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From 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' to 'Can the Algorithm Hear?': Re-reading Subaltern Studies in the Age of Artificial Intelligence

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Abstract
Subaltern Studies seeks to understand the presence within the study of history and society of those groups whose voices had been suppressed by dominant elite and colonial knowledge systems. Ranajit Guha examined this issue through the lens of subaltern political agency, demonstrating in his studies that subordinate groups were not merely passive recipients of the policies of power; rather, they possessed their own political consciousness and an autonomous domain of action. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak gave a decisive turn to this discourse through her writings. In 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', she moved the question beyond the mere capacity to speak, linking it instead to structures of representation, mediation, and listening. This paper attempts to re-examine this intellectual tradition within the context of contemporary digital society and Artificial Intelligence. In contemporary times, social media and other digital platforms have created new opportunities for subaltern groups to engage in self-representation and collective mobilization within mainstream society; however, algorithmic systems based on the online and other availability of relevant past material have begun to influence which voices gain visibility, which content circulates, and which experiences are recorded as data and rendered computationally recognizable. In this context, this paper develops the proposed concept of 'algorithmic subalternity.' Thus, the traditional question of Subaltern Studies "Can the Subaltern Speak?" is extended to a new sociological question for the age of AI: "Can the Algorithm Hear the Subaltern?"

Keywords: Subaltern Studies, Spivak, Guha, Algorithm, Exclusion, Digital Divide

Introduction

For a long time, the history of colonial India was written primarily from the perspective of those individuals and institutions that had traditionally participated in power and administration and had ready access to formal avenues of knowledge. In colonial records, the peasantry was frequently portrayed merely as a revenue paying population, as rebels, or as sources of law-and-order problems; similarly, the political consciousness and daily struggles of local communities were often relegated to the margins of a history that more readily documented the narratives of the state and the elite. Nationalist historiography altered this situation to some extent, yet even within it, the emphasis remained heavily on political leadership and organized, large scale or national movements. Against this backdrop, it is crucial to recognize that the absence of a community from historical records cannot be equated with an absence of social life. People are present in history; they engage in struggles, comprehend their own interests, and articulate their relationship with power in their own ways even if their voices are barely discernible in the available historical sources. Ranajit Guha identified this issue as a fundamental limitation of colonial Indian historiography. According to him, mainstream historiography failed to accord sufficient importance to the active role of the common people; consequently, the political consciousness and agency of subaltern groups became almost detached from the broader historical narrative (Guha, 1982) [14]. In 'Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India', Guha sought to understand peasant uprisings not merely as blind reactions or consequences of administrative disorder but through the lens of insurgent consciousness, experience, and political will (Guha, 1999) [15].

Subaltern Studies emerged from this very intellectual restlessness. With the publication of 'Subaltern Studies: Writings on South Asian History and Society' in 1982 [14] edited by Ranajit Guha a historiographical project came to the fore that raised the question of how to make those groups within Indian society, which had not been adequately represented in colonial and elite political narratives, the subjects of history (Guha, 1982) [14]. The fundamental thrust of this entire project was not merely to write 'history from below'; more importantly, it sought to view peasants, workers, Dalits, and other subordinate groups as social actors possessing their own historical agency. In his writings, Guha particularly emphasized that it is entirely inappropriate to view subaltern politics merely as a shadow of elite politics. His studies interpreted the rebellions led by these groups as political actions driven by an understanding of their own world and a desire to transform it (Guha, 1999) [15]. Subsequently, the scope of Subaltern Studies expanded further, with issues concerning history, power, nationalism, culture, and representation gaining greater prominence. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak addressed this very point through a distinct yet profound question: "Can the Subaltern Speak?" For her, the issue was not merely whether the subaltern speaks, but rather how their voice is recorded and understood within dominant structures of representation. Thus, the question of subalternity became intertwined with the politics of voice, knowledge, and representation (Spivak, 1988) [21].

