

BOOK REVIEW

Chetan Singh, *Himalayan Histories: Economy, Polity, Religious Traditions*, (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2018), Rs. 895, pp. xi+303, Hbk, (ISBN 9788178245300).

Bikash Sarma

In social theory space is represented as an inert domain where progress of the society is inscribed through time and thus history. Chetan Singh in the book (a collection of fourteen essays) under review gently guides the readers with this philosophical question with a subsequent critique of this ontological and epistemological position. Space in this theoretical proposition does not exist independent to our knowledge and perception of it. Space is socially produced. Any spatial unit be it region or territory is not just a “theatrical stage” of historical transformations but is produced out of the dwellers relations with space. Singh focus on Western Himalayan state of Himachal Pradesh not only to understand how environment structured human activity but how aspects of history, religion and culture were incorporated in the social and ecological whole. The social space is constitutive of the “rational organisation of material life” or the profane and the superstitious beliefs of cultural life or the sacred.

Chapter I “Introduction” and Chapter II “Defining Spaces, Constructing Identities” constructs a theoretical correction to process of history writing on the Himalayas. Singh argues that paucity of written sources on the Himalayas inevitably calls for a multi-disciplinary historiography spilling over boundaries of academic disciplines of geography, sociology and anthropology. This would enable a historiography that takes into account both the material and “locally variant cultural forms” (p. 29). Arguing on the lines of James C. Scott¹ the author argues that the absence of written tradition gave the dwellers of this space flexibility to manoeuvre upon these cultural forms that makes it more interesting to look into these forms.

Chapter III “Defining Community” traces the epistemological connection between production of space and creation of community.

¹ Scott James C, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland South-east Asia*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).

Like space, community for him is not inert but created with complex relations with the dwelling space through a process of social thought. He argues in great detail about how different clans effectively created often contested local histories to give meaning and to have control over territory. The temple of the village god in fact constituted the most important institution via which a collective identity of the community was created. "Mythical sagas", "supernatural actions of local gods" (p. 39) were enacted as signifiers for power; occupation and "theistic sovereignty". In these mythological sagas the power relations and contestations among the mortals were passed off as contestation between gods. The landscape thus is constitutive of these cultural and material relations between humans, gods and nature.

In Chapter IV "Geography, Religion, and Hegemony", Singh contends that through cultural and material relations (elaborated in chapter II) rulers achieved 'hegemony' in the cultural domain of the subjects. This was possible through a "complex relationship between diverse local cults and Brahmanic religion evident in their territories..." (p. 56); since the time of geographical and political expansion of monarchical states like Kulu, Mandi and Suket among others. These arguments are further expanded in Chapter V "Nature, Religion and Politics", to interpret the relationship between nature, religion and politics in the former princely states of Keonthal and Kumharsain. This relationship found an expression through the continuous "exchange between folk deities, peasant clans, and formal state structures" (90). Meaning making was inscribed through the symbol of the local god, both by the peasantry about the world outside and by the external forces to influence the former. The argument of Chapter VI "Myth, Legend and Folklore in Himalayan Society" is based on this intertwined nature of myth and history. The author tries to understand the material effects of myths that in turn constitute politics of the region. And as claimed by the author, that goes beyond the academic dichotomy enacted between written inscriptions on one hand and oral narratives, myths on the other.

As argued in chapter VII "The Dum: Community Consciousness, Peasant Resistance, or Political Struggle", myths, oral narratives

centred on the local devtas and the village level material co-operation were the cornerstone of organising rural life in the mountains. These collective consciousness and co-operation also induced by geographical factors provided the possibility of collective resistance or customary rebellion among the peasantry. Understanding collective resistance provided an occasion for Singh to raise certain methodological issues in academic history writing by de-marginalising the role of “living culture” or popular memory. This is necessary not only to question the power relations enacted by official archival sources in history writing but also to enrich it by bringing in popular memory into the domain of history writing.

