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Challenging Social Norms: Exploring Subaltern Perspectives in Vijay Tendulkar's *Sakharam Binder*

Research Scholar

Ruchira Dudhrejiya,

Lecturer in English,

Sir Bhavsinhji Polytechnic Institute, Bhavnagar

Email: ruchira.dhudhrejiya@gmail.com

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Abstract:

This research paper, "Challenging Social Norms: Exploring Subaltern Perspectives in Vijay Tendulkar's *Sakharam Binder*, " examines the representation of subaltern consciousness in Tendulkar's acclaimed play. This study examines the significance of subaltern perspectives in challenging and deconstructing dominant social norms prevalent in contemporary Indian society. The research investigates how Tendulkar's *Sakharam Binder* provides a voice to marginalised individuals and communities on the periphery of societal structures. It emphasises the complex interplay between power, agency, and subaltern consciousness through a close textual analysis of the play, including its characterisation, dialogues, and narrative developments. It explores the play's provocative themes of gender, caste, and class and their implications for subaltern agency and resistance. Incorporating literary analysis, cultural studies, and social commentary, this study employs a multidimensional approach to decipher the subaltern consciousness embedded in *Sakharam Binder*. But as Gramsci and Spivak argue, there is the politics behind speaking or working for the subalterns, which suggests the central and severe issue about the liberation of the subalternity has existed for centuries. In addition, it investigates the play's reception and influence within the Indian socio-cultural context, casting light on its contribution to challenging dominant norms and spurring dialogue about subaltern experiences. This study contributes to extant scholarship on the works of Vijay Tendulkar and the study of subaltern consciousness in Indian literature.

Key Words: subaltern consciousness, social norms, socio-cultural, consciousness, power.

This study on Vijay Tendulkar's play *Sakharam Binder* (1972) examines subaltern consciousness during Independence in India. The perspectives of women, the disadvantaged, and other subjugated groups have always been muted in *Sakharam Binder*. In the aftermath of the colonial period in India, these formerly exploited groups have continued to lack agency in society and access to social authority. Although the binder, Sakharam, gives voice to the marginalised and excluded community members, he fails to fully empower them in the social, political, and educational fields because he is inclined to exploit their situation. Sakharam's efforts to rehabilitate the impoverished, agricultural women and social outcasts demonstrate Tendulkar's subaltern consciousness, even though he cannot work altruistically.

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Subaltern consciousness is another contentious topic in subaltern studies since subaltern people are becoming more aware of their circumstances. In her essential work "Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography," Spivak offers a deconstructive interpretation of the Third Volume activities of the Subaltern Studies Group. In her writing, she tries to evaluate their efforts. She shares the concerns of many other critics on their fragmented conceptions of awareness. When she considers their work, she discovers that it shares similarities with deconstruction, which erases dichotomies like elite/subaltern. She thinks their mission, which seeks to explore, identify, and build a subaltern or peasant consciousness, is somewhat positivist. It implies that this empirical endeavour will produce a solid foundation or absolute truth.

However, their attempt seems more idealistic. Spivak thinks that "consciousness, here, is not consciousness-in-general, but a historicised political species, subaltern consciousness" (338). She sees their attempt to restore peasant awareness as a deliberate application of positivist essentialism in service of a starkly clear political goal. She suggests "that its subalternity in claiming a positive subject-position for the subaltern might be reinscribed as a strategy for our times" (345). They may then utilise anti-humanist force as a weapon. If they genuinely want it to be a successful approach, they must employ this consciousness in a limited sense—as self-consciousness. She, again, reinforces their strategic use of "peasant consciousness" by saying that they (Subaltern Studies Group) should be "concerned not with consciousness-in-general but in this crucial narrow sense" (342). Under the strictest sense, this implies that those under subordination must first become aware of themselves. People considered subalterns are frequently ostracised, making them readily incited to rebel. The goal of academics studying subalternity is to make the subaltern population the target of insurrection. As a result, they want to emphasize subaltern consciousness as their main idea. Otherwise, the experience of insurgency among the underclass would be reduced to a chronicle of incidents without a protagonist.

Despite adversity, Sakharam succeeds as a bookbinder in the press due to his dogged determination, which indicates his subaltern character. In this business, he receives assistance from the women he has frequently housed because other European merchants attempt to defraud them. Because he knows the hegemonic power's interest in third-world countries, he does not tolerate injustice and ill-treatment against the marginalised. Consequently, Sakharam attains wealth by battling against obstacles. As a subaltern, he works diligently for both himself and others.