Today's digital world does not render this age old question obsolete; rather, it elevates it to a new level. In the era of globalization, smartphones, social media, and digital communication have opened avenues of expression even for those who previously struggled to make their voices heard in the mainstream public sphere; yet, the opportunity to speak and the societal capacity to be heard are not one and the same. An individual's post may exist online, but its visibility is shaped by platform rules, language dynamics, digital literacy, data structures, and algorithmic filtering. It is here that the need arises to re-examine Subaltern Studies within the contemporary context of artificial intelligence. If Guha's question concerned how to recognize the political agency of the subaltern in history, and if Spivak asked how their voice could be heard within structures of representation, then in the current era of AI, the question shifts slightly: can an algorithm recognize the voice of the subaltern? Which languages exist as sufficient data, what forms of experience are deemed machine-readable, and which social groups appear underrepresented or distorted within algorithmic systems these are no longer merely technical questions. Through them, long-standing dynamics of power, knowledge, and social inequality resurface in new forms. In this sense, contemporary AI can be interpreted as a new problem for Subaltern Studies one where the question of representation extends beyond the historical archive to encompass data, platforms, and algorithms.

Subaltern Studies: Intellectual Foundation

To understand the concept of the 'subaltern,' it seems essential to begin with Antonio Gramsci, as the intellectual background for the term's later usage within the South Asian context lies in his writings. Gramsci did not view subaltern groups merely as a class of the economically poor or the socially deprived. Their position is shaped by broader power relations in which dominant groups maintain their social, political, and ideological leadership. In the 'Prison Notebooks', Gramsci sought to understand the condition of subaltern groups in terms of their political organization, historical consciousness, and hegemonic relations (Gramsci, ***1971).*** Here, hegemony does not signify mere overt domination; it is crucial to understand that power becomes more enduring when dominant social groups succeed in making their vision and values part of a broad social consensus. In this system, while subordinate groups possess experience and harbor grievances, transforming these into organized political consciousness and sustained collective action is not easy. For Gramsci, therefore, subalternity is not a static social identity but a historical condition shaped by the interplay of power, organization, and consciousness. Consequently, viewing subaltern groups merely as passive recipients of domination would amount to underestimating their actual social role. Embedded within the experiences, struggles, and organizational potential of marginalized groups is an agency capable of challenging the dominant order, although the form this takes may vary across different historical contexts (Gramsci, ***1971).***

In South Asian historiography, Ranajit Guha advanced this very question within a distinct historical context. For Guha, the central issue was how the political role of the Indian masses was frequently overshadowed by the elite leadership in both colonial and nationalist historiography. While peasants and other rural communities appeared in colonial history primarily in the context of administration, law and order, or revenue systems, nationalist history prioritized the national leadership and organized political movements. Guha highlighted a profound gap in this historiography: although the Indian masses were present in history, their own political consciousness and actions were not accorded adequate space as an independent historical force (Guha, ***1982).*** The Subaltern Studies project sought to address this very issue. Instead of viewing history merely as a narrative of prominent leaders, institutions, and formal political organizations, Guha and his fellow scholars endeavored to interpret it from the perspective of those situated at the lower echelons of power in colonial society. Peasant rebellions hold particular significance in this approach, as dismissing an insurgency merely as a spontaneous reaction against the colonial administration obscures the political meaning inherent within it.

Guha's work, 'Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India', is particularly significant in this context. In it, he interprets peasant rebellions as forms of collective action that embodied the peasants' own understanding of their social world, a distinct language of protest, and a specific conception of their relationship with power (Guha, 1999) [15]. This is the point where Guha's thought moves beyond Gramsci in a significant direction. The subaltern is not merely an object of someone else's politics; they also act based on an understanding of their own circumstances. Guha posited the concept of an 'autonomous domain' of subaltern politics in contrast to both colonial and nationalist elite historiography. This did not imply that subaltern politics was entirely isolated from other power relations in society; rather, it meant that understanding such political behaviour merely as a reaction to elite initiatives was insufficient (Guha, 1982) [14]. When peasants rebel, their actions are shaped by local experiences, communal ties, economic pressures, the memory of power, and their own understanding of resistance. Thus, it would be incorrect to view subaltern consciousness merely as a replica of ideologies imposed from above.