In Chapter VIII “Between Two Worlds” and IX “Strategy of Independence”, the author articulates on the histories of cultural and economic liminality in Kinnaur, Chamba and Kangra. In the case studies mentioned the conventional dichotomy between pastoralists and settled agriculturist often blurs as the state extracted resources from the communities/category of ‘agro-pastoralists’. This liminality was also evident in cultural domains of worship. However, here liminality often gave away to hierarchy among gods. The author then elaborates on the Gaddis as “best known transhuman pastoralists of the western Himalayas” (p.154). These agro-pastoralists were integral part of the pre-colonial state making as the state appropriated land revenue as well as other resources from them irrespective of their pastoralist or agriculturist modes of production. However, it should be remembered that (as argued in Chapter X “Migration and Trade in Mountain Societies”) this liminality was the result of paucity and insufficiency of resources. Combination of these factors including trade was in fact essential for the survival of many of the hill communities.

Chapter XI deals with the transformations in the social and economic organisations of these communities brought about by colonial encounter. In its forceful integration of the space and social relations into the same time frame as that of the coloniser, it not only altered the old relations but also created new ones. A case that would interest the readers is to understand the restrictions on the pastoralist grazing rights with the imposition of forest regulations, as grazing was ‘thought to have’ pernicious effects on timber forests.

Chapter XII “Pastoralism and the Making of Colonial Modernity” and chapter XIII “Diverse forms of Polyandry...”, underlines that the trade exchanges in the trans-Himalayan highlands and the intermediate positionality of many of the Himalayan societies encouraged them to be flexible and have willingness to deal with new ideas and institutions. These exchanges in the form of ideas permeated into the Kinnaura social organisation.

Singh continuing with the transformations brought about by colonialism argues in chapter XIV about the disjuncture between the “integral process of indigenous developments and those brought about by colonialism” (p. 263). The case in point here is the process of urbanisation in the Himalayas centred on the idea of “Hill Stations”. The focus definitely is on Simla the way it got transformed from an uninhibited, forested ridge to “a city from where Britain’s Indian empire was ruled” (p.266). However, this came at the cost of nature. Timber extraction reached an unprecedented level in this colonial project of urbanisation. Ironically, by the same centre of power that restricted access to the forests products for the indigenous in the name of conservancy.

The work is expected to contribute immensely to the current debates on interdisciplinarity on the Himalayas as an area studies or on the possibility of an area studies on the Himalayas, the plural spatial configurations of the Himalayas in the academic discourse and its impact upon the society in creating numerous ever changing social relations. It would have been enlightening if the arguments could have extended little deeper into the changing social relations into his spatial domain of analysis, especially on the changing contours of gender and caste. However, it would be an interesting reading for academicians working on the Himalayas, general readers, and for those who are struggling ‘hard’ to denaturalise the ‘exoticism’ associated with the ‘mountains’.

Vivek Chibber, *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital*, (London: Verso, 2013), pp.306, \$29.95 ISBN: 978-1-84467-976-8, Paperback.

George Thadathil

This review would like to revisit the recent story of a position and an anti position in the socio-economic history of India that came to academic discourse of prominence in the last few decades. These reflections are drawn from the reading of the 9 plus volumes of subaltern history project that we have read and the more recent reading of the *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital* by Vivek Chibber (2013). History of thought is a history of contradiction of thought. Ideas have ruled the world and ideas have also helped crumple empires and principalities of the world too. The emergence of an idea into an ideology and a way of life and the counter emergence of an alternative and its expansion into a way of life marks the progress or digress or culmination of history. Books that critique the prevailing wisdom in the academia, itself the outcome of hard won labour into history and archaeology, nature and its evolution, people and their movements, critique and counter critique of texts is difficult to come by and Vivek Chibber's *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital* is one such.

Chibber takes on subaltern historians by the horn to expose the flaws in their project and in their argumentation. He does so by exposing the misreading of the European history and sociology in the eagerness to compare with and create a contrast and further on to create a space for an alternative historiography and its logic. While the project itself is regarded as praiseworthy enterprise that caught on the imagination of the academic world and was propelled to the centre of global learning with the preeminence of Gayatri Spivak Chakraborty, Chibber attempts to argue the illogicality and misreading of the history of Europe by these scholars and conversely of the Indian situation as unique or different in comparison.

