

**Making the Subaltern Voice Heard: Situating Spivak's Theory in Amish  
Tripathi's *Shiva Trilogy***

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**Abstract**

Subalternity has been in existence from time immemorial. To view subalternity as an exclusive legacy of the colonial history of any nation is to limit its implication to one perspective. Subalternity forms an important aspect of human societies that are built upon hierarchical structures. Human history is the history of struggle between the privileged and the underprivileged. Political and social structures have been reinforcing subalternity at different times and different places. This is very true of ancient Indian society where economic, social and cultural hierarchies were based on varna system.

This varna system was legitimized by the socio-religious texts which led to the development of cultural hegemony of few people over the masses. So it is only natural that even in the retelling of ancient myths and legends, one can find the wronged subalterns and power crazed imperialists. In fact myths and legends could be seen as meta narratives of postcolonial

**UNDERSTANDING LITERATURE IN THE CONTEXT OF CONTEMPORARY THEORIES- INDIAN AND  
WESTERN PERSPECTIVES**

discourses. Amish Tripathi, famously known as the J.R.R. Tolkien of India and India's first literary popstar, occupies a unique position in the contemporary Indian literary scene with his retelling of ancient myths and legends. The present paper examines the voicing of the subaltern in *Shiva Trilogy* through the lens of Spivak's essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?*. According to Spivak, subalterns cannot speak not because they do not know to speak for themselves but because their voice is not properly represented by any agent that does not affiliate to the reigning ideologies of dominant groups. The paper explores the trauma faced by the socially, politically and culturally marginalized Vikarnas and Nagas and traces how Lord Shiva effectively creates the enabling condition for these subaltern for social participation by engaging with them positively and replacing hegemonic laws of oppression and exploitation with socially responsible practices.

**Key Words:** myth and legend; subaltern oppression; Vikarna; Naga; rituals; trauma ;justice;

Subalterns are a class of people who are marginalised and oppressed on the basis of race, ethnicity, gender and colour. They are present all over the world and are known by different names such as Untouchables, Other, Dalit, Shudra. Subalterns are deprived of their basic rights. They face humility in various forms due to the cruelty of the higher strata of the society. Ancient Hindu society was stratified on the basis of 'varna' ideology. In the scriptures, the varna system is classified according to the karma of a person. Later on the same varna system was based on the occupation of a person. The higher caste people are called Brahmins and they served as priests. Next in cadre of the varna system was the kshatriyas, kings/rulers. The vaishyas consisted of herders, farmers, merchants and craftsmen. The shudras were the lowliest in the hierarchy comprising of farm workers, servants and laborers. They were made to serve the society by committing themselves to menial jobs. They were not allowed in temples, educational

**UNDERSTANDING LITERATURE IN THE CONTEXT OF CONTEMPORARY THEORIES- INDIAN AND WESTERN PERSPECTIVES**

institutions and in later times, were not allowed to travel in trains or buses along with the elites. They were prohibited from fetching water from the same well that the elites use and from wearing clean clothes. This ill-treatment of the people in the lower rungs of the varna ladder was justified by the bourgeoisie in the name of caste. The inhuman attitude of the socially superior people towards the subalterns continues even in this modern world.

After Indian independence, the cruelty of hegemony towards the colonised and the cultural effects of colonization came to be depicted in postcolonial studies. There were many political and social activists, writers, scholars and critics during and after the colonial times who voiced out for the sake of the subalterns in terms of social, political and economic rights.

A handful of scholars who were interested in the changes that took place in society during precolonial and postcolonial period, initiated the subaltern studies group, and recorded the events in the form of postcolonial historiography. Gradually Subaltern studies entered the postcolonial studies through the contribution of various South Asian literary scholars and theorists such as Ranajit Guha, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Dipesh Chakrabarty. The concept of subaltern is also discussed in various theoretical discourses such as marxism, cultural studies and feminism.

