

## **Is the Subaltern Speaking? A Study of Selected Bangla TV Serials and Films**

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### **Abstract:**

The portrayal of subalterns, be it queer characters or individuals belonging from the societal peripheries, has remained restricted in the Indian mainstream media. Things were and still are not much different in the regional channels catering to the distinctive tastes of somewhat hegemonistic cultural perspective of the audience. The paper attempts to trace the representation of such characters in the Indian media, with a special focus on some of the prominent Bangla TV serials and movies belonging to both the mainstream and art house/independent genre. The paper further categorizes the representation of women, especially the working women, as a part of the societal reflection of subalternity in the Indian and Bangla media space. The paper presents the ironical co-existence of distinctive yet stereotypical representation of the subaltern. While the global media is increasingly reaching out to the marginalized, there is also a growing (un) representation and even sheer misrepresentation of the same on the Indian television and laptop screens. For instance, the representation of Karna or Draupadi in the recently broadcasted Mahabharata of Star Network, aired in multiple languages (including Bangla) owing to its widespread and instant popularity, did little to deviate from their conventional representation as outcaste and vulnerable societal entities. Bereft of any agency, the subalterns finding space in the Indian media are hardly “allowed to speak” their own mind. The vulnerability of the subaltern characters that ultimately paves the way for the protagonist’s heroism is what problematizes the authenticity and political correctness of such representation. The paper concludes with a comparative study of media as a means of voice to the voiceless, while being a platform spearheading the severe censorship of imagination, guided by unidimensional perspective.

**Keywords:** Subaltern, Mainstream Media, TV, Spivak, Women, Queer, Outcaste, Films.

## Introduction

Stereotypical representation has always been one of the greatest tools of advocating superiority and dominance. In every discourse, representation has remained instrumental primarily due to its construction of a fixed image of the downtrodden, and for the maintenance of the dictatorial voices on the oppressed. As stated by Homi Bhaba about stereotypical representation in *The Location of Culture*, it “is a form of knowledge that vacillates between what is always in place, “already known and something that must be anxiously repeated”. Mass-media thus stands as significant in this context as without it the repeatability of notions and their seamless distribution is next to impossible. The mass-media act as crucial tool of facilitating the dissemination of information to a vast number of receivers at real time. One of the pivotal aspects of such a distribution network is how – the way – things are being represented. The technological boom of the twenty-first century brought along with it the concept of ‘paid media’, which often mediates and moulds reality in order to subscribe to a certain ideology. Over time, it has acquired the power to even construct or demolish certain ideologies. The aim of the paper is limited to electronic media itself, focusing on the regional media of the Bengali entertainment industry.

Indian mainstream media has been a significant platform for the representation of the society. Commencing its journey from the Doordarshan channels to the current boom of privately-owned channels, Indian media has been quite skilled in capturing the ‘Indian’ sentiments and its ever-changing dimensions. Time and again several aspects of the Indian society has found its reflection in the media space, be it in the headlines or through the more popular representing tools such as TV serials and cinema. The paper attempts to trace the representation of such characters in the Indian media, with a special focus on some of the prominent Bangla TV serials and movies, belonging to both the mainstream and art house/independent genre. The paper further categorizes the representation of women, especially the working women, as a part of the societal reflection of subaltern identities in the Indian and Bangla media space. The paper presents the ironical co-existence of distinctive yet stereotypical representation of the subaltern. The vulnerability of the subaltern characters that ultimately paves way for the protagonist’s heroism is what problematizes the authenticity and political correctness of such representation. It stands quite similar to that of white-savior complex of the West, as exposed in the #OscarsSoWhite campaign, coined by April Reign, a noted activist. The campaign called out to the hypocrisy of white supremacy which is still much prevalent in Hollywood, as studios still consider it risky business to staff films with