Though Chibber's argument is against the grain of a prevailing postcolonial theorizing and deserves to be heard, however, muted it may remain, as he himself fears, given the investment the establishments have done in setting up chairs and journals, yet let truth be told is the spirit with which he has forged ahead in his

book which has eleven chapters in all. The first four place in context the emergence and denouement of subaltern theory and the project. In the next two chapters he attempts to unveil the role of capital capturing the Marxist argument for his purpose of critiquing the subaltern theorists. In the following four chapters he takes on in varying degree three leading lights of the and attempts to demolish their claims. In the final concluding chapter, he who is more than adequately happy to revise and review and repeat the argument (which itself helps to make the point, repeatedly) sums up the false gains of subaltern theorists and the emboldening of the orientalist thinking it has helped in turn to promote.

The main argument he places in all through the chapters is that the universalizing role of capital has been not sufficiently taken into account by the subaltern historians in staking a claim to alterity. If the role of capital is correctly understood the way it has played out globally, India would not stand out as an altogether different scenario as the subaltern theorists have made it out to be is what he harps on from chapter to chapter. A detailed excursus of the chapter is illustrative and instructive of the argument and thus we shall come to what is probably being submerged or overlooked or subsumed in the project. There seems to be a thin line separating the way it can be creatively used or can be once again used by power to nullify the freedom that modernity brought forth.

Vivek dissects the subaltern theorization basing on three prominent sources - Guha, Dipesh Chakraborty and Partha Chatterjee - to six theses and tries to refute them and show their weakness in their argument and how the project brings back to life orientalist thinking and a justification for colonialism in their attempt to stay clear of the enlightenment trajectory and the Marxian meta narratives that do not do justice to the unique features of postcolonial societies and their attempt to take on agency.

The crux of the argument is built around the colonial capitals refusal to take up its universalizing mission and as a result to accommodate the ancient regime (here the whole case is not mentioned but implied). Though Chibber critiques he acknowledges it as significant for political analysis (p.15). The Indian Bourgeoisie failed to integrate the popular culture (here meaning Dalit and

Tribal, OBC and Women) of a modernizing discourse. This state of affairs held to be in sharp contrast from what happened in Europe where the bourgeoisie took on the culture of the popular feudal serfs, the subalterns, into the modernizing discourse is what is critiqued by Chibber as a false reading of European history. Instead of enumerating the chapters, we shall go on to identify his chief argument and make one possible danger that his reading of subaltern history and its critique can have for the future of Indian social re-engineering.

From the days of Marx (1840) *Capital (Das Capital)* is of world fame. The economic determination of politics and culture; the dialectical materialism and the resultant determinism that capital thus succeeds to effect in the flow of economic history is well known. I heard it as a class IX student of history and economics. The impact that the classical theory of economics and the determinism that capital and its spread across societies ever since the industrial revolution is by now common sense knowledge. The unique impact of *Capital* on the formation of a modern nation state (birth of nationalism) away from the centralizing determinants of feudal worldview and arrangements is what is meant by the 'universalizing effect of capital. In other words, with the arrival of wealth into the hands of the bourgeoisie they shaped a new thinking and a mode of social arrangements away from and different from the traditional (feudal = Lords and Serfs); and thus was born modernity (read from the economic angle). This process of the power of wealth (capital) to determine the flow of culture and device new social-political arrangements initiated through the rebellion of 1640 in England and continued into the 1789 revolution in France is what is credited as the birth of the modern age. This has its parallel in the philosophical discourse of the era is what Rousseau, Des Cartes, Francis Bacon, John and James Stuart Mill and a score of others have recorded as having happened is spread through their writings.

In the 1980s with Ranajit Guha, the historian, began the project of unearthing the history of the impact of capital on Indian society and the reading of the difference it brought or manifested in India as it had its play through colonialism. This presumed that the pre-colonial era in India as in Europe was a feudal arrangement with the

princes and their retinue of administration at the local level forming the feudal lords and the rest of the peasants being tenants and serfs.

This inquiry of critical nature, spearheaded by Guha came to be known as the Subaltern Project after him and a group of Subaltern historians, delving into local and regional histories with a direction and intent to identify the role of peasants and tribals in the transition of Indian society. It made a scathing critique of the failure of the Indian bourgeoisie to emerge as it did in Europe, spearheading the nationalistic democratic movement percolating the values of modernity down to the peasants and dalits and thus transforming society from traditional to the modern.