Gayatri Spivak is in her famous essay *Can the Subaltern Speak*, explores the possibilities of the representation of the problems of subaltern and identifies the characteristics of the subaltern. Spivak's answer to the most famous question whether the subaltern can speak is 'no'. The subalterns do have voice but they are silenced. The fact is they are not being heard by the society which is not ready to listen to them.

Myths, as popular cultural beliefs, represent the ancient's way of life, the hierarchical social order, tradition and culture that they followed. In the present scenario, reviving myth is in trend among the Indian Writers. The contemporary revisionist myth makers include ChitraBannerjeeDivakaruni, DevduttPattnaik, Sara Joseph and Kavita Kane. In order to condemn the injustices done to the ancient legendary mythical characters these revisionist myth makers, take the weapon of revivalism in their hands and rewrite the incidents to subvert the meek characters and show them as powerful strong individuals.

One of the famous writers of revisionist myth making is Amish Tripathi, famously known as the J.R.R.Tolkien of India and India's first literary popstar. Amish Tripathi is a voracious reader of history and myth. His grandfather was a pandit, and a repository of knowledge of mythical legends. The stories that he listened to as he grew up turned him from a banker into a successful author. He has written two trilogies so far, namely *Immortals of Meluha* and *Ram Chandra Series*. These novels have been translated into nineteen Indian languages, and he has received various awards and accolades for his writings. He amalgamates, fantasy and history in his novels. He revises, revisions and revitalizes the myths to revive the ancient Indian culture and tradition. He not only discusses the various social and environmental issues that prevailed and are prevailing in India, but also provides solution to the problems through his writings. He can also be called as a social activist for voicing out the problems of the subordinated communities of the past that relate to the present day marginalized minorities. His legendary characters such as Lord Shiva, Lord Ram, Lady Sati and Sita champion the cause of the disempowered.

In fact Tripathi's *Shiva Trilogy* serves as a critique of oppression by foregrounding the various ways the subalterns are positioned in a hegemonic culture. The present paper examines the voicing of the subaltern in *Shiva Trilogy* through the lens of Spivak's essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?* For Spivak subalterns cannot be heard because their voices are misrepresented by colonial power. The paper explores the trauma faced by the socially, politically and culturally marginalized Vikarmas and Nagas and traces how Lord Shiva effectively creates enabling condition for these subalterns for social participation by engaging with them positively and replacing hegemonic laws of oppression and exploitation with socially responsible practices.

Amish Tripathi's *Shiva Trilogy* has multidimensional perspectives of marginalised people which includes caste based discrimination, discrimination of ill-fated people (because of losing their loved ones to a disease), discrimination of people with physical deformities such as extra limbs, heads or hands.

Vikarmas are considered to be cursed people who suffer the penance of the sins that they committed in their previous birth. If a woman gives birth to a still born child, or if a person is afflicted with some disease or becomes blind suddenly, they are considered to be impure and are ostracized from the society. Meluha comes down severely upon them with rigid rules and regulations. Vikarmas have to perform certain rituals every month and pray to Lord Agni to get rid of their sin. Both the men and the women have different procedures for penance. None should cross the path while the procession of the Vikarma women is on the move. If at all any person happens to touch these Vikarmas they have to perform a ritual called 'shudikaran'. The mythical Vikarmas are parallel to the real untouchables in India, and even touching them accidentally is believed to be a sin by the elites. The sad part is that most of the Vikarmas believe that this law is

**UNDERSTANDING LITERATURE IN THE CONTEXT OF CONTEMPORARY THEORIES- INDIAN AND WESTERN PERSPECTIVES**

appropriate and they must suffer their entire life because of their sins committed in previous births.

These Vikarmas are tormented doubly. First, because of their individual pathetic situation of being deformed or losing a baby. Second, due to the mental agony that they have to undergo in the name of law, that prohibits their contact with the outer world. Nandi explains their sufferings to Lord Shiva: “They are not allowed to marry since they contaminate others with bad fate. They are not allowed to touch any person who is not related to them or is not part of their daily life” (IMM 95). Though Vikarmas live in Meluha which can be considered as an utopia as far as sophistication is considered, the life style of Vikarmas make their land a dystopia for them.

