



SWEDISH
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REGULAR SESSION INFORMATION

Session: Rethinking Minority Cultures

Session Convener(s): Mollica Dastider, University of Delhi

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Comments: -

I) *Minority Cultures as Border Thinking: Oral Discourses Affecting the Everyday of Tribal Citizens*
Mollica Dastider, University of Delhi

II) *Uncertain Entities: Subaltern Refugees in South Asia*
Rajarshi Dasgupta, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi

III) *Unstable Majority and the Dangerous Marginal: Female Militancy in the Naxalbari Movement (1967-75)*
Mallarika Sinha Roy, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi

IV) *The Space of Culture? Land, Affectivity and the Domain of Politics in Rajarhat*
Saikat Maitra, University of Texas at Austin

ABSTRACTS

Session description

Under this theme the Panel proposes to engage with Minority Cultures in light of the argument of temporal disjunct and different modernities

The broad arguments for the Panel to deliberate upon could be as follows:

All minority or marginalized cultures do not necessarily speak in the name of nations. The non-national minority cultural communities of marginalized tribes, languages and religions often point towards a “critical and dialogical difference within”. Minority cultures in other words are culture’s in-between temporalities, the community practices – which are neither contemporaneous with the modernity of the dominant national culture, nor simply ‘out of date’ or lagging behind that modernity. If modernizers are averse to the archaic or pre-modern traditions, then minority cultures through their lived traditions and indigenous worldviews **reassert the prevalence of the past, or the archaic, in the present.**

‘Rethinking Minority Culture’ therefore provides a prism for the ‘post-western-hegemony-world’ to look at ‘communities’ outside the framework of nation- state, the logic of capital and most importantly outside the oft repeated liberal concern for ‘minorities’ that speak about minorities and their ‘rights’. It is rather a quest for ‘minority’ subject of agency that provides alternatives to the accounts of historical chronology and hierarchy (historicism), and on the need to be aware that the minority is also a certain kind of ethical attribution in ‘theory’ or cultural debate. The borderline temporalities or conditions of minor cultures draw our attention to the power of the ‘minoritarian’ to disrupt linear histories and cultural totalities.

Whether **border thinking** or border epistemology from the perspectives of the historically subordinated communities, offers a critique of all possible fundamentalism (western and non-western) that emerge from the experience of colonial difference, is one of the key-ideas that the Panel may specifically deliberate upon.

Papers

I) *Minority Cultures as Border Thinking: Oral Discourses Affecting the Everyday of Tribal Citizens*
Mollica Dastider, University of Delhi

In this paper I try to place minority cultures outside the realm of ‘rights claiming citizens’, and bring in the temporally disjunctive character of the concept of minority. The aim is to mull over the interventions, interrogations and disruptions that minoritarian position constantly make in the modernity of national culture. It is, I feel, a position of alterity, an ethical intervention in the foundationalist theory that govern modern nations. The intervention comes in form of abiding by alternative knowledge system; and in *not* abiding *only* by the linear notion of progress and development, and above all in retaining the non-modern practices in the everyday life. To substantiate the argument I take references from the *Janajatis*, the tribals or the minoritised indigenous.

My attempt will be to narrate from the discourses of a tribal community in east Himalayas. The oral traditions of Kirati Limbus often reiterate the past in the present with their set of alternative knowledge and life-world practices in the everyday. As members of a scheduled tribe (a modern governing category) in India, the Kirat Yakthumbas or the Limbus are producing instances of groups inhabiting the borderline conditions of subscribing to a different temporality while being at the same time the political subject of a modern democracy. The Kirati script based Limbu language and its narrative tradition (taught in schools and colleges in the region as one of the modern Indian languages); the lived traditions of ‘Mundhum’ (body of oral scriptures that impart knowledge on

life) and the social leadership of ‘Tum miang hang’ in tribal councils – are some of the dynamic traditional institutions that help these minoritised indigenous keep engaged with border thinking both from the interiority and exteriority of modernity, as well from inside and outside of the modern nation state.

II) *Uncertain Entities: Subaltern Refugees in South Asia*

Rajarshi Dasgupta, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi

This paper outlines the existence of a subaltern population, originally refugees of the partition, still living in transit camps and squatter colonies in India and Bangladesh. Dwelling outside the limits of political representation, fighting to secure dignified livelihoods but failing to neutralize social hostility, their lives are structured by a persistent condition of uncertainty and a set of resultant improvisations. Drawing on a comparative study of two cases: Bihari Muslims in Dhaka and Hindu Namashudras near Kolkata, the paper will highlight how modern states produce a permanently stateless population and how such people respond with strategic mobility and malleable identities. As citizens increasingly turn into governmental objects of disciplinary techniques, this population seems to have fashioned a new kind of counter-subjectivity, unmarked by particular nation and characterized by a cosmopolitan sensibility, free from localized protocols and embedded in informal international networks. The paper will try to understand this population as giving rise to a new kind of minority subject, constituting a disruptive outside within the nation states in south Asia, pushing the calculations of governance into more and more uncertain grounds. The uncertain structure of such lives, we try to suggest, is overturned into a practical ambiguity for the very exercise of state sovereignty in south Asia.