One of their objectives was to trace the causes for the transition to modernity in India. This was pinpointed as the failure of capital to play its role of universalization. This was willy nilly identified as due to the unique features of Indian society were the formation of social stratification was not only along class lines as in Europe but much more entrenched into measured modes of segregation and separation between the layers in society determined by factors other than the mere dimension of wealth or economics. While Guha and Dipesh Chakraborty and the group of scholars working on these alternative stories of the subaltern in Indian history and their role in the nation formation attempted to highlight something of a history and a development not underscored and recognized by the Cambridge historian or the colonial historian and not even by the mainstream nationalist historians it created a wave of attention into the late 80s and 90s. A critique to their project emerged very slowly and 'post colonial theory and specter of capital' is probably the best summation of that critical argument.

Therefore, to summarize, while history in India has been made not only by the colonial masters nor only by the elite nationalists of the Indian resistance to colonialism, there have been umpteen expressions from the subalterns - the peasants, the women, the Dalits, the hoi polloi, the commoners, the local resistance movements - and these deserved recording and an acknowledgement. In this process of highlighting the role of the subaltern and the reading of the colonial project as a dominance without hegemony - peoples appropriation of the values of the changing times and formations,

the critical voices to this critique is trying to say that the uniqueness of the Indian situation as read by Guha and Dipesh and group is not all together unique but regarded so from a faulty, incomplete reading of the reference point or counterpoint - meaning to say, the European transition to modernity and the imagined role played therein by capital as a universalizing democratizing project, a dissemination of wealth and new ideas of community formation as a people to people-process.

While agreeing with Guha that there is a difference in the way capital engaged itself in India and therefore the attempted transition was a failed one, the cause by which it failed according to Chibber is not the same as what Guha meant it to be. For Guha the bourgeoisie in Europe and England took the lead as a result of the wealth distribution process to democratize society. Whereas in India the Indian bourgeoisie failed to emerge and fulfill their role of democratizing society because of the social stratification over and above class differentiation. For Vivek Chibber, Guha is not right or correct in reading the European British social transition because the role played by capital constrained the emergence of democratic aspirations unlike what Guha read it to be, and as arising from more contemporary researches into the social set up of those times around 1640, in England and 1870, in France and this trend continued well into late 19th and even early 20th centuries is what he is trying to counter establish as an argument.

In making his case he draws on the research done by the Dipesh Chakraborty on the Jute Mill owners of Kolkata. Dipesh engages his study to go along with Guha to show that the hegemony of the jute mill owners was without domination. In other words, the wealth /capital that was invested in setting up the Jute factories did not sufficiently lead to equalize Indian workforce because of the colonial condition in which it was deployed. Chibber draws on the trade and investment patterns of Europe and shows how even there the capital (those who wield it) ensured that the workforce did not get to the limits of challenging authority and in order to do so even worked towards controlling the political forces that would keep labour at its place and not usurp an assertiveness that could be counter to the aspirations and goals of capitalists or capital investors!

Therefore, one of the lessons to be drawn from the debate is the well established fact that the capital behaves the same way whether its in Europe, India, China or England. The extend of its reach is such that we can now comfortably invert the famous slogan of Marx: 'proletariats of the world unite you have nothing to lose but your chains' with 'billionaires of the world unite because you have nothing but to gain the chaining of them all, all of them the non-millionaires''.

In sum, the problem that I find with a well researched and articulated book the *Specter of Capital* comes from the probably unintended but disturbingly sinister use to which it can be put by the re-emerging elite wanting to reinscribe in Indian society the erstwhile traditional systems, and are looking for one more example to pigeonhole and dethrone all of the western knowledge as the cause for the evils, even as the obituaries of colonialism that churn out repeated attempt to establish. What is the modern India left with other than not having the wherewithal to reclaim the essence of its power of egalitarianism embedded in its soul, and camouflaged and disclaimed repeatedly, for the benefit of the traditional capital/ social/ dominant class/ community? Chibber has made a coherent argumentation and a point that the world is not all perfect and not even in Europe, or Britain, despite longer years of democratic rule. This is therefore, an indictment of the processes of democracy into which modern India, in order to free its millions who were considered ill gotten and not deserving of equal rights; and to thrust them once again back into the stranglehold of social stratification, waiting to be re-inscribed tooth and nail. Chibber deserves to be read with a cautious eye and ear as to be ready for the war that is being unleashed on the modern sensibility and its yet to be fully realized future.