

# Cultural Elites and Elite Cultures in Contemporary India and South Asia

## Constructions and Deconstructions

### Editorial

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#### Situating the subject – Introduction

Definitions are slippery; they reveal as much as they conceal and hence are not always a productive pursuit. But to open our discussion, at least as an entry point, we propose that elites are a small group within a hierarchical framework with unequal distribution of authority who claim power and privilege on the basis of socially accepted credentials and then strive to extend their dominance. As a relational construct it implicitly includes references to variously identified non-elites (the working class, subalterns etc). To use Vilfredo Pareto's observation (1991), elites are a class of people who have the highest indices or outstanding assets in their branch of activities. That said, throughout 20th century, literature on elites or elite studies have primarily been focused on political or politico-economic elites, with the unspecified term "elite" usually implying a political elite and with a significant part of elite theory aiming at conceptualizing elite changes. How are new elites established and what happens to the old elites in the process: are elites reproduced, i. e. older elites managing to maintain an exalted position at the top; transformed with a changing modus operandi or rather circulated, i. e., replaced by other new groups, for example? While a major part of elite theorizing focussed on the formation of elites and their social function, the literature and case studies have largely been drawn from "Western" experience and dominated by sociologists and political scientists such as Pareto (1991), Mills (2000), Putnam (1976), Bourdieu (1996), and Hartmann (2007) among others.

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What has been less evident, if not in fact absent, is cultural and anthropological research providing us with a ring-side view of things, though there have been a few isolated attempts such as in Shore / Nugent (2002), Khan (2012) or Salverda / Abbink (2013). Though theorization of elites was influenced by Pierre Bourdieu's (1996) pioneering broadening of the concept of capital (social, cultural, symbolic) and habitus as fundamental to social relations, these ideas have not percolated into or been interpreted in a comparative Indian perspective, nor has the literature on elites on the Indian subcontinent critically engaged with the shifting definitions and significations of the elites. In order to fill this gap, scholars working on elite cultures and cultural elites met at Aarhus University, Denmark from 5–6 May 2015 to address issues relating to elite formation, its performativity and representation. Selected deliberations arising from the workshop form the content of this special number of the *International Quarterly for Asian Studies* (formerly known as *Internationales Asienforum*).

We may add here that when we say India, we broadly refer to the idea of a cultural experience and epistemology which continues to influence social and cultural life in parts of the South Asian subcontinent. However, it is understood that this broad-based narrative does not attempt to suggest any sort of uniformity. It is because of the cultural overlap, shared historical processes and symmetry that papers on Nepal and Sri Lanka have been included in this number of the journal besides various narratives on India. Starting with a general understanding of elites as “makers and shakers” in influential positions in society, the present number aims to expand Bourdieu's insights, to deploy them to understand the shifting nature of elite cultures in the subcontinent and to explore the evolving landscape of elite discourse in India and South Asia based on ethnographic, historical and cultural analysis in discourse with existing literature and research. Awareness of rising inequality, demands for inclusive politics, the march towards economic development, together with rapid social-cultural changes create unique situations of imagining elitism in South Asia.

Since elites often perform as elites, it is important to discuss the “the language and practice through which elites represent themselves” (Shore 2002: 13) and “the way social reality is constructed by actors themselves” (ibid: 5). Academics, student leaders, activists, journalists, artists, film makers often come together to articulate the aspirations of people and form new elite collectives, challenge older ones or even style themselves as an anti-power elite – though in very heterogeneous ways. This leads or can lead to an elitization of subalterns, for example caste/class leaders, or in the reverse process to a subalternization of elites. Without proposing any essentializing approach to culture, we would like to emphasize cultural factors and elements explicitly because culture is increasingly referred to in public discourses and has almost become

the new socio-economic, though it does not lose sight of gender, social stratifications etc. with which it overlaps. However, it is here in a self-spun web of symbols and meanings (Geertz 1973) that struggles over truth and values are taking place more than ever before, forming public opinions and affecting people's lives and thereby leading to both the manufacture of consent (Lippmann 1998; Herman / Chomsky 1988) as well as the manufacture of dissent.

