. Indeed, if he does not do what he ought to do as a function of what he believes, it is because he does something else, which, still as a function of the same idealist scheme, implies that he has other ideas in his head as well as those he proclaims and that he acts according to these other ideas, as a man who is either 'inconsistent' (no one is willingly evil) or cynical or perverse (Storey, 2018, p. 156).

The subaltern social mobilization under the spectrum of my study demonstrates this autonomous action that Althusser talks about when he speaks of the 'other ideas' that an individual might have when he acts as 'always- already subject'.

It is common knowledge that most colonial regimes established their initial dominance through brute force and then in its interpellation phase through a hegemonic rule that included Western education or the colonizer's cultural habits. In this context, it is interesting to observe how a state that evolved from colonial dominance follows the same trajectory of hegemonic rule as its predecessor. However, the state's clarion call to organise social movements centered on striking utensils/candle burning lost its hegemonic force by being fragmented within the class divide. While instances of Corona Devi worship to satiate a female deity were reported in states like Assam and West Bengal, women from marginalised classes lived in slum areas who participated in the ritual. Sanchari (2020) cited how a small group of women from a village in West Bengal called Nichupara Basti (roughly translated as a slum) fought the Pandemic with incense, sweets, and jaggery.

On the other hand, the state-led social media campaign to show solidarity to health workers by ritualistic gestures found the overwhelming response from the middle and upper classes. Gramsci gives a lucid analogy when he talks about the various moments of collective political consciousness, 'how a tradesman feels obliged to stand by another tradesman, a manufacturer by another manufacturer. But the tradesman does not feel solidarity with the manufacturer; in other words, the members of the professional group are conscious of its unity and homogeneity and the needs to organise it, but in the wider social group, this is not yet so' (Storey, 2018, p. 216).

David Hardiman, in his research conducted on the Devi movement of Northern India, concluded that the Cult of Salabai (a goddess of Epidemics) was an Adivasi (aboriginal/tribal) initiative distorted by nationalist historiographers who ignored the role of subaltern groups in the making of their history. Since it was often seen that there was a marked improvement in the material conditions of the Adivasis under the impact of the movement, a picture is thus drawn of dedicated nationalists going to virgin areas of Adivasi backwardness 'to uplift the tribals' (Das, 1989, p. 100).

In keeping with Hardiman's survey, my fieldwork conducted on a particular subaltern community aims to address relevant research questions to prove that continuity of similar cultural practices can appear at different contingent junctures with renewed symbolism.

In Walter Benjamin's words,

'For in its afterlife- which could not be called that if it were not a transformation and a renewal of something living- the original changes. Even words with fixed meaning can undergo a maturing process' (Benjamin, 1968, p. 77).

### 3. Materials and Methods

The prime inspiration behind this paper's documentation has been the outstanding work of Subaltern Historiographers in the field of Cultural Studies. Talking about the five volumes of Subaltern Studies, Veena Das makes an interesting point:

They are an invitation to think anew the relation between history and anthropology from the point of view that displaces the central position of the European anthropologist or historian as he subjects of discourse and Indian society as its object... As Gayatri Spivak has often pointed out, to deny that we write as people whose consciousness has been formed as colonial subjects is to deny our history. However, the consciousness of ourselves as Colonial Subjects is modified by our experience and the relation we establish to our intellectual tradition (Das, 1989, p. 310).

At the end of March, 2020 when Janta Curfew was initiated on social media by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, many were expecting a muted response. That the immediate aftermath of the campaign was palpable came as a shock to many. The striking of utensils (thaali bajao) and candle burning particularly caught all and sundry's attention. It spread like wildfire and brought within its aegis a significant number. Around this time, I decided to unravel this social mobilisation's hysterical nature, whose initial thrust came with a national ambition to contrive a nation of nin-

compoops into an ideological trap. Though there was no dearth of articles in the day's newspapers, a subjective response could only be extracted by a factual exploration. The primary question, of course, was what has constantly confronted subaltern history interpreters- the privileged subject position. The postmodernist theory has done many rampages by eroding the fixity and exposing the constructed-ness of identities and subjectivities. Theoretically, it means that our subject positions are characterised by a certain degree of multipositionality and that our identities are shaped through conflicting discourses of power that locate us here and there at different points in history. Assuming that my position is contingent, I had to equally presume that the same form of contingency articulated the subjectivities I wished to document. Was I to call myself an academic activist? (a term used by Homi K. Bhabha). After much deliberation, I concluded that I would prefer to call myself an investigator and a storyteller of certain events that are not without repercussions in the Nation's grand narrative. The subaltern community on which this paper is based is a former squatter colony called 'Alleshpara' (para meaning neighbourhood) in Barasat, Kolkata.