The Vikarma law places certain restrictions on the victim’s family members too. Drapaku, an efficient warrior is not allowed in the Meluhan army due to the fact that he is a Vikarma. He turns into a Vikarma due to a disease, which killed his wife and made his father blind. When Lord Shiva, sees the masses and Drapaku’s father wants to seek blessings from Lord Shiva. He makes attempts to fall on Lord Shiva’s feet, immediately his son hinders it and asks for forgiveness to Lord Shiva. Later Shiva realizes that the blind man is a Vikarma, but Lord Shiva does not believe in the law and gets blessings from the blind man to save the country. This shows the humble nature of Lord Shiva and everyone in the crowd who witness the incident are dumfounded with astonishment. When Sati and Brahaspati ask Shiva to perform a shudikaran for touching the impure person, Lord Shiva calmly says that “Well if the law says that my touching the poor is illegal then the law is wrong” (IMM 201). Brahaspati tells him that the sins of the oldman’s previous birth due to which he is blind will contaminate Lord Shiva too. Lord Shiva

**UNDERSTANDING LITERATURE IN THE CONTEXT OF CONTEMPORARY THEORIES- INDIAN AND WESTERN PERSPECTIVES**

replies “If the weight on that man’s shoulders lessens I will feel blessed” (IMM 202). Through these Amish Tripathi drives home the prejudices that the elite practiced against the untouchables.

Lady Sati is the daughter of the Meluhan Emperor Daksha and Veerini. She is an excellent fighter and possesses martial skills. She marries Chandhandhwaj. Ill-luck befalls her when she gives birth to a stillborn child and her husband dies on the same day. Due to this incident she becomes a victim of Vikarma law and is forced to follow the rules of the law as others. Lady Sati follows the rules willingly by draping herself in blue angavastram and wholeheartedly praying to Lord Agni. The philosophy of karma is deep rooted within the minds of the Meluhans. Vikarmas are made to believe that their suffering is essential for moksha. It is ironical that the fellow human beings do not feel empathetic towards these Vikarmas and they do not realize the fact that one day, they may also become a Vikarma. The untouchables are prohibited to come near the places where the higher caste people live, as they are considered to pollute the place. Vikarmas are not supposed to stand on the platform where the holy ritual is carried on. Unknowingly Lady Sati stands in the Dwitiya platform where a yagna is conducted. An immigrant named Tarik accuses Sati by saying that: I don’t know what a vikarma woman is doing travelling with a convoy of Neelkanth. She is polluting the entire journey (IMM 228).

Lady Sati humbly apologises for her mistake but Tarak does not stop his argument, hence the enraged Sati calls him for agnipariksha, which is a duel in which only one person will be alive. Sati wins in the agnipariksha and proves herself but still she does not voice out her views against Vikarma law. If the higher caste people in ancient India come in contact with the untouchables, they have to take a purifying bath as a ritual. Similarly, if anyone accidentally touches a Vikarma, the person has to undergo a purification ritual called shudikaran. Lord Shiva

**UNDERSTANDING LITERATURE IN THE CONTEXT OF CONTEMPORARY THEORIES- INDIAN AND WESTERN PERSPECTIVES**

teaches the dance movements to Sati and accidentally touches her during the dance movement, Sati asks Lord Shiva to perform shudikaran, but Lord Shiva refuses to perform shudikaran as he finds it absurd, he says: “In fact the entire vikarma is ridiculous. I think it is one of the few things in Meluha that is not fair and should be changed” (IMM 151).