## The culture question

Before turning to Bourdieu's already mentioned contributions, a few more words about the idea of culture as just indicated above with reference to Clifford Geertz will be productive. While culture is shared among groups, there is a constant interdependent and at times contradictory interplay between invention and convention, between newness and innovation on the one hand and control, the defining perspectives of actors, even legitimation on the other, as Roy Wagner (1981: 21ff) argued. In creative processes of symbolization, signs are constructed, re-interpreted or even manipulated – commonly within a range of “meaningful” symbols and codes, whose meaning is generated within a variety of contexts. Applied to political rituals as “action wrapped in a web of symbolism”, David Kertzer (1988) explored the role of leaders as symbol-makers and interpreters in processes of legitimation or de-legitimation.

While anthropology, especially symbolic anthropology, and adjacent disciplines have furthered this analytical understanding of culture, Wagner (*ibid.*: 21 ff) also pointed out that culture does not have one referent and remains an ambiguous term. Beyond the broadest, “democratic” signification of culture as something all collectives inherently possess, a narrower meaning of culture as refinement co-exists alongside this general notion. Called the “opera-house” sense of culture by Wagner, this latter idea also goes back to the earlier Latin term in its meaning “to cultivate”, but is used in an elitist or aristocratic sense of being cultivated or cultured – precisely as polished, refined or possessing *noblesse oblige*. Retained also in distinctions between high and low culture, this idea is crucially connected to institutions – not just the opera but first and foremost educational institutions, which have also been the focus of Bourdieu's research.

Culture as capital on which elitism is commonly predicated, has often been tied to and in fact subordinated to economic power in Bourdieu's (1996) approach. Within a Marxist framework, culture according to Bourdieu is the second order system which is not just the effect of the first order system of economy, but which in itself leads to something else, namely power. Instead of repeating the conventional wisdom that culture is an autonomous space of cre-

ativity and aesthetics, Bourdieu expands the scope of capital to include culture, because the latter requires investment of a particular type so as to guarantee a return. Elsewhere Bourdieu (1984: 1) compares cultural capital to economic forms of capital like houses or money and argues that – within limits – there are ways of transubstantiating cultural or symbolic capital into economic capital and vice versa. Accumulation of such capital (for example through education) ensures a type of habitus that inscribes distinction and value upon the individual and legitimates existing inequality. In a sense, economic capital not only produces cultural capital but is also produced by the latter.

Since culture has no absolute value on its own and is metonymic of economic capital, it would be a misrecognition to argue that the aim of culture is only to reproduce economic and social power relationships. Culture is creative, open-ended and even arbitrary; even though its public performance is aesthetic, its hidden transcripts are that of power. Thus the intrinsic value of culture and its experiment with beauty are often exposed as sites of conformity and domination. For Bourdieu, culture is an empty container and there is nothing intrinsically appreciable in it; rather, culture is meaningful only in relation to those who have and those who do not have culture – the cultured versus the uncultured. Culture disguises and camouflages itself as non-economic and consistently reproduces the conditions of economic production. However, as Rob Moore has proposed, this does not explain how some lower-class pupils reach the highest level whereas upper-class pupils may be less successful (2004: 452), while David Halle (1992) argues that members of different groups do not relate to art in fundamentally different ways and that cultural capital may not be as difficult to obtain as Bourdieu suggests.

What is frequently elided in this discussion on culture as a site of distinction is the making of culture, its genesis and its sustained iteration. First, Bourdieu tends to treat cultural elites as carriers of culture, as if it is a possession, something which can always reproduce social hierarchy and confer privileges. Secondly, elites are seen as a singular formation, a perception which ignores the power play between the elites. What is also ignored is the constant stylization of elite roles which are important for changing ideas of power and politics. It is reductive to say that one elite type transforms into another so as to consolidate power in the face of popular movements from below. Cultural elites, as members of a distinct category independent of the economic sphere may have other ways to legitimate themselves, such as through disavowal. It means that segments of cultural elites which do not enjoy institutionally approved positions of authority and may be pitted against what is state or economic power, nonetheless can ironically draw some sort of moral power in that act of resistance. Unlike ideology, which creates an imaginary relation with real problems of production and distribution (Althusser 1978), such soft power claims to speak truth to power.