This leads to a further theoretical question arising from the paper: while Guha asked how the subaltern constructs their political agency, in contemporary digital society, we must also examine how that agency manifests within technological structures. If a marginalized individual voices their perspective on social media today, yet the wider circulation of that voice is influenced by the platform and its algorithmic systems, then agency persists, but its visibility is not automatically guaranteed. Therefore, when interpreting Guha's concept of the 'autonomous domain' in the current context, a new question emerges: do algorithmic systems recognize subaltern agency, or do they redefine it within their own categories, rankings, and data structures? This very question lays the groundwork for a subsequent discussion on 'algorithmic subalternity' and 'algorithmic agency.'

From Guha to Spivak: The Problem of Voice and Representation

For Ranajit Guha, the problem of the subaltern was primarily linked to recognizing their historical-political agency. However, it was not enough to simply assume that because the subaltern possessed political consciousness and agency, their voice would automatically become visible in

history. This is where Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's intervention becomes significant. In her famous essay 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', she situated the question of the subaltern within the realms of representation, discourse, and power (Spivak, 1988) [21]. For her, the issue is not whether the subaltern is physically capable of speaking; the problem is far more complex. An individual may articulate their views or express their suffering and experiences, yet their voice may not reach the socio-institutional system in a form that allows it to be heard and acknowledged. Speaking and being heard are, therefore, not the same process; multiple layers of power operate between them. Within the social order, factors such as language, education, institutional status, social prestige, and prevailing norms of knowledge determine which statements are deemed meaningful and legitimate.

Representation holds special significance in Spivak's argument. She draws attention to two distinct yet interconnected meanings of representation: speaking on someone's behalf and representing someone within an image, discourse, or narrative. When an intellectual, researcher, political organization, or the state speaks for a marginalized group, they do not merely convey that group's views; they also construct the group's social image and political identity. A difficult question arises here: if an individual cannot articulate their own position and someone else speaks on their behalf, how much of their own voice remains in that process of representation? Furthermore, if their views are translated into a dominant institutional language, which experiences surface during this translation, and which ones are left behind? Spivak links this complex relationship to the problem of subalternity. For her, it is inappropriate to view the subaltern as possessing a romanticized 'pure voice,' because that voice is always heard within the confines of specific discursive and institutional structures (Spivak, 1988) [21].

From this perspective, Spivak's question does not negate Guha's project but rather poses a different problem for it. Guha demonstrated that the political consciousness and agency of subaltern groups had been suppressed within elite history. Spivak asks: when we re-present the agency of these groups in history and scholarship, within what structure of representation are we ourselves operating? Even while attempting to bring the subaltern's voice to the fore, the researcher inevitably molds their experience into their own language, theoretical categories, and academic conventions. Throughout this process, the power relation between the researcher and the researched is not eliminated; instead, it persists in a new form. Therefore, in Subaltern Studies, the question of 'voice' ceases to be merely a matter of expression; it becomes a question of knowledge production. Whose experience becomes knowledge, in which language it is articulated, and who validates that knowledge all these questions are inextricably linked to social power.

It is here that the distinction between 'speaking' and 'being heard' becomes evident. A marginalized individual may have the opportunity to speak, yet the structures required to listen to, comprehend, and grant institutional recognition to their words are not necessarily within their control. This distinction gains even greater significance in modern democratic and digital societies. While social media has facilitated expression, visibility and recognition remain unequally distributed. An individual may voice their views online, but the reach of their voice, the context in which it appears, and the manner in which it is interpreted are all influenced by platform structures and broader social relations. Thus, Spivak's fundamental question can be re-examined within today's new technological context. If the earlier challenge concerned how the subaltern voice was represented within dominant discourses, today we must also ask how digital and algorithmic systems classify, filter, and circulate that voice. This leads to the paper's next question: how do the conditions for the subaltern 'being heard' shift when a significant portion of representation occurs through algorithms?