Lord Shiva annihilates unjust hegemonic practices in the name of law, caste and religion. He serves as a bridge between the country and the people. He notices that even when the Vikarmalaw treats the victims unfairly, the Vikarmas like Sati, Drapaku and his father are patriotic towards their country. Drapaku’s father begs Lord Shiva not to stop protecting the country because he polluted Lord Shiva by touching his feet. Lord Shiva tells “ ‘Bless me sir, so that I find the strength to fight for a man as patriotic as you’ ”(IMM 200). Being practical and after witnessing the physical and mental trauma of the Vikarmas, he scraps the Vikarma law by saying that “I want the entire vikarma law scrapped. Nobody will be a vikarma from now on. Bad fate can strike anyone. It is ridiculous to blame their past lives for it” (IMM 282).

The independent Vikarmas feel overwhelmed and become more patriotic towards their country. Drapaku joins the Meluhan army once again and gets ready to fight with Lord Shiva for a holy war against chandravanshisand assures Lord Shiva that he will bring another five hundred Vikarma soldiers to fight for the sake of their mother country and Lord Shiva names their army as ‘Vikarma Brigade’ and Meluhans welcome them eagerly. “Drapaku and his soliders looked around the camp absorbing the respect that they had been denied for way too long”(IMM 337). After being freed from the Vikarma law, Lady Sati dares to take adventures and participates in the war. Lord Shiva as a social reformer makes clear that not only creating a law for the



subaltern will help them to improve their situation but also scrapping the law which hinders their progression and treats them inhumanely, will help them to evolve and grow as an individual.

The plight of Nagas are more humiliating than Vikarmas. Nagas are people born with deformities such as extra limbs or heads and have a deformed face. The Nagas are tormented by the elite right from their birth. If a baby is identified to be a Naga, immediately it is sent to Panchavati. A Naga ship will sail every month to Maika and all the Naga babies will be sent to their kingdom through the ship. All the record of such babies is maintained by the maika record keeper. As they are considered as outcasts, they are not even allowed to reside anywhere near SaptSindhu region. The suryavanshis believe that even the pronunciation of the word 'Naga' will bring bad luck to them. The physical trauma of the Nagas are mentioned by Queen Kali :

Nagas are born with small outgrowths, which doesn't seem much initially, but are harbingers of years of torture,' continued Kali. 'It almost feels like a demon has taken over your body. And he's bursting out from within, slowly, over many years, causing soul-crushing pain that becomes your constant companion. Our bodies get twisted beyond recognition so that by adolescence, when further growth finally stops, we are struck with what Brahaspati calls "deformities". I call it the wage of sins that we didn't even commit (OOV 16).

The elites see the Nagas as cursed people and they are made to believe that their suffering is due to the sin they have committed in the previous birth. They are looked upon as evil creatures and the very presence of Nagas brings terror in the minds of Swadeepans and Meluhans. Though the Nagas are ostracised from the society, they are powerful warriors blessed with extraordinary skills. Kali is the Queen of Nagas. She is Sati's twin sister who had been abandoned by king

**UNDERSTANDING LITERATURE IN THE CONTEXT OF CONTEMPORARY THEORIES- INDIAN AND WESTERN PERSPECTIVES**

Daksha for political reasons. Lord Ganesh with his elephant trunk is another Naga. He is the son of Sati, who was unaware of his existence, as she believed that she gave birth to a still born baby. The evil minded Daksha did not let anyone know these secrets, lest he will be in trouble. In the beginning Lord Shiva considers Chandravanshis and Nagas as evil creatures. After witnessing few incidents he is able to understand that the nagas are virtuous people.

Nagas are separated from their family members and this causes psychological trauma. Lord Ganesh and Kali miss their family members, though his aunt is with him, Lord Ganesh misses his mother and takes risk to save a tribal son separated from his mother. In the chapter 'Mystery of the Eastern Palace', King Athithigva secretly visits his sister and asks her to tie rakhi. Lady Sati witnesses this incident and questions the king, but Maya, the king's sister pours out all the pain within her. She says to Sati:

And who is more misunderstood than a person with deformity? Call us Naga. Call us a monster. Throw us to the South of Narmada, where our presence will not trouble your lily white lives (SON 176).