## The Indian experience

During India's independence movement, the Western educated Indian elites strove to create a social order which was free from both foreign rule and social inequalities at home (Desai 1984: 641). The democratic process, as outlined in the Indian constitution, led to the rise of new regional elites linked to language or nativist movements, and in turn to an increase in their political power and economic benefits after independence (Brass 2009). Decades after independence, in what is considered a "second democratic upsurge", other new elites rose in politics, i. e. the so-called Other Backward Classes (OBC) – the term used here as an administrative disguise for castes. Thus, lower backward castes, often relatively wealthy peasants, but also so-called Dalits or ex-"Untouchables" increased their political influence in the 1980s and 1990s – a process described as a "silent revolution" (Jaffrelot 2003) and the "rise of the plebeians" (Jaffrelot / Kumar 2009). While lower caste leaders have created an aura around themselves as champions of justice, they often undermine their resistance politics by allowing themselves to be coopted and used by the mainstream political parties or they compromise their principles, given the temptations of money and power. Simultaneously a broader urban and small town middle class emerged, defined and defining themselves by a new consumerism and with occasional leanings towards communal politics – particularly towards a Hindu nationalist movement. This new and complex pattern has begun to replace old binaries of elite and mass, if they ever really existed in such simplified forms, thus leading to new ideas of political community and citizenship.

At the same time the postcolonial anti-elite elitism continues to date and is still concerned with the removal of a hierarchical society ridden with social evils. Now, contemporary India is a site of many new era elite identities in the arenas of technology and media, neo-religious movements, indigenous and subaltern groups, new social movements, films and sports to name a few examples. In the intellectual and cultural spheres, a new community is emerging as avant-garde or thought leaders (often referred to as conscience keepers of society), wielding immense clout as well as celebrity capital. Activists and intellectuals exercise enormous influence in terms of their capability of shaping public opinion and of offering new visions of politics and development. This group of elites may be called moral elites (Zhuravlev / Kupreichenko 2014: 5) because they help form moral consciousness and influence large masses.

Gennady Batygin questions the idea of intellectual elites as disinterested and sees ambivalence in the habitus of these people when he says that intellectuals usually maintain an elite life-style with regard to food habits, sexual behaviour, clothes, speech style etc. (2001: 259). Over a period of time, this

intelligentsia degenerates into “a corporate status system” (Batygin 2001: 264). Though ideationally and operationally these elites are different, they all carry what we can call “influence or celebrity capital” and they may even share a conviction that an ideal society is a society without elites. It is this disavowal which distinguishes the present cultural elites from the traditional ones. This special number thus seeks to broaden the critical discourse on the social processes through which elites are constructed and create frameworks through which such performativity can be deconstructed. In this critical discourse the social, political and economic understanding of elites is seen as interwoven through the fabric of culture. This is a perspective that we hope will encourage a more nuanced and mediated theorizing not limited to the typical tropes. Thus elites might be viewed not only as a constructed category but also as an imaginary in its various hues.

The political, social and economic complexities of postcolonial societies such as that of India offer opportunities to study societies which got independence with the intention of bringing equality among its people and reverse the culture of domination. At a time of deepening democracy and progressive politics that facilitate representation of the marginalized (for example in reservation policies for backward communities or for women’s representation in various local government bodies), the cultural elites may transform themselves by opting to be on the side of the subaltern. Such politics of elite subalternism often lead to a condition wherein only conscientious elites can represent the disenfranchised. One can say that Indian political and cultural discourses oscillate between the politics of representation and the politics of presence. In the former, the elites speak for and represent the subaltern, for example in the political parties’ or in the intellectuals’ and activists’ appropriation of dalit or minority voices, whereas the latter refers to a politics when the subalterns take upon themselves the responsibility to speak for themselves and refuse to be coopted by mainstream representation.