The Expansion of Subaltern Studies: Chakrabarty, Chatterjee, and Others

The intellectual evolution of Subaltern Studies progressed from Ranajit Guha's initial insistence on recognizing the political agency of subaltern groups within historiography. Scholars following Guha expanded this project in various directions, clarifying that understanding subalternity solely through the lens of peasant uprisings or colonial rule was insufficient. In 'Provincializing Europe', Dipesh Chakrabarty challenged the conception of history associated with modernity - one that treats the European experience as the universal model for modern social development (Chakrabarty, 2000) [7]. The significance of his argument lies in the recognition that modernity is not a uniform historical experience; concepts originating in Europe, when applied to other societies, often overlook the specific historical experiences and social relations that define those societies' unique local character. From this perspective, Subaltern Studies transcends the mere project of bringing marginalized, suppressed voices into historical view; it begins to interrogate the very system of knowledge production that designates certain experiences as 'universal' while relegating others to the status of 'particular' or 'peripheral.' This question acquires new relevance in the context of contemporary AI. If machine learning systems learn patterns from vast datasets, it becomes essential to ask which society's knowledge predominates in those datasets and which types of experiences are underrepresented. Knowledge that was never recorded as sufficient data may suffer from limited algorithmic visibility. In this sense, Chakrabarty's inquiry into universal knowledge can be extended to the realm of algorithmic knowledge today.

Similarly, Partha Chatterjee, by understanding subaltern politics in the context of nationalism and postcolonial state, showed that modern political life does not operate only through formal institutions. In The Politics of the Governed, he focuses on populations who maintain an unequal and practical relationship with the formal citizenship and institutional politics of the state through his notion of 'political society' (Chatterjee, ***2004).*** In his study, it is not enough to view marginal populations as passive recipients of state policies. They build relationships with the state through their everyday lives, local organizations and collective bargaining etc. This puts Guha's agency problem in a new context. In this way we understand that Subaltern political practices do not always take place within parliament, elections or formal organizations; They also develop in informal and negotiated spaces. The same is useful in contemporary digital society where marginalized

groups try to build their collective presence outside formal institutions through social media networks, community platforms and local digital spaces. Shahid Amin gave a new direction to Subaltern Studies through the lenses of memory, local history, and everyday actors. In 'Event, Metaphor, Memory', rather than interpreting the Chauri Chaura incident merely as an episode within the nationalist movement, he demonstrated the divergence between the memories held by local people and the official nationalist narrative (Amin, 1995). Here, local memory itself becomes a source of historical knowledge, yet memory and official records do not always align. While the official or national history of an event conveys a particular meaning, the local community may attribute a different significance to that same event based on their own experiences and memories. This distinction remains relevant in today's data driven society, as official databases and large scale datasets often fail to capture local experiences in the way the communities themselves understand them. Thus, Amin's inquiry into local knowledge can be revisited in the context of algorithmic representation.

David Hardiman's work played a pivotal role in expanding the scope of Subaltern Studies to encompass tribal communities, religious movements, the colonial economy, and popular resistance. He demonstrated that the socio-political world of subaltern groups cannot be understood solely through class relations; factors such as religious beliefs, community ties, local power dynamics, and the colonial economy also shape their experiences (Hardiman, 1987) [16]. This renders the concept of subalternity more social and multi-layered. It is no longer sufficient to view the subaltern merely as a 'class situated at the bottom'; caste, tribal status, locality, religious identity, and economic relations can all influence their position in distinct ways. This expansion proves useful for understanding the concept of 'algorithmic subalternity.' If contemporary AI organizes people within a society into data categories, it becomes essential to ask how much room exists within these categories for local experiences, languages, and social diversities. Thus, the insights offered by Guha (political agency), Chakrabarty (critique of knowledge), Chatterjee (political society), Amin (local memory), and Hardiman (subaltern social worlds) converge on a shared question: who records the diverse experiences present in society, in what languages and categories are they recorded, and ultimately, which forms of knowledge are deemed socially valid? This very question lays the conceptual groundwork for connecting Subaltern Studies with contemporary algorithmic society.

