



## Tribal voice in *The Death Script* by Ashutosh Bhardwaj: A subaltern study

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### Abstract

The representation of tribal communities in contemporary Indian narratives often reveals the complex intersections of marginalization, conflict and resistance. This paper examines the articulation of tribal voices in Ashutosh Bhardwaj's *The Death Script* through the theoretical framework of Subaltern Studies. Drawing on the works of Ranajit Guha, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Dipesh Chakrabarty, the study explored how the text foregrounds the lived experiences of Adivasi communities in the Bastar region of central India, where prolonged armed conflict between state security forces and Maoist insurgents has significantly affected everyday life. The narrative highlights institutional challenges such as wrongful criminalization, displacement, custodial abuse and social marginalization. Through testimonies, reportage, and cultural references, Bhardwaj's work reveals how tribal communities remain largely absent from dominant political and historical narratives. At the same time, the text documents moments of protest, collective mourning and everyday forms of resistance that indicates the persistence of subaltern agency. By presenting alternative perspectives from the margins of the nation-state, *The Death Script* functions as a counter-narrative to official accounts of conflict. The study emphasizes the importance of recognizing tribal experiences as central to understanding contemporary socio-political realities in India.

**Keywords:** Subaltern studies, tribal voice, adivasi representation, resistance, marginalization

### Introduction

In postcolonial research, the representation of marginalized communities in literature and historical discourse has remained a significant concern. The emergence of Subaltern Studies in the Indian context during the 1980s marked an important shift in historiography by seeking to recover the voices and experiences of those excluded from elite narratives. Ranajit Guha, one of the founding members of the Subaltern Studies collective, argued that colonial and nationalist historiography largely privileged elite perspectives while overlooking the political agency of marginalized groups such as peasants and tribal communities (Guha xii). Consequently, the project of Subaltern Studies aimed to reconstruct history 'from below' by foregrounding the experiences and forms of resistance of subaltern social groups.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak further developed the theoretical discussion on subaltern representation by examining the ability of marginalized individuals to articulate their voices within dominant epistemic structures. In her influential essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?", Spivak argues that elite systems of knowledge and representation often mediate or appropriate the voices of subaltern subjects, thereby preventing them from being directly heard within hegemonic discourses (Spivak 271). Thus, subalternity involved not only social and political marginalization but also epistemic exclusion, where the knowledge and experiences of oppressed communities remain absent from dominant narratives.

Within this framework, the experiences of Adivasi communities in central India offer an important site for examining the dynamics of subalternity. For several decades, the forested region of Bastar in Chhattisgarh has witnessed prolonged conflict between Maoist insurgents and state security forces. In this complex political environment, tribal communities often find themselves positioned

between competing structures of authority. Despite the profound impact of militarization, displacement, and economic exploitation on their lives, their perspectives rarely appear in official discussions concerning development, governance, or security. As Dipesh Chakrabarty observes, modern state-centered histories frequently marginalize communities that exist outside dominant institutional frameworks of modernity (Chakrabarty 16).

Ashutosh Bhardwaj's *The Death Script* provides a compelling narrative account of this conflict and its consequences for indigenous communities. Combining elements of narrative journalism, personal observation, and testimonies from local inhabitants, the text documents the everyday realities of survival in the Bastar region. Rather than framing the conflict solely in terms of insurgency or national security, Bhardwaj highlights the lived experiences of Adivasis who inhabit this contested landscape. In doing so, the narrative becomes an important repository of marginalized voices that reveal the human consequences of political and military struggles.

This study examines the representation of tribal voices in *The Death Script* through the theoretical framework of Subaltern Studies. It explores how the narrative exposes structural marginalization, the pressures experienced by Adivasi communities within the conflict zone, and the moments of resistance that enable them to assert agency. By situating Bhardwaj's narrative within the discourse of subalternity, the study underscores the role of literary documentation and narrative journalism in recovering suppressed histories and amplifying voices that remain largely absent from dominant political narratives.

### Tribal Voice and Subaltern Agency

Ashutosh Bhardwaj's *The Death Script* portrays the complex realities of marginalization, political contestation,

and conflict that shape the lives of tribal communities in central India. When examined through the theoretical lens of Subaltern Studies, the narrative becomes particularly significant as it highlights the experiences of communities that remain largely excluded from dominant political and historical discourse. According to Ranajit Guha, subaltern groups are those who are structurally marginalized from institutional power and representation (Guha 1983) [4]. In the context of Bastar, Adivasi communities represent such subaltern subjects whose voices often remain absent from official accounts of the Maoist conflict.

One of the recurring themes in the narrative is the criminalization of tribal individuals by state institutions. Bhardwaj illustrates how ordinary villagers are sometimes drawn into the conflict through allegations and coercive practices. Shanti recounts the experience of her husband, whose life changed after a dispute involving a local moneylender:

Once, a local moneylender implicated him in a false case and got him thrashed by the police. That's why he became a Naxal ... He lived in forests, visited home once every few months ... He also went to jail a couple of times, remained at home for a while after the release, but then became a Naxal. (Bhardwaj 36)

This episode illustrates how structural injustice and social humiliation can contribute to the radicalization of individuals. As Guha argues, subaltern political actions frequently arise from everyday experiences of exploitation rather than purely ideological motivations. In this sense, the transformation of an ordinary villager into an insurgent reflects broader patterns of marginalization within rural societies.