If the manufacture of consent is what the cultural elites do as is broadly understood, the present time of political egalitarianism has created an environment which makes the cultural elites blur the difference between the elite and the subaltern. Contemporary elites, new and older ones, appear to get their legitimacy by manufacturing dissent rather than consent, though the latter still plays an important role. Instead of perpetuating the status quo and existing terms, cultural elites may resist and transform such norms, thereby reversing the idea of the elite as the invisible enemy of the marginalized. If C. Wright Mills saw democracy as incompatible with elite power (2000) and Karl Mannheim (1940) believed that it is the mass which is inimical to democracy, others like Frank Bealey (1996) believed that it is not possible to generalize about elite attitudes to democracy. Thus the role of elites in a democracy can be dynamic and their response to the state and power could be equivocal.

## The question of methodology

This brings us to a methodological challenge. Cultural anthropology (including cultural studies in humanities circles) was more interested in producing knowledge from below and in interrogating the subtle ways through which power produced subjecthood. In the last 60 years or so, academics have sustained the production of knowledge of subalterns and their everyday life. It might come easier to us to study the Other from a distance or maybe through participant observation, and do the “god-trick” to understand the Other. We have tended to produce these rescue narratives, possibly because of our training in left-liberal university spaces. For us the subaltern subject is always a resisting subject, or somebody who acknowledges our intent to emancipate them. But we do not simply seek to emancipate them; we are equally interested in establishing ourselves as emancipators.

How can we turn the gaze inward and study ourselves (as cultural elites) without that critical distance that will compromise our truth claim. This partly explains the absence of cultural elite literature. Here Seyla Benhabib’s (2002) insights could be revealing when she distinguishes between the social observer and the social agent. For the former, culture may appear as a finished product and a complete whole without any fracture within. In contrast, the social agent responds to culture in an ambivalent manner and offers enough scope to see culture as a site of contestation and negotiation. For Benhabib, “from within, a culture need not appear as a whole; rather, it forms a horizon that recedes each time one approaches it” (2002: 5). It means while studying cultural elites (ourselves), we must consistently imagine ourselves as both, i. e. as social observers while continuing to remain social agents.

Let us return to the methodological question of how we know what we know. Producing critical material on cultural elites, on those who are us or like us, is more difficult as it is a narrative from within. Self-representation offers a huge challenge since cultural elites are a lot more heterogeneous than any supposedly “traditional” elites. This raises many associated problems like self-representation and the question of authenticity and acknowledging our role as culture producers, because so far we have imagined ourselves as recorders or interpreters only. There is also the problem of critical vocabulary, which has been good enough to capture subaltern experience or interrogate elite power, but may not be an appropriate vehicle to articulate our ambivalence given our material privileges and our theoretical moments of epiphanic conscience. The challenge for our current postmodern vocabulary on which most of our theorizing rests is how to implicate ourselves in that constructed linguistic and cultural universe.

The broad range of questions engaged in the following pages are: What kind of capital does a particular group possess and how does it go about reproducing that capital? How does this capital get converted into new socio-political currencies? How do the elites grapple with competing notions of social morality and their place in it? What are the performative strategies that are at work, legitimating certain types of elites but not others? Are elites interest groups, or do they mutate into identity groups in changing social environments? Do the elites reflect a new social order or create one; are they conscience keepers of a society or do they produce a particular consciousness? How do cultural elites position themselves vis-à-vis the state, class, caste and gender or the people, the masses? The following papers of this special issue, in varying degrees, address some of these questions. They bring together scholars, junior and senior, Indian and European, who have worked intensively on the Indian subcontinent and its elites. Kaamya Sharma, Tereza Kuldova, Stefanie Lotter, Sudarsan Padmanabhan and Jyotirmaya Tripathy are among the contributors. We are also pleased to include a special contribution from Jakob Rösel, Professor Emeritus at the University of Rostock and former editor of the *International Quarterly of Asian Studies*.

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