members of neglected populations, both in front of and behind the camera (Reign). It started out to protest the underrepresentation of people of color in the annual Academy Award nominations of the year 2015, eventually gearing up to include the entire marginalized community and their under/misrepresentation in the American film industry. The recently released Bollywood film *Article 15* (2019), though garnering significant applause for its content-driven approach, unfortunately drives on this white-man/upper caste savior complex. As Nishad, the Dalit rebel delivers the spine-chilling yet powerful dialogue “*hum akhri thore hi na hai*” (I am definitely not the last), right before being shot by the police in a fake encounter, his character arch was definitely not powerful enough to be the protagonist of the film. Burdened on the shoulder of a Brahmin and noble IPS officer Ayan Ranjan (played by Ayushman Khurana), the film is a brilliant narrative on the caste-based violence, but fails miserably at the same time as it shows to be a dominant phenomenon of the rural India, which certainly is a distant cry from the reality. Films such as these highlight the unfortunate essentialism of Brahminical doctrines that the society has mandated for the upliftment of the marginalized. Dalit communities (like all other communities) would have conflicts of their own and also be rich in interpersonal relationships within, but this is not given expression to (Raghavendra), as the Savarna audience is conveniently and continually supplied with role models, while the marginalized have none to look up to.

The inception of the Varna system in Hinduism manifested itself in the form of casteism in the daily lives of Indian natives. The practice of casteism is deeply rooted in India even in the twenty-first century. And yet, ironically, the practice, in the world’s largest democracy, stands in contradiction to the term ‘democracy’ altogether. The media conglomerates became an integral part of the free market economy with the emergence of the policy of Liberalization, Privatization and Globalization in the 1990s. Consequently, the mission of endeavors witnessed a shift from the “voice of the voiceless” to the voice of capitalism. Instead of bridging the gap between the mainstream and subaltern, the media has somehow managed to deepen the inequality of class and caste in the society. For instance, there are hardly any Dalits in a commanding position in print, television or any other media industry, which is an extensive reflection of the marginalized societal status of Dalits (Pal). B. R. Ambedkar’s statement “*caste is not a division of labor but a division of laborers*” in his book *Annihilation of Caste* remains woefully distant from the reality of the contemporary society. Consequently, headlines such as “Dalit Student Tied to Tree and Beaten, Not Allowed to Give Board Exam in Gujarat’s Patan” are still prevailing in the media space. The

portrayal of subalterns, be it queer characters or individuals belonging from the societal peripheries, has remained restricted in the Indian mainstream media. Things were and are still not much different in the regional channels catering to the distinctive tastes of the somewhat hegemonistic cultural perspective of the audience. While the global media is increasingly reaching out to the marginalized, there is also a growing (un) representation and even sheer misrepresentation of the same on the Indian television and laptop screens.

### **Women of Bengali TV Serials: A Subaltern Entity?**

It is an utterly unfortunate fact that the nation which claims to be in the process of “globalization” or “modernization” still portrays its women in meaningless piles of costume jewelery and jardousi sarees (Roy). Gone are the days when TV actually represented women in their humane form without subscribing to unnecessary valorization or victimization. Udaan (1989-1991), aired on Doordarshan, was one of the first Indian television show on women empowerment that dealt with issues concerning a woman’s struggle to achieve her dreams. Inspired by the real-life story of Kavita Choudhary’s, the director’s elder sister Kanchan Choudhary’s life, it actually provided its female protagonist with a mind and a voice of her own. She was someone who dared to harbor ambitions to become the first female Director General of Police, and left no stone unturned to turn her dreams into a reality. It inspired its viewers and instilled in its female audience a desire for emancipation –beyond the claustrophobic nets of society (Roy). However, the regional industry of Tollywood lacked any such representation. Bengali TV serials such as Ke Apon Ke Por (2011-present), Ishti Kutum (2011-15), Jol Nupur (2013-15) and Jhanjh Lobongo Phool (2016-17) were in line with the conventional love story of boy meets girl. Rated among the top TRP garnerers of the time, what these shows had in common was a female protagonist belonging from the marginalized section, being conveniently rescued by the ‘uppercaste/class’ hero, with the story being eventually shifted entirely to that of an urban setup and the struggles of the protagonist to create a new identity therein. What becomes problematic here is that the marginalized background that had been established with the introduction of the female protagonist is then conveniently sidelined as the story progresses. The story could well have been grounded on the struggles of the female protagonist in the rural or ‘forbidden’ setup. Instead, what is witnessed is a complete uprooting of the female protagonists’ identities and an encasing of the same in a new one which is pre-fabricated in accordance with the societal norms. What becomes further disturbingly alarming is the representation of these women