Digital Society and Subaltern Voice

The expansion of digital technology has placed the issue of the 'subaltern voice' in a new context. Access to the public sphere previously possible primarily through political organizations, media outlets, publishers, or other formal institutions is now achievable relatively directly via smartphones and social media. A rural woman can now share her experiences through video, a tribal community can document local issues on digital platforms, and an informal worker can personally document their work and living conditions. This shift has significantly altered the traditional framework of representation; it is no longer necessary for others alone to speak on behalf of the subaltern, as they can now make their own stories, experiences, or demands public. However, this gives rise to a significant sociological issue: the capacity to speak and the attainment of social visibility are not the same thing. While the voice of an individual or community may exist online, its widespread circulation, reach among audiences, and acquisition of public significance depend on various social and technical factors. Therefore, it would be inappropriate to assume that the digital public sphere is inherently an equal and democratic space; existing social divisions can re-emerge within these new mediums (Couldry, ***2010***; van Dijk, ***2020).***

In this context, the concept of the digital divide becomes significant. Digital inequality cannot be understood merely by looking at whether an individual possesses an internet connection or a smartphone. While access to technology is the first step, the subsequent questions concern the individual's proficiency in using that technology, their ability to comprehend available information, and ultimately, the extent to which they can leverage digital resources to serve their social, economic, or political interests. Therefore, digital inequality can be broadly viewed through the progression of access, digital literacy, and meaningful use. Even identical smartphones or internet connections do not guarantee equal digital opportunities. Two individuals may possess the same device, yet the benefits derived from it will differ due to variations in their education, language proficiency, income, social networks, and institutional knowledge. van Dijk (***2020)*** has emphasized the need to understand the digital divide as a comprehensive process wherein skills and patterns of use are just as critical as physical access. Similarly, research on digital inequalities indicates that existing social inequalities are often reproduced in new forms within the digital sphere rather than being eliminated (Robinson *et al*., ***2015).***

Pierre Bourdieu's theory of capital offers a useful theoretical bridge here. Bourdieu (***1986)*** explained through the concepts of economic, cultural, and social capital that access to resources does not automatically yield equal social outcomes; rather, the various forms of capital available to an individual can be converted into one another to generate social advantage. In today's digital society, this argument has been extended to the concept of 'digital capital.' An individual possessing economic capital can purchase superior devices and connectivity; cultural capital can influence their ability to comprehend and utilize digital information; and social capital can provide access to networks that offer digital opportunities and information. Consequently, digital competence and meaningful usage are not distributed equally across society (Calderón Gómez, ***2021)*** ***[6].*** Thus, understanding the interrelationships between economic, cultural, social, and digital capital reveals that the capacity to enter and exert influence within the digital public sphere is not uniform across different social groups. This becomes even more significant in the context of 'subaltern voices,' as the issue is no longer merely whether a marginalized individual can speak. The question also concerns whether they possess the necessary resources to sustain their message within the digital space, render it intelligible, disseminate it through networks, and reach the wider public. This point leads us to the role of algorithmic systems. When digital visibility becomes mediated by algorithms, the question of subalternity transcends mere access and evolves into an issue of data, classification, ranking, and algorithmic recognition.

Algorithmic Turn: The New Question of Subalternity

The nature of representation in digital society is gradually evolving. Previously, the task of presenting an individual or community in the public sphere was primarily performed by human agents such as journalists, writers, historians, political representatives, or the state. Now, platforms, databases, and algorithms have also begun to play a significant active role in this process. Search engines determine which information appears first, social media platforms decide what content to recommend to users, and automated systems assign individuals to specific categories. AI-based language systems also determine based on available data which languages, experiences, or forms of knowledge can be processed most readily. Consequently, representation is no longer merely a process of one person speaking on behalf of another; it is increasingly becoming a process involving an interplay between human actors, digital platforms, and algorithmic systems. Gillespie (***2014)*** has highlighted this role of platform algorithms, noting how algorithmic systems play a crucial part in organizing, filtering, and ranking public information. Similarly, Beer (***2017)*** has emphasized the need to view algorithms not merely as technical tools, but as components of contemporary social power. This implies the emergence of a new institutional layer situated between the presence of a voice and its visibility within the digital public sphere.