About the genesis of squatter colonies, Partha Chatterjee paints an empathetic portrait:

They were refugees produced by India's partition; most of them settled on public, and sometimes private, property- illegally but with the authorities' tacit acquiescence, because where else would they go? The refugee settlements acquired the official and popular name of 'Colonies' (Chatterjee, 2004, p. 53).

My interviews were conducted in the local language Bengali on a total of 15 families, most of whom migrated in the late 1960-70s across the border to occupy the abandoned lands as settlement illegally. All the testimonials ascribed to the fact that a local stone quarry owner Dilip Roy led the squatting movement by distributing the land to takers at the rate of 1 rupee per 720 square feet. Low caste Hindus presently inhabit this colony, mainly scheduled and depressed castes (Namashudras) and a handful of Muslim householders. Finally, I must not forget to mention that there was much reluctance on the witnesses to talk (I use the term 'witness' intentionally to validate the record with authenticity) as my subject position was often confused as someone representing the state or some political party. Some of the interviews were audio-taped on consent, while others were more comfortable speaking off the air. Not violating their privacy and yet retrieving an 'autonomous subaltern' was the prime motive of this survey.

#### **4. Results and Discussions**

This paper's major thrust is to reveal alternative discursive spaces of subaltern dissent/deviance through analysis of social movements organised by these classes that became more than just 'a passing phase' during the Pandemic. The conclusions derived from this investigation expose the modes of resistance produced by such political activities of subaltern communities that can fundamentally undermine a hegemonic state and its efforts to homogenise the consciousness of all population groups/minorities. I began this paper by pointing out certain frantic gimmicks of the BJP government to counter the Pandemic, based primarily on miracle cures from a pre-colonial, nativist Hindu cultural tradition resurrected for political agenda. The research, which was undertaken from April to September 2020 on a colony of around 100, was driven by representing silent movements that find almost no mention in popular media or public archival records. On Day 1 of the survey, as I had walked towards the colony, it was discovered to be barricaded with strong bamboo poles to keep out outsiders.

##### **FINDING 1:**

##### **Barricading the 'Other':**

The National Lockdown announced in late march forced local municipal bodies to make arrangements to quarantine residents. However, Alleshpara was cordoned off by the inmates themselves to

‘self-quarantine’ on their own with zero state intervention/aid. Witnesses whose statements I could record during the quarantine phase mentioned how gathering together in large groups to prevent outsiders from entering signified the ‘Solidarity of the underprivileged’.

Ajay Mazumdar, a local tea vendor who spearheaded this demonstration of barricading the ‘Other’, shared his opinion,

‘We will keep sitting here to express our distrust of people who do not live here. Who knows they might be infected? We will stay put till death.’

When asked whether this campaign was ignited due to the central government’s Islamophobic conspiracy theories, Rintu De, a local fish vendor, responded in these words,

‘Not at all, didi (elder sister)! We are not against any specific community. We have lived peacefully with our Muslim neighbours forever. We will not let anyone enter till corona disappears’.

Part of the reason that the BJP’s efforts to spread communal disharmony were disconcerted was local political engagement. Trinamool Congress party (in power from 2011 in West Bengal) has been actively promoting secularism for electoral purposes, for which it has often been at loggerheads with the national agenda of ‘Hindutva’. This exciting finding exposes the hidden spaces of subaltern autonomy and seeks to dismantle the Nation State’s extremist propositions. This exclusion of the ‘Other’ is a stand-off against any outsider (irrespective of ethnicity/religion) who might pollute the presumably uninfected space, which also clarified why 90% of the group is opposed to the vaccination program.

## FINDING 2

### **Translational ambiguity and Articulation Space of the ‘Other’:**

If Ideology operates through rituals and practices, any subaltern class’s subjectivity can consequently be formulated through their ‘strategy of the performative function’ in the nationalist discourse. To be more precise, all the testimonials collected confirmed that they performed the rituals that the state propagandised, but the rationale behind the act/s was grossly misinterpreted. Or could the ambiguity of the messages be part of the statecraft? The state imposition of a uniform ritualistic code was misappropriated by this subaltern class, who undermined the state directive through ‘incorrect decoding’. Homi K. Bhabha locates this problematic of cultural mistranslation in the alterity of the linguistic sign; ‘What is meant, and way of meaning it in the act of translation often opens up other translational spaces of negotiation through dialogues, dissent, strategy, craft, contingency and indeterminacy’ (Bhabha, 2016).

Thus, through misappropriation of information, the subaltern temporarily ceases to become a mere object of/in Nationalism’s pedagogic discourse.

Monotosh Biswas, security personnel by profession, testified,

I first came to know about it from television news. My daughter, who goes to college, saw it on her phone. Then we began the rituals prescribed by the state. Indeed, this was one way for the government (sorkar) to ensure our safety (mongol) and peace (shanti). This would ward off the disease (See Appendix, Personal Communication with the interviewee, 2020).