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In the meantime, we should not neglect that "defiance," as Gautam Bhadra notes, "is not the only characteristic behaviour of the subaltern classes" (63) and that "submissiveness to authority" is an equally significant aspect of their behaviours. Even though "defiance" and "submissiveness" reflect the subaltern mentality, it is abundantly evident that subaltern consciousness has the potential to challenge the elite class, as Laxmi challenges Sakharam:

> Why do you look at me like that? What am I worth round here? After all, I'm just a caste-off wife. Who cares if my foot burns black? What are you staring at? Aren't you ashamed of yourself? Go away. Don't dare show me your black face again.
>
> Go on, get out Ooch. . . . Go on, go. Or else I'll hit you . . . you.,. . (140)

When Gayatry Spivak examines the fundamental tenets of the Subaltern Group, it is clear that the concept of the subaltern itself has become problematic in post-colonial philosophy. She did this in the influential article "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1985), in which she first criticised Gramsci's assertion of the group's autonomy. It is said that this article introduced the subaltern into the post-colonial sphere. She portrays women as a subaltern category in her article. She sees Laxmi and Champa as inferior beings since they are both female. As a result of this method's tendency to define the subaltern group and subaltern identity as one homogenous entity, the idea becomes ineffectual. Instead, it would be necessary to think of subversive organisations as having fractured identities that would allow for multiple coalitions to form.

In "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Spivak presents the case of a political activist who attempted suicide to communicate her predicament but whose communication was thwarted by the patriarchal and colonial codes into which her actions were inexorably inscribed as an example of the subaltern. Bhuvaneswari Bhaduri belonged to one of the several organisations fighting for Indian independence by force. She committed herself by hanging herself in 1926 during the start of her period so that her death could not be attributed to illicit desire. However, her passing was regarded as an instance of unrequited love. Spivak concludes that the subaltern cannot communicate since her acts are not only engraved but also understood in terms of the prevailing rules of British imperialism and Indian patriarchy. This is true of Laxmi, who cannot express her feelings verbally and instead confides them to the ants. Laxmi, a subordinate figure, lacks

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agency in post-colonial Indian culture. They are therefore forced to share their joys and sorrows with other animals, such as ants. Laxmi converses with the ant:

> I had to face the music and all on account of you! That's right. You eat the sugar, and I get the scolding. Nobody believes me.
>
> Ants, sparrows, crows--they all talk to me. What do you talk to me? Eh? Why must you talkee-talkee to me? Go on . . . tell me ... You naughty fellow . . . Tell me . . . (139)

This demonstrates the inferior status of women in India. On the one hand, they are treated like animals. However, if we take another angle, Laxmi's action shows her ecological or ecocritical knowledge. Sakharam reprimands her after he overhears their talk with the ant. It exposes the propensity of men to see women as property. Spivak's conclusion is preceded by a critique of Foucault and Deleuze, in which she discusses the risks of reinserting imperial assumptions in colonial studies, as well as of Antonio Gramsci's and Ranajit Guha's treatments of subalternity, with Guha's examination of the social structure of post-colonial societies as her primary focus.

In “Can the Subaltern Speak?” Spivak’s aim is, in her words, “to learn to speak to (rather than listen to or speak for) the historically muted subject of the non-elite” (271). Regarding Guha's introduction to his book on subaltern studies, in which he analyses the structure of colonial society and defines what space can be referred to as the subaltern space, Spivak suggests using the term "subaltern" to refer to everything different from organised resistance. He supports this suggestion with examples from Guha's work. Despite Sakharam's efforts to improve the precarious position of women in India, he is so steadfast in his beliefs that he never makes allowances for errors or negligence. He throws Laxmi out of the home if she doesn't behave as he expects. But Laxmi has become so conscious that she directly challenges Sakharam, saying: "A dead then do not fear the fire! Nothing more terrible can happen to me now. I have been through everything in this house. The whole world knows what goes on here. Even the children talk …" (147). This resistance on the part of Laxmi isnot organised but dispersed.

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Laxmi fits in with this way of life as a subordinate, working hard and finding solace in her loneliness by conversing with insects and birds. She appears to transform Sakharam in some ways, removing the top layer of skin at most. However, the inner devil continues to surface at the slightest provocation. He appears to despise religious prejudice (a situation involving Laxmi and his Muslim buddy, Dawood), and he shows signs of being sensitive enough to want to hear Laxmi laugh, but the result is unpleasant and cold. After roughly a year, Laxmi is comfortable enough to voice her complaints about the arduous labour and any disrespect. In turn, Sakharam believes it's time to eject Laxmi. Laxmi finds the separation difficult because she has nearly regarded this as her home.