characters in complete black and white shades with no grey areas explored. No space is provided for their character to develop and be humane. Even if they are provided with ‘careers’, (for instance, Joba from *Ke Apon Ke Por* is a private-practicing lawyer), the significance of which they happen to realize only after their shift to the urban and relatively more sophisticated set up, they are bestowed with all the qualities ideal for the *bouma* of the family. While they are ‘free’ to pursue their professional life, they also have the constant pressure to rise up to the occasion of fulfilling domestic duties. For instance, hailed as one of the progressive shows, *Jai Kali Kalkattawali* (2017-19), which is a part of the ‘Chalo Paltai’ initiative of the Star Jalsha channel, aimed to bring forth a change in the conventional perspectives of its masses. But the story does little to deviate from the usual patriarchal assertions. Abhaya, the protagonist, is the ideal homemaker who takes it upon herself to end the perpetual injustice on the womenfolk, while looking after her family. Much alike her divine counterpart, Abhaya is a docile homemaker like Parvati, the Shiva consort, credited with providing the bohemian Shiva a family and is responsible for the maintenance of their happiness and taking care of their needs. The same Parvati transforms into a fiery Kali whenever the situation calls for it, which is typically in response to the call to end the world’s injustice. The masculinity of gods reinforces gender inequality, goddesses could subvert it (Rathore); however, the question remains, ‘do they’? Rajeswari Sundar Rajan, for example, in her essay ‘Is the Hindu Goddess a Feminist?’ throws into doubt the emancipatory value of the Stree-Shakti trope (Rathore) (Rajan). The idea of Doshobhujā Durga is much prevalent in Bengal, known as the land of the Shakta tradition of divine worship. Centered on the concept of Shakti that a woman represents, it draws its inspiration from the way Durga supposedly manages the world and household chores with expertise and fineness with her ten hands or dosh bhuja. However, in real life, women are unfortunately bestowed with only two but are expected to harbor similar qualities and deliver the similar results like that of their divine embodiment. With significant increase in female working population, it is surprising to see that the target audience of daily soap operas is still the women, who apparently have enough leisure time to devote to the mindless assertion of preconceived notions of perpetual subjection of women. Interesting it is to note that the popular notion “*sangsar sukher hoi ramanir gune*” (the bliss of the household rests in the hands of the woman) is not just a Bengali saying, it is infact the nutshell of the Indian familial pattern where the woman of the household is granted the central position by virtue of her liminality! (Roy). The very revolving of the woman’s identity around a husband and her in-laws while she happily cooks *aloo-posto* without complaining and attending to the work with equal expertise is the

showcase of nothing but the sheer dual hypocrisy of the society, which ‘permits’ women to step outside the house but not without the baggage of domesticity. So every time Joba or Abhaya crosses the domestic threshold, they are intrinsically aware (or made aware) of their ‘sinthir sindoor’ and ‘shankha-pola’, without which their identity remains apparently incomplete. Moreover, the stereotypical representation goes on to the extent of pitting a woman against her sistren, with the characters of that of a wronged wife, a domineering mother-in-law, scheming sisters-in-law. Such stereotypes utterly fail to do any justice with the shifting identity patterns within household. They simply refuse to acknowledge the diversified career options that are now being considered by Indian women, and rather cherish to remain entrenched in deep-rooted notions. Although the television is flooded with a plethora of female characters, with each of them centered on a female and her life, the storyline becomes similar in every single one of them as they are steadily molded into the societal framework of an ‘ideal’ daughter, wife, daughter-in-law, and mother, while glorifying their sacrifices a woman typically has to make. What is even more disturbing is that these women characters are never permitted to explore their sexuality or orientation, which is perhaps still a forbidden path to tread for both the reel and real life. It remains a reality of the present times that even with some attempts to actually portray reality, Indian serials have not evolved beyond the monochromatic dimensions of a faithful wife and a scheming vamp (Roy).