Most of the testimonials ascertained that they equated the rituals’ performance as an antidote to the disease itself (COVID-19). They relied on hearsay generated effectively through rumour and fake news that finally disabled the state proposition’s original intent. Such interpretational failure and translational ambivalence almost certainly produce alternate articulation spaces which can help one read the consciousness underlying collective activities of minorities.

### **FINDING 3:**

#### **Counter cultural practices of the ‘Other’ as a mode of resistance:**

Namita Das, a sweeper by profession had organised a Corona Devi worship (puja) at her daughter’s residence. Her account was interesting to record:

One of my daughters had a dream of a young girl. After that we all started ingesting raw turmeric and black cumin seeds (kala jeera). We prayed to the goddess Corona and offered her sweets. With her blessing we are all hale and hearty to this day (See Appendix, Personal Communication with interviewee, 2020).

Strikingly, the Corona Devi propitiatory cult was not a state orchestrated gesture but rather mushroomed spontaneously in certain states among the rural and tribal women folk, exhibiting through their community behaviour the failure of the state to homogenise cultural practices in the mould of the nationalist agenda. Such counter subaltern strategies do undermine the state effort at universalising social and cultural consciousness. As Proggya Ghatak points out in her study of cultural folklores,

Corona Devi is a modern re-incarnation of the ancient female deity mentioned in the folklore ‘Sitalamangal’; a goddess of small pox with healing power, known by a variety of local names, worshipped in West Bengal as well as Northern India. Such indigenous deities later on were incorporated into regional Hinduism but were considered unimportant in classical Hindu literature such as the Vedas or Puranas (Ghatak, 2013).

Undoubtedly these counter-hegemonic practices of the subaltern classes have the capacity to overturn any totalising manoeuvre of the state at assimilation.

### **5. Conclusions**

While we speak (theoretically), an exciting development came to light when state propaganda was used against it. Express Web Desk (2020) reported a radical gesture of farmers protesting against new agricultural reforms who banged utensils to mock the exact ritual introduced by the prime minister during the lockdown.

If gestures that serve the ideological purpose of the state can be overturned against it by subaltern classes, a nation-state, at that specific historical moment, almost inevitably loses its hegemonic force. When BJP seized the COVID-19 situation as a political agenda to impose community practices as a way of tacit incorporation, many other interpretational possibilities germinated in the execution process. The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate how the subaltern can act independently and exhibit through the social movements it engages in a remarkable agency in its struggle against the forces of domination. Such collective movements may find a marginal reference in the hierarchy of historical events, but that cannot diminish their symbolism

Let me end with Walter Benjamin’s views on the mode of translation: ‘The transfer can never be total, but what reaches this region is that element in a translation which goes beyond transmittal of subject matter’ (Benjamin, 1968, p. 79).

### **6. Funding Statement**

The entire research project which included visiting the colony and conducting interviews on the spot, recording audio files and keeping written records is self-funded. The publication process is also self-funded due to lack of any research grant or organizational affiliation.

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## 8. Supplementary Materials

The audio files of interviews conducted in the local language with six participants have been included. For the rest, refer to the transcripts of the interviews.

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## 10. Appendix

The questions asked in the survey were as follows:

1. Name and Age of the participant.
2. Number of family members.
3. Profession.
4. Possession of Identity Card (Aadhar Card) Yes/No response recorded.
5. Whether participated in the BJP prescribed rituals.
6. Source of the information.
7. Awareness of the significance of the rituals.
8. Readiness for the vaccination program. Yes/ No response recorded.

Transcripts of some personal communication:

Purnima Das, a cook by trade had celebrated corona Devi worship for the well-being of her family but responded reluctantly to the survey. She had no idea about the reason behind the prescribed ritual of banging utensils and joined the others in the colony for moral support. She refused any vaccination program from the government.

Bolaichand, a fish vendor by trade did not participate in the prescribed rituals himself but his wife did. The whole family did not believe in vaccination and were confused about the dogmatic code of rituals imposed by the BJP.

Avinash Agarwal, a driver by trade, participated in the prescribed rituals as he heard it over the news but his support was not for aid workers but rather for the party as he confessed his ardent loyalty for BJP. He and his family were open to the vaccination program.

Mollika Sengupta, a cook by trade who has a college going daughter (unlettered herself) confessed her delight in celebrating the rituals as she believed women need to obey patriarchal norms. She vehemently opposed any vaccination scheme. Additionally, she was clueless about the rationale behind the state imposed code.

Nasirrudin Ali, working as a caretaker in a residential complex confessed that he took part in banging utensils with great enthusiasm but did not hold the BJP in high regard due to the anti-muslim sentiment the party conveys. He got to know the ritualistic code from a friend but did not understand the reason behind the social activity. He had not made up his mind on getting vaccinated.

Dulal Saha, a security guard testified that his family including himself followed the PM's call verbatim when he got informed through friends in the colony. However, he was unsure about the cause behind the collective movement. He and his family were not interested in getting the job.