III) *Unstable Majority and the Dangerous Marginal: Female Militancy in the Naxalbari Movement (1967-75)*

Mallarika Sinha Roy, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi

This paper talks about the entangled representational strategies that have emerged around the figure of the female militant in the Naxalbari movement. The perspective of non-national minority culture gives an opportunity to rethink how the radical Left ideologies recourse back to stereotypes of *Virangana*, or *Shakti* – the very familiar nationalist tropes of female militancy. The woman militant becomes a dangerous marginal precisely because she inhabits such porous borders of seemingly well-defined cultural/political discourses and often crosses ethical predicaments that govern revolutionary violence. As she defies sacrosanct borders, the woman militant exposes the fluid and unkempt aspects of body and sexuality vis-a-vis political violence. Calling upon minority culture to situate this argument stems from the need to focus on the strong affective articulation of political agency that resolutely refuses to be contained within definitive representational strategies of assigning the dangerous marginal the status of segregated identity and then a ritualistic reintegration after blunting the dangerous possibilities.

The trope of *Virangana* – the warrior woman – combining canny strategic genius with an unswerving sense of honour and dignity, acts as the historical frame of reference to revisit particular moments of women’s militancy that have had impact on representations of women Naxalites. Even though *Virangana* is often listed within different manifestations of *stri-shakti*, alongside mother goddesses like Durga and Kali, the new scholarship on *Dalit Virangana* legends acts as a conceptual point of departure to look for meanings of *Virangana* outside the Hindu religious symbolism. As *Virangana* has a significantly different cultural genealogy in Bengal and emerged sporadically in certain critical moments of political violence to address the question of female militancy it is worthwhile to confront the strangeness of these disparate trajectories of *Virangana* in colonial/postcolonial Bengal and explore how the politics of class/caste/ethnicity functions in the implicit contingent patriarchy of the radical Left.

IV) *The Space of Culture? Land, Affectivity and the Domain of Politics in Rajarhat*

Saikat Maitra, University of Texas at Austin

In 1995, the Communist Party of India (Marxist) - CPI(M) - led government in the Indian state of West Bengal began acquiring over 3000 acres of land in Rajarhat, on the north-eastern fringes of Kolkata, for a massive satellite township project to be called New Town. Plan documents for Rajarhat New Town projected a future of global living standards for the township in a place where till then subsistence farming largely supported the local population with very little impress of urbanity despite its proximity to Kolkata. A coalition of small farmers and sharecroppers in the name of Rajarhat Jomi Bachao Andolan Committee (Committee for Protection of Land in Rajarhat – RJBAC), threatened by the eventual destruction of their agrarian basis of survival, soon mobilized a resistance movement in the region against governmental land acquisitions and demanded resettlement for those already dispossessed. Over a decade and half later, Rajarhat today is a segregated spatial zone of high-end gated communities, rows of half-finished building projects and lavish shopping malls interspersed by rural hamlets and patches of crops where continued peasant agitations have led to a repossession of government acquired lands through forced cultivation.

In this paper, I ethnographically map the contemporary life-worlds of Rajarhat peasant communities to inquire into how urbanization projects of the CPI(M) government from the early 1990s had initiated a systemic process of state acquisitions of agricultural lands for their conversion into lucrative urban real estate to facilitate in-migration of capital. In doing so, I theorize resistance for the socially marginalized as shifting from institutionalized domain of political parties and occurring through mobilizations of local level coalitions aimed at contesting state discourses of public goods and making possible the imagination of the ‘public’ as constituted through shared material practices, livelihoods, spatial location and so on . This style of resistance seeks political redress not through legal structures but by making an ethical claim on the state for continuation of a communitarian basis of livelihood and foregrounding its special status as minority culture that has to be nurtured against corrosive state projects like the urbanization drive in Rajarhat. My ethnographic focus on RJBAC and Rajarhat seeks to tease out the how multiple imaginaries of minority cultures are evolving as critiques of an aggressive neo-liberal privatization sponsored by state-corporate alliances in West Bengal and the distinctive ways in which affective ties to the land is figured as the central element in determining its preservation of such cultures.