Once more, a fiery (rebellious) woman named Champa enters the scene. Like many who came before her, she is also an abandoned woman. But she is not shy, passively following directions, unlike Laxmi. Sakharam surprisingly appears to understand this, if only because she is astounded by Champa's overt sexuality. But she is uninterested, telling him, "I am not that kind of woman" (156). Though she first drowns herself in booze to cover up her distaste, she finally complies with his persuasion. Before Laxmi's return one day, everything for Sakharam appears to be returning to normal. After kicking her out, he discovers Champa and Laxmi forming an alliance and agreeing that Champa should handle him and that Laxmi should run the household. Such a "marriage" of convenience is doomed to failure. Laxmi begins to question and covertly criticise Champa's behaviour as she feels she has lost Sakharam and the house to Champa. Sakharam is allegedly accused of losing his "masculinity" in front of Laxmi by Champa. After becoming furious at the charge, he tries to kick Laxmi out of the house. In a shocking turn of events, Sakharam kills Champa out of wrath after Laxmi informs him of her suspicions about Champa (an affair with Dawood). To prevent anyone from finding out, Laxmi persuades a stunned, dumb Sakharam to bury Champa. Laxmi's action demonstrates subaltern awareness.

Laxmi's actions at the conclusion make us wonder whether everything is a survival game when love, innocence, and appreciation are on the line. Champa's alleged adultery has yet to be established. Did Laxmi make it up by writing it up as an ace to win the last game? Did Champa consent to take Laxmi to get Sakharam's attention away from her? Does the community despise Sakharam because he calls himself a wolf and acts like one? What about the wolves (husbands) that stealthily prey on the impoverished peasant women's flock while camouflaging themselves in a marriage's lamb's skin? Through the play, Tendulkar raises a pertinent question: Does society purposely disregard them, condoning any abuse under the guise of

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marriage? These and many more issues that one is forced to ask themselves are explored throughout the research. That is the strength of Tendulkar's play *Sakharam Binder*.

Gail Hershatter asserts that one could generalise Spivak's observation and propose that it makes other identity markers, such as race, ethnicity, religion, or nationality, more visible in their interactions rather than just "across the class spectrum," thereby illuminating the process of class formation itself. The broad definition of "subaltern" does not imply that all forms of oppression (or resistance) are equivalent, nor that each individual is a subaltern in the same sense. Hershatter hopes not to "render oppression uniform and thus somehow less onerous, but rather to trace the ways that oppressions can be stacked, doubled, intertwined" (19).

Fernando Coronil proposes that we view the subaltern neither as a sovereign subject that actively occupies a bounded place nor as a vassal- subject that results: "[F]rom the dispersed effects of multiple external determinations, but as an agent of identity construction that participates, under determinate conditions within a field of power relations, in the organisation of its multiple positionality and subjectivity." (95)

According to him, subalternity is relational and relative; just as there are moments and locations when subjects play dominating roles, there are also periods and places where they play subaltern roles on the social stage. Sakharam is therefore portrayed as an experienced traveller. He is aware of the situation of the poor and oppressed. Due to his interest in the internal affairs of the Elites, he learns about the wealth disparity in India. When the Indians took over the English, Sakharam went there specifically to see how the upper class lived by travelling with others.

Additionally, an actor may subordinate to one person while dominating another at any moment or location. Dominance and subalternity are relationship characteristics rather than intrinsic states. Subalternity describes a subordinated condition of being, not the existence of a subject. A relational conception of the subaltern, however, requires a double vision that recognises, on the one level, a commonality among various forms of subjection and, on the other, the unchangeable identity of subjects formed within specifically constricting social worlds. This is because sustained domination can fix issues into limiting positions. The first viewpoint creates a framework for connecting subordinated persons (including the analyst who adopts a subaltern perspective).

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In contrast, the second recognises the distinctive and ultimately unshareable repercussions of particular modes of subordination. Anti-colonial intellectuals may find it easier to escape the polarity that they see underlies Spivak's theory if they use a relational and situational approach to understanding the subaltern. Instead, they may be more open to hearing subaltern voices from differentially subjugated places.

