

Marginalisation and the media: How does the subaltern respond to mediation?

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*The international mainstream media today actively seeks to incorporate the voices of marginalised groups. Drawing on his recent research, **Sudheesh Ramapurath Chemmencheri** considers the nature of this representation, and how subaltern groups have responded to being mediated in this way.*



In an age of round-the-clock coverage of political and non-political debates, it is worth taking a moment to consider how the marginalised sections of society and their struggles are depicted in the media. In a different generation, Gayatri Spivak raised the question “[Can the subaltern speak?](#)” and the academy was shaken into recognising that it cannot assume it can represent the voice of the marginalised. The international mainstream media today actively pursues subaltern voices, and in doing so creates a two-way interaction: as the journalists seek to incorporate the marginalised in their rush to find news, and the subaltern seeks new opportunities offered by mediation to voice her opinion.

I first came across the term ‘subaltern’ at college in India via the Subaltern Studies series, inaugurated by Ranajit Guha way back in 1982. The term was previously used by Antonio Gramsci in his [Prison Notebooks](#) to indicate the proletariat but it is now used as an umbrella term for a broad spectrum of marginalised persons. The Subaltern Studies Group criticised the extant schools of historiography and pointed out that subaltern struggles were not reducible to the classical Marxian notion of class struggle; if one read between the lines of colonial records, one could extract growing subaltern consciousness – engaged as they were in myriad struggles related to caste, class, religious differences and patriarchy – during the Raj. Today, when globalisation and neoliberalism are omnipresent, many subaltern sections are not what they used to be. The global media is increasingly reaching the marginalised groups, although there are of course many subaltern sections that are still excluded from these opportunities. Thus, subalternity seems to change according to time and context, rather than remaining a frozen identity.



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The question here is does the subaltern lose its unique position now that the media is offering it a mouthpiece? My

analysis of the media representation of the Koodankulam anti-nuclear protests and the Kashmir conflict in India shows that mediation in fact reinforces the identity of subalternity through the specific narratives produced. Mediation is not simply a platform for voicing opinion, but also a means of making new meanings, new interpretations, invariably put together by the journalist. The key aspect that needs to be examined, then, is the *nature of representation*.

What meanings are created by media narratives and how they do represent the subaltern? Karl Marx pointed out the intriguing difference between representation (speaking for) and re-presentation (presenting again). Media narratives about subalternity can be seen a constant tussle between the two. The struggles of marginalised groups are often presented as performances, concentrating on the affective-performative aspects, more than the arguments contained therein. For instance, many stories, pictures and blog pieces on mainstream media captured vividly the Koodankulam anti-nuclear protesters forming a human chain in water or standing half-buried on the sea-shore. Many protests indeed have become camera-ready, as protesters are aware of the pervasive presence of the media. However, the articulation of concerns by the protesters in their words, as a result, received only secondary importance. Simultaneously, representative coverage of suave protest leaders as proxy for the whole struggle by the media can often obliterate the understanding of protest logics as well as criticism from amongst the rank-and-file. For instance, increasingly the voice that we hear from Kashmir through media stories is not that of the ordinary Kashmiri masses and their daily struggles, but that of either political leaders or academics sympathetic to the demands of Kashmiri people.

What emerges from such represented/re-presented narratives is that the subalternity of the people involved in the struggle is reiterated and not effaced as irrelevant just because it has been given a platform. However, it has been permeated by the globalising force of mediation. For example, coverage by the international media has on occasion facilitated the forging of new alliances between similar movements in different parts of the world. In others, it has drawn sympathy and financial or material support from global audience.

Does the reiteration of subalternity through mediation lead to the conclusion that subalternity should be the preferred state to be? This would be a dangerous lead to take as subaltern struggles are primarily meant to lead to social change and the end of marginalisation, an idea to which sincere media outlets may also feel committed to. Thus, just as we saw that subalternity is not a frozen identity, it will continue to be malleable even after receiving media spaces to speak. Still to be seen is whether mediation becomes *the* chosen space to establish a subaltern identity as more actors, such as gender/sex queer persons or stateless people, are increasingly positioning their struggles using the frame of subalternity.

What the media needs to take note of is that the representation of the subaltern and subaltern struggles continues to be political. Acknowledging this would help media studies to re-orient its production of knowledge so that the manner in which global media descends to the stratum of the subaltern and closely engages with their struggles is sensitive to the politics of representation.

This post is a summary of the key arguments presented in Sudheesh's recent publication Subaltern Struggles and the Global Media in Koodankulam and Kashmir, which appeared in [South Asia: Journal of South Asian Studies](#) (Vol. 38, Issue 2, 2015). The essay used postcolonial insights to look at the narratives produced by the global media on protest movements in India.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the South Asia @ LSE blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.

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