### **The Lost Voice of Subaltern in Bengali Cinema**

In cinema, the bigger screen of the Bengali showbiz industry, the mis-/under representation continues to walk its path on derogatory boundaries. Cinema, being one of the most important tools of mass media for propagating certain ideologies, is credited with providing lucrative food for thought to the masses. It, therefore, undoubtedly holds a major role in the representation of various sectors, communities or even an individual amongst the crowd of many. However, the battleground of caste, gender identity, sexual orientation (among others) has hardly ever found a space in Indian cinema. It stands as a great matter of irony that the entertainment media, attracting a major chunk of the population, has managed to thrive by remaining largely untouched by such issues. And even when it did attempt to represent any of these, the sense of victimhood and victimization dominated the character sketch without an iota of agency. The problem lies in the fact that all these media representations base their fundamentals on “social preconceptions rather than unbiased

observation” (Raghavendra), which in turn, re-asserts the conventional notions even more strongly instead of acting as a desirable means of resolution. The Marichjhapi Massacre and Dalit refugees are two cases-in-points that will be discussed henceforth in the paper to approach the aforementioned context. Political upheaval has always been an integral part of the history of Bengal. However, the representation of the same remains woefully distant and inadequate on the celluloid. It is interesting to note that the Mukti Juddho or Bengal War of Liberation of 1971 captures the fancy of filmmakers more than the partition of 1947; the creation of Bangladesh somewhere takes precedence over the creation of East Pakistan while they pay a visit to silver screens. Rajkahini (2015) by Srijit Mukherjee is one of the few recent films that have focused on the Bengal narrative amidst the partition wave of 1947. Apart from this, there is hardly any cinema that focuses on the subject, with Chinnamul (1950) being another of the few exceptions. A commercial failure, Chinnamul was made with the help of Indian People’s Theatre Association (IPTA), with people from refugee camps enacting in the film. One name, however, stand as seminal in the context, and it is that of Ritwik Ghatak, who worked as assistant director in this Nemaï Ghosh directorial. Ghatak, a pioneering name in Bengali parallel cinema movement, went on to mark his name with his trilogy Meghe Dhaka Tara (1960), Komal Gandhar (1961), and Subarnarekha (1962). Out of these, Subarnarekha, though produced in 1962, did not received a release till 1965, attempts to highlight the plight of Dalits and the fate they suffered because of the cartographic cosmetic surgery (Gupta). The story revolves around Ishwar Chakraborty (played by Abhi Bhattacharya), a Hindu refugee from East Pakistan and an idealistic youth, who adopts Abhiram (played by Satindra Bhattacharya), the son of a lower-caste bagdi widow. But the tension soon emerges to the surface with the revelation of Abhiram’s romantic inclination toward Ishwar’s sister, Sita (played by Madhabi Mukherjee). Brimming with the images of agony and emotional trauma, alongside vulnerability of humans that the partition imprinted and exposed, the films shows Abhiram’s mother – the lower-caste bagdi widow (played by Gita Dey), being abducted from the refugee camp, where she is denied any entry at the first place owing to her low caste. In another scene, she gets off a train and dies at the station platform of the town where Ishwar, Sita and Abhiram live. No one even attempts to rescue or reach out to the woman because of her caste. It is indeed noteworthy how the practice of casteism exercised its existential rights even among the poorest of the poor in the direst situation. The train, however, is a significant symbol as it is bound for Dandakaranya, which brings the discussion to that of the plight of namashudras. *“Namasudras were faced with the full coercive might of the Nehruvian state to ensure their removal from West Bengal: the*

*imprisonment of prominent leaders, police brutality, sexual violence, the withholding of doles and allowances to induce the willingness to leave, dispersal of protestors beyond city limits to prevent their recombination, forced evacuations on trains beyond the borders of the state,”* argues Dwaipayan Sen(Sen). The Dandakaranya forest in Chhattisgarh was a popular send-off destination — an abode of solitary confinement of masses who are forbidden in the mainstream society. Manoranjan Byapari, a Bengali Dalit writer, recounts in his work *Itibritte Chandal Jeevan*(Byapari), how the late CPM patriarch Jyoti Basu promised the silver lining to the lower-caste refuges of the forest if the Leftists were voted to power. These people, who were practically residing in no-man’s land, were promised to be included in the mainstream society of what Left promised to be a new Bengal. However, the result was as hollow as the promises, as was evident in the police brutalities of 1979 in Marichjhapi. The Marichjhapi massacre was one of the first examples of Communist Party of India (Marxist)’s brutal suppression of any form of dissent or opposition. And this incident, as is evident in the contemporary times, has conveniently acquired a status of ‘forgotten history’. Amitav Ghosh’s *The Hungry Tide* (2004) is perhaps one of the few representations that feature the incident in some detail, but the incident of caste violence is yet again obscured with the theme of climate change and its effect on the Sunderban plains. The novel was supposed to be adapted into a film, starring Abhishek Bachchan, Rahul Bose and Zuleika Robinson, according to a 2006 report by India Today. Nothing seems to have come of it, much like the lost, silent voices of Dalits in Bengali cinema(Gupta).