It is here that the concept of 'algorithmic subalternity' can be proposed in this paper. This term refers to a social condition wherein a marginalized group's visibility, voice, data representation, and access to algorithmically mediated opportunities are shaped not merely by their immediate social location, but also by the digital infrastructures within which their data is collected, classified, and processed. This concept does not presuppose that algorithms inherently render a group subaltern; rather, it examines how pre-existing social inequalities can assume new forms through data and computational systems. For instance, if a community's language is sparsely represented in digital datasets, an AI system may struggle to process it. If the experiences of a particular social group are not adequately captured in large datasets, patterns related to their social lives may appear less prominently in algorithmic knowledge. Similarly, automated classification systems might employ categories rooted in dominant social assumptions that fail to accurately reflect local social realities. Thus, the issue of algorithmic subalternity transcends mere technological bias; it concerns which social experiences gain the opportunity to become data and which are rendered computationally visible.

Linking this concept to the core concerns of Subaltern Studies reveals an interesting parallel. In colonial society, power did not operate solely through direct rule; the construction of knowledge, the classification of people, administrative records, and colonial categories were integral parts of the governing process. Colonial knowledge interpreted society through specific categories and governed populations using those very categories. Within this framework, Subaltern Studies raised the question: where does the historical consciousness and agency of those depicted as a specific category in official records actually manifest (Guha, ***1982***; Prakash, ***1994)***? While the context of contemporary algorithmic systems differs, a profound connection between classification and representation is evident here as well. The key difference is that today, classification often occurs through statistical models, datasets, and automated decision-making. Thus, a useful analytical comparison reveals a relationship between knowledge production, classification, representation, and exclusion in the context of colonial power, whereas contemporary algorithmic power highlights the interplay between data production, classification, ranking, recommendation, and visibility or invisibility. This parallel is not intended to equate the two systems; their historical contexts and mechanisms differ. The aim is simply to illustrate how the relationship between power and knowledge can take on new forms within a changing technological environment.

The significance of 'algorithmic subalternity' lies in the fact that it moves the concept of subalternity beyond the mere question of the capacity to speak. Today, an individual can articulate their views, record them, and publish them online; yet, the reach of their voice and their social recognition are not guaranteed. If platform rankings, recommendation systems, or automated moderation influence their visibility, a new technological gap emerges between speaking and being heard. This is precisely where Spivak's question regarding representation intersects with contemporary AI. Previously, the inquiry focused on who was speaking on behalf of the subaltern; now, it is equally essential to ask which system is transforming their voice into data, categorizing it, and determining which audience it reaches. In this sense, algorithmic subalternity should be understood not as a replacement for Subaltern Studies, but as a contemporary extension of its inquiries. It compels us to recognize that in the era of AI and algorithmic systems, power is constituted not merely by who can speak, but also by whose voice becomes computationally legible, visible, and socially actionable.

Can the Algorithm Hear?

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's famous question, "Can the Subaltern Speak?", situates the problem of subalternity within the context of voice and representation. The significance of this question lies in the fact that speaking in itself is not enough. An individual or community may possess the capacity to articulate their views, but ensuring that their voice is actually heard at social and institutional levels is a distinct process (Spivak, 1988) [21]. This distinction has become even more complex in digital society. While smartphones, social media, and online platforms have today opened up numerous avenues for expression, the computational systems underpinning digital communication have begun to determine which information is searchable, which content receives recommendations, which text is easily processed, and which voices reach the wider digital public. With this shift in mind, Spivak's question can be re-examined in a contemporary context: "Can the Algorithm Hear?" Here, 'hear' does not refer to the literal auditory perception of a voice. Rather, it asks: can an algorithmic system recognize, classify, and process a social experience, and subsequently represent it as meaningful information?