The play recounts the well-known background of Vijay Tendulkar's 1972 play Sakharam Binder, a study of violence and depravity that had caused elite people to feel extremely uneasy. These events are recreated in the play, which is a revelation to audiences today. The narrative of this episode is interspersed with unsettling passages from Sakharam Binder, which serve as a reminder of the potency of Tendulkar's play screenplay. But that tells half the tale. The subaltern's blending with the main narrative, the small customs and folklore of the eras appearing both as narrative and commentary on a timeframe from then to today, and other arguments' structures and meanings heavily influence my case for this play. The truth in Indian society is the portrayal of a subaltern figure like Sakharam. His instances are replete with what appear to be incidental allusions to the modifications made to the Maharashtrian (tamasha) framework (155). The Delhi-based professor who has provided the dancer and the (Shahira) project attempting to record their existence in contemporary India and her middleman, the historian, are other figures who stand out immediately in this environment (155).

Even though at the time Sakharam was written, India was still a conquered nation directly ruled by Britain. He adheres to all customs and ceremonies and wears traditional Indian garb. He travels from several locations in India. Tendulkar portrays the history of the subaltern mass in this way by telling the tale of the families of the subaltern characters and their contributions.

Vijay Tendulkar's *Sakharam Binder* is the subject of this study's investigation into post-colonial India's subaltern consciousness. Tendulkar discusses the complexities of human nature and the exploitation of disadvantaged people. The play's eponymous character, Sakharam, a subaltern figure from a low social class, adopts widows, abandoned spouses, and untouchables who would otherwise be homeless, impoverished, or murdered without repercussion. He provides them with housing and employment. He will even pay for their bus fare and any required clothing if they want to leave his home. However, despite his efforts to speak up for the underprivileged, his actions look dubious.

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Despite his efforts to help the underprivileged, he needs to do more to help them since he occasionally favors Laxmi and Champa for his financial gain. He always makes them work hard, and Laxmi confronts him. However, he fights out for the underprivileged, even Muslims like Dawood. A bookbinder named Sakharam Binder takes in a string of wives whose husbands have kicked them out of their homes. He provides them with food, housing, and necessities of life in exchange for help around the house and company.

Sakharam employs this alternate arrangement in his family because he vehemently rejects the hypocrisy he perceives in marriage. He, therefore, never marries. In this way, he contrasts how people often think of people in his neighbourhood. He doesn't get married, but he retains wives. He criticises the institution of marriage, which subjugates women, as a subaltern. Sakharam has since brought Champa, who has fled from her husband. Fauzdar Sindhe, her husband, starts acting more like a beast to her than a man, so she runs. He abuses her like a beast and uses strange means to satisfy his sadistic and carnal desires. When Champa sees her husband, she erupts in rage and beats him.

Laxmi and Champa are the exploited characters since they are more frequently used. Due to their lack of autonomy, Laxmi turns to non-human animals like ants for company. On the other hand, Champa tries to find comfort in alcohol to ease her anguish and annoyance. Despite being aware of their inferior status, they cannot help each other since they are hegemonic to elite masculine ideology. Champa remains mute as Sakharam reprimands and tries to strike her, suggesting, in Spivak's opinion, that subordinate women lack agency and cannot stand out for their rights.

The voices of women, the oppressed, and other abused groups have never been heard in the drama. Historically subject to extreme exploitation at the time, these communities have yet to gain social agency or access to power in India's post-colonial era. The author of the binder, Sakharam, offers a voice to those marginalised and excluded from society. Still, he needs to genuinely empower them in the social, political, and educational spheres since he tends to take advantage of their predicament. He, therefore, primarily works for the benefit of underprivileged communities. Tendulkar's subaltern awareness may be seen in *Sakharam Binder*'s desire to rehabilitate the impoverished and social outcasts even though he cannot act selflessly. This represents the need to acknowledge and uplift people lacking agency. The play provides an excellent analysis of

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interactions between working-class men and women. Although Sakharam "rescues" women from their unfortunate and wretched circumstances, he uses them to set his cravings. Most crucially, the termination of the power dynamic between a man and a woman reflects the focus on working-class women who are subordinate, and this is demonstrated with astounding dramatic force.

Therefore, this analysis of Tendulkar's *Sakharam Binder* adds to our understanding of the plight of underprivileged individuals from various sociocultural backgrounds. The question of the play's applicability in the current environment therefore arises. Out-of-wedlock physical relationships and cohabitation are not permitted in Hindu society. However, remarriages and divorces are significantly more frequent. More women are autonomous as a result, protecting themselves from the social vultures of elite groups. Society is considerably more conscious of the struggles and rights of women. Therefore, if not entirely removed, that component appears to have diminished. However, as it has been throughout history, the survival game of every living thing, in which case relationships and emotions are openly exchanged, is still very much in force. Therefore, every generation will unavoidably include Laxmi, Champa, and Sakharam in some capacity as long as there are still subaltern people. According to Gramsci, the working class's (proletariat's) knowledge of subordination is the key to their emancipation.

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