## **Conclusion**

Gayatri Chakravarti Spivak, in her seminal work, ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’ challenged the legacy of colonialism through critical and cultural theories. In her essay, she refers to the ‘subaltern’ for the unrepresented groups of people in the society. Borrowed from Gramsci, the term has unanimously acquired an embodiment status representing the marginalized across the globe and not just from the South Asian landscape. In her own statement, “*in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow*”. And this stands true for the representation of the subaltern in the media space as well. The representation of subaltern on the silver screens has always woefully suffered at the hands of the dominant mainstream. It is not only about the lack of social agency and its denial, but goes well beyond to the point where subalterns “*receive their political and discursive identities within historically*

*determinates systems of political and economic representation”* (Spivak). The representation of subaltern suffers greatly due to the commoditization of representation – what sells is what is being supplied, and negligible effort is put to move past it. Be it in terms of gender or caste-based violence, both Bollywood and Hollywood took a long time to portray these ‘unsafe’ themes, primarily out of their ‘moral obligation’ to the society which feeds wealth into their pocket through their dilapidated didactics. A classic example of using meritocracy to overpower the need for diversified spaces is Eddie Redmayne’s portrayal of a transgender person in *The Danish Girl*, which, though played out brilliantly by Redmayne, could have been a suitable platform to launch an actual transgender actor (Bakar). It is extremely disappointing to witness the inability among the common masses to acknowledge that *“representation forms the basis of many minorities’ self perception and value. It allows us to be architects of our own narratives, connects us to stories and histories of those like us”* (Bakar). Furthermore, the communitarian view says that what we say is only relative to our particular identities. In this scheme, representation becomes the highest ideal, because it is in the act of *representing* that culture can have any value for minority groups at all. Identity has become the locus of cultural value and representation the means of its transmission (Whiskard). The situation is still worse in case of the regional Bengali industry which produces mindless remakes as the mainstream cinema, while names such as Rituparno Ghosh and Ritwik Ghatak stand out distinctive and also alone in the parallel cinema genre, a distinction which in itself is testimony to the infelicitous subaltern representation. For instance, queerness has largely remained a subaltern entity in its representation, even though same-sex relationships and cross-dressing and related elements have never been an alien phenomenon, were rather approved of and tolerated in the Indian subcontinent. Religious-cultural practices, like that of Aravani, and adoration of a male deity by a male devotee in the Vaishnava tradition in Bengal, have roots deep within the Indian history. And yet, what is unfortunate today is that these subaltern identities have merely survived and not ‘lived’ or ‘allowed to live’. This is what gets vividly reflected in the celluloid as the Indian cinematic landscape reflects the field where there is oxymoronic coexistence of universal acceptance of and aversion towards queer presence (Srija Sanyal).

In the era of globalization where nothing is latent in the literal sense, it is surprising to witness the emergence of a media form that champions in, more often than not, misrepresenting reality. While it remains a fact that a representation can have diversified perspectives and vivid interpretations, there is a need for consonance between the ground

reality and what is being represented to the world. Furthermore, misleading and under-representation of socio-political reality including gender dynamics and its ever-changing dimensions and identity politics, thus, encouraging stereotypes, are nothing but sheer cases of propagating a distant reality. While a lot has undergone massive transformation for the better, a lot still awaits a significant change as cases of caste-based violence and instances where “one is not born but becomes a woman”(Beauvoir) through a well-orchestrated social didactics remain a grim reality.

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