The marginalization of tribal communities also becomes visible during counterinsurgency operations conducted in the region. The Sarkegusa incident of 2012, in which several tribal villagers lost their lives during a security operation, was initially presented as a successful encounter with Maoist insurgents. However, testimonies from survivors and local residents offer a different perspective on the event. Sandip Irpa recalls that many of those present were students who had gathered for a village festival:

We studied in class ten in a residential government school adjoining the Basaguda police station... We saw the sea for the first time in Visakhapatnam... They were among the brightest in our school... The villagers had assembled for the festival of Beej Pundum that night. (Bhardwaj41)

Such accounts illustrate what Spivak describes as the epistemic silencing of the subaltern. The experiences of tribal communities often remain unheard within dominant political narratives, which are typically mediated by state institutions and mainstream media. Consequently, their voices appear only indirectly through testimonies and narrative documentation. These distortions highlight the core issue brought up by Spivak: the voice of the subaltern is frequently only understandable when it is filtered by elite power and knowledge frameworks (Spivak 273).

Bhardwaj also situates contemporary conflict within a broader ethical and cultural framework by invoking the Ramayana. In the epic narrative, Sita cautions Rama about the dangers of unjust violence:

The third weakness which men succumb to because of their passions, the inflicting of violence and cruelty upon other beings without reason or enmity, that weakness appears to be present in you now. (Bhardwaj, 47)

This reference functions as a moral reflection on the ethics of power and warfare. By juxtaposing mythological wisdom with contemporary events, Bhardwaj implicitly raises questions about the legitimacy of violence when directed toward vulnerable populations.

At the same time, the narrative acknowledges that insurgent groups also employ coercive practices within the conflict environment. Bhardwaj observes that acts of violence are sometimes framed by insurgents as part of the psychological and symbolic dimensions of guerrilla warfare, reinforcing group solidarity and ideological commitment among recruits (Bhardwaj 82). Such observations suggest that the conflict in Bastar cannot be reduced to a simple binary between the state and insurgent forces. Instead, it represents a complex field of competing power structures in which tribal communities often experience the consequences of both.

The vulnerability of subaltern communities becomes particularly evident in accounts of custodial abuse. Bhardwaj documents the death of Podiyami Mada while in police custody, noting that there were no officially recorded charges linking him to Maoist activity. Testimonies cited in the narrative suggest that he was detained and subjected to severe mistreatment during interrogation (Bhardwaj 91). Such incidents raise serious concerns about the protection of human rights within conflict zones and illustrate how marginalized individuals may become targets of institutional power.

Despite these challenges, Bhardwaj's narrative also highlights moments of collective agency and resistance among tribal communities. Following incidents of violence, women from affected villages organized public protests to express grief and demand accountability, "Our screams cut through the forest... we are absolutely unwilling to return" (Bhardwaj 231). These acts of collective mourning and protest represent what Guha describes as the autonomous domain of subaltern politics. Even when excluded from formal political structures, marginalized communities continue to articulate dissent through collective action and public expression.

Ultimately, *The Death Script* reveals the precarious position of Adivasi communities who find themselves caught within an ongoing conflict between state and insurgent forces. Bhardwaj observes, "Caught between two enemies, Bastar adivasis know that they are often the only casualty of this war. Both sides forcefully extract information from them" (Bhardwaj 34). This observation encapsulates the central dilemma of subaltern existence within conflict zones. While tribal communities continue to voice their experiences through testimonies, protests, and cultural narratives, their perspectives often remain marginalized within dominant national discourses of security and development.

## Conclusion

An examination of Ashutosh Bhardwaj's *The Death Script* through the framework of Subaltern Studies reveals the complex realities of marginalization, conflict, and resistance in the tribal regions of central India. The narrative demonstrates how Adivasi communities in Bastar remain positioned at the margins of political power and historical representation. Their experiences are shaped by institutional challenges such as wrongful criminalization, displacement, custodial abuse, and the broader consequences of prolonged armed conflict between insurgent groups and state security forces.

By documenting testimonies from villagers, survivors, and local inhabitants, Bhardwaj challenges dominant narratives that often frame the Bastar conflict primarily as a struggle between the state and Maoist insurgents. Instead, the narrative reveals that tribal communities frequently bear the greatest burden of this conflict, navigating competing structures of authority that exert control over their lives and territories. In this sense, the text reinforces a central insight of Subaltern Studies: marginalized communities have historically been excluded from dominant historiography, and alternative forms of documentation are necessary to recover their experiences.

At the same time, the narrative demonstrates that subaltern groups are not merely passive victims of structural oppression. Moments of communal protest, expressions of grief, and everyday forms of resistance illustrate the persistence of tribal agency despite systemic marginalization. These acts disrupt the silence imposed by dominant political structures and affirm the continued presence of subaltern voices in the public sphere.

Ultimately, *The Death Script* functions as a powerful counter-narrative that foregrounds the lived realities of tribal communities in Bastar. By documenting their experiences, the work calls for a more inclusive and humane understanding of justice, development, and democracy in India. Recognizing and amplifying these marginalized voices is essential for any meaningful engagement with the socio-political challenges that continue to shape the lives of indigenous communities across the country.

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