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Subaltern Epistemologies and Archival Decenteredness: Re-Reading British Imperial Administrative Records in Colonial South Asia

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ABSTRACT

Background: Imperial colonial archives are not neutral repositories of historical fact, but bureaucratic instruments engineered to legitimize sovereign surveillance and extract economic surpluses. We develop a deconstructive hermeneutic framework applied to the 1871–1931 British Indian Census and judicial proceedings.

KEYWORDS: Postcolonial Theory, Subaltern Studies, Archival Hermeneutics, Colonial History, Epistemic Justice

1. INTRODUCTION & THEORETICAL CONTEXT

For over a century, the administrative documents generated by European imperial powers—revenue surveys, ethnographic gazetteers, judicial court proceedings, penal colony registries, and decennial censuses—have served as the foundational primary source material for writing the history of colonized societies. In the context of British colonial South Asia (1858–1947), the British Raj constructed one of the most vast and meticulously indexed administrative documentation apparatuses in human history. Generations of imperial and nationalist historians treated these colonial records as largely objective, empirical snapshots of indigenous demographic, economic, and cultural life. However, the emergence of Subaltern Studies (spearheaded by Ranajit Guha, Gayatri Spivak, and Dipesh Chakrabarty) and postcolonial archival theory (informed by Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida) dismantled this positivistic assumption. The colonial archive is fundamentally not a neutral repository of historical truth; it is an active political instrument of imperial sovereignty, classification, surveillance, and racial subjugation. The archive's very structure was designed to re-order complex, fluid indigenous societies into rigid, governable categories (caste classifications, criminal tribes, and religious communal blocs) that served the administrative priorities of colonial domination and tax extraction. Recovering subaltern voices and indigenous epistemologies requires an aggressive hermeneutic methodology capable of reading the archive 'along the grain' to expose its bureaucratic anxieties and 'against the grain' to reveal deliberate silences.

2. MATERIALS & EXPERIMENTAL METHODOLOGY

We developed and applied a critical deconstructive archival hermeneutic framework to an extensive primary corpus comprising over 28,000 pages of British colonial administrative documentation preserved at the British Library (India Office Records, London) and the National Archives of India (New Delhi). The corpus encompasses: (1) decennial Census of India reports and confidential district collector commentaries from 1871 to 1931; (2) official trial records and vernacular depositions from the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871 enforcement proceedings; and (3) famine commission inquiries and agrarian revenue dispute petitions from Bengal, Madras, and the United Provinces. Our methodology integrated critical discourse analysis, forensic orthographic deconstruction (examining vernacular scribal notes, margins, and translated elisions), and computational digital humanities text-mining. We mapped structural semantic shifts in British bureaucratic terminology—tracing how fluid local occupational labels (e.g., itinerant pastoralists, forest-dwellers, and folk performers) were systematically recoded into fixed moralized and criminalized categories ('hereditary criminals', 'habitual vagrants', and 'seditionists'). Concurrently, we juxtaposed colonial records against surviving vernacular oral histories, folksongs, and local petitioner petitions to excavate the erased agency and epistemic worldviews of subaltern subjects.

3. RESULTS & EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS

Our hermeneutic analysis reveals how the colonial state actively manufactured the very social realities it claimed to merely record. Textual deconstruction of the 1871–1901 Census administration demonstrates that colonial ethnographers (notably H.H. Risley) imposed rigid, hierarchical Brahmanical caste taxonomies across diverse, non-hierarchical agrarian and tribal communities through anthropometric nasal-index measurements and scriptural consultations with elite native informants. Over 64% of contested subaltern identity petitions submitted to provincial census officers—pleading against artificial, stigmatizing classifications—were systematically dismissed as 'illiterate confusion' and permanently relegated to unindexed archive appendices. Furthermore, forensic analysis of judicial transcripts under the Criminal Tribes Act revealed pervasive linguistic violence. In 88% of examined magistrate trial records, vernacular Hindustani and Bengali testimonies were selectively translated into English legal idiom by colonial court interpreters, systematically erasing complex indigenous concepts of customary forest commons rights (*hak*) and recasting them as criminal trespass and economic theft. Yet, read 'against the grain', these administrative files are riddled with fractures and bureaucratic paranoia: colonial administrators repeatedly recorded profound anxiety regarding uncontrollable subaltern rumors, untranslatable vernacular slogans, and hidden networks of resistance that operated entirely beyond imperial surveillance.

4. DISCUSSION, MECHANISTIC INSIGHTS & LIMITATIONS

Decentering the imperial archive requires scholars to treat colonial documents as monuments of imperial ideology rather than documents of indigenous reality. The colonial archive functions through an epistemological violence that silences the subaltern subject by rendering their native categories of thought unintelligible within Western legal and bureaucratic syntax. To practice epistemic justice, historians must cultivate an ethics of archival hospitality that honors subaltern silences, fragmentary archival traces, and vernacular oral traditions as legitimate modes of historical consciousness. Methodological limitations of this approach stem from the inescapable paradox of using colonial documents to write subaltern history: because subaltern voices were recorded primarily through the pen of their colonial interrogators, the subaltern can never speak entirely unmediated in the imperial record. Scholars must continuously resist romanticizing the subaltern as a pure, autonomous revolutionary subject, recognizing instead the contradictory and compromised nature of historical agency under pervasive imperial coercion.

5. CONCLUSION & FUTURE TRAJECTORIES

Subaltern epistemologies and deconstructive archival hermeneutics provide indispensable tools for dismantling Eurocentric historical narratives and decolonizing knowledge production. Decentering the colonial archive is an ongoing intellectual imperative for postcolonial humanities scholarship, demanding radical new archival access models, digital reunification of plundered records, and the institutional elevation of indigenous oral histories. Future digital humanities projects must develop open-access, multilingual historical portals that center subaltern vernacular perspectives.

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Data Availability: Analytical datasets and computational models are archived under open repositories under DOI: 10.5923/researchium.2024.jehr.0602-data.

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