Lord Shiva is practical and explains to Sati that it is illogical to neglect a baby because of being born as deformed and the concept of naga is irrational. He condemns the superstitious beliefs based on karma and thinks rationally in order to find solution to the problem. He explains to Sati:

How can one believe that an innocent child is born with sin? It's clear as daylight: a new born child has done no wrong. He has done no right either. He has done no right either. He has just been born. He could not have done anything!(OOV 55)

**UNDERSTANDING LITERATURE IN THE CONTEXT OF CONTEMPORARY THEORIES- INDIAN AND WESTERN PERSPECTIVES**

Lord Shiva effectively opposes the discourses of domination, within which the subalterns are trying to speak. He creates ground for the Vikramas and Nagas and liberates them from the oppressive practices of the society.

Spivak in her essay *Can the Subaltern Speak* suggests that the ethical move is to create a conducive atmosphere, for the subaltern to come out of their suppressed position. If they have a space for themselves, they will be empowered and certainly come out of the demoralized position. Prior to this step of creating an enabling space for them, it is essential to learn their situation and empathise with them. In the novel, Lord Shiva saves the subaltern from the evils of the society. He comes to Meluha as an immigrant and after consuming somras, his throat becomes blue. His blue throat elevates him to the status of a God and he is worshipped as the Neelkanth by both the elite and as God he is able to see the rights and wrongs of the society in a better perspective.

As stated by Gayatri Spivak, Lord Shiva learns to learn from the subaltern. Though he is an immigrant, he does not consider himself an alien. He observes the culture of the land and various social injustices done to the subaltern and understands the physical and psychological trauma that they suffer due to their neglect. He empathises with the miseries of the subaltern, as per Spivak's theory and that is how he provides the space for the subalterns to stand up for themselves. Lord Ganesh rightly points out to Kartik, "Baba's mission is to fight for the oppressed; to be the voice for the voiceless. It is obvious that the elite want to stop him" (OOV 41).

Lord Shiva has stood up for the freedom of the untouchables and the downtrodden. The role of Lord Shiva as per Hindu myth is 'destroyer'. Lord Shiva searches for evil right from the

**UNDERSTANDING LITERATURE IN THE CONTEXT OF CONTEMPORARY THEORIES- INDIAN AND WESTERN PERSPECTIVES**

beginning in order to destroy it. At first he believes Nagas are evil, but slowly he understands that they are not evil, and they too are being treated unfairly by the elite and then goes in search of the reason why there is disease in Branga, with the help of Brahaspati and the Nagas, he discovers that the real evil is somras which served as the source for the miseries of Nagas and Brangas and destroys it completely. Thus muted section of the society gain independence due to his continuous effort. Amish Tripathi, as a creative and innovative writer has portrayed Lord Shiva as a normal human being who attains the status of God, because of his noble deeds. Lord Shiva strives to create equality amongst the people and even though he loses his wife in the process, he does not give up, until justice is rendered to the subaltern.

Amish Tripathi, as a social activist has pointed out the flaws of the society that need to be obliterated for a healthy nation. Through his treatment of the subjugated groups, Vikarnas and Nagas in the *Shiva Trilogy*, he has brought to light the elite's cruel treatment of the subaltern. And by projecting Lord Shiva as the subaltern representative who creates enabling conditions for the subaltern empowerment, Amish Tripathi has also successfully reiterated Spivak's theory that subaltern voice is not heard because of lack of representation and not because of lack of articulation.

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**UNDERSTANDING LITERATURE IN THE CONTEXT OF CONTEMPORARY THEORIES- INDIAN AND WESTERN PERSPECTIVES**

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**UNDERSTANDING LITERATURE IN THE CONTEXT OF CONTEMPORARY THEORIES- INDIAN AND WESTERN PERSPECTIVES**