This question holds particular significance in a linguistically and socially diverse society like India. The development of artificial intelligence systems relies on large datasets, yet not all languages and social experiences are represented equally

within digital data. While vast digital corpora exist for high resource languages like English, the data available for many Indian languages particularly low-resource ones can be relatively limited. Joshi *et al*. (***2020)*** have highlighted the scarcity of resources and datasets for natural language processing in Indian languages. In such a scenario, even with formal access to technology, language itself can become a barrier. If an individual's language is less legible to a computational system, their digital presence despite technically existing may remain weak within the algorithmic environment. Here, the issue of subalternity transcends physical exclusion and becomes a question of computational recognition.

Similarly, experiences related to caste, tribe, rural life, and local knowledge cannot be understood solely based on the volume of data. It is essential to ask which experiences were recorded during data collection, under which categories they were classified, and through what labels their meaning was constructed. If the experiences of Dalit or Adivasi communities appear less frequently in large datasets, one cannot conclude that their social experiences are any less significant. Rather, the issue lies in the potential disconnect between social reality and data representation. This gap can be even more pronounced in the case of local and indigenous knowledge, as much of this knowledge exists within oral traditions, community practices, and local languages, and is not necessarily captured in the same form within formal digital databases. In this sense, algorithmic recognition is not merely a matter of technical accuracy; it is also a question of the relationship between knowledge and power.

An important sociological distinction emerges here. The ability of a voice to speak and the recognition of that voice by a technological system are two distinct processes. The former relates to agency, while the latter pertains to representation and technological legibility. For this reason, the question "Can the Algorithm Hear?" should not be viewed merely as a technological substitute for "Can the Subaltern Speak?" It transposes that same age-old question into a new framework. While Spivak raised the issue of voice within the context of representation, contemporary AI compels us to ask: when representation increasingly occurs through data and algorithms, which voices become computationally visible and intelligible, and which ones are once again relegated to the margins? This is the central problem of algorithmic subalternity.

Algorithmic Subalternity in the Context of Indian Society

Caste is one of the most crucial entry points for understanding 'algorithmic subalternity' in Indian society. In Indian social life, caste is not merely a cultural identity; it has traditionally been linked to education, occupation, residence, social networks, and access to resources. Therefore, when social data is transformed into algorithmic systems, it is difficult to assume that historical inequalities will remain outside the data. Recent Indian research has linked algorithmic bias to caste, religion, gender, and socio-economic inequalities, arguing that bias is not just a technical issue within the code but can also stem from broader social structures (David *et al*., ***2025***; Biju & Gayathri, ***2025).*** Here, the relationship between voice, data, algorithm, visibility, and power is significant. If caste-based experiences are not adequately recorded, or if indirect variables such as location, language, educational institution, or occupation begin to serve as proxies for such social identities, then algorithmic classification can reproduce existing social disparities in a new technological form. Thus, 'digital equality' cannot be achieved merely by ensuring that everyone can use the same platform; it also requires examining how the platform represents them.

The issue regarding Adivasis and other local communities is slightly different yet interconnected. Here, the problem involves not only social inequality but also linguistic and epistemic visibility. Most of India's regional languages and local knowledge traditions are not equally represented in digital resources. Recent NLP research has also emphasized the need to develop culturally grounded datasets for low-resource Indian languages; for instance, a study published in 2026 [4] attempted to create language specific and culturally grounded instruction data for 13 Indic languages (Chitale *et al*., 2026) [9]. The sociological significance of this lies in the fact that a small digital corpus for a language does not signify a lack of social importance; nevertheless, the quantity and quality of data within computational systems can influence that language's visibility. The same applies to indigenous and local knowledge. Knowledge embedded in community memory, oral traditions, or local practices is not necessarily recorded in the same form within formal databases. In this context, a new form of subalternity emerges as epistemic invisibility.

The digital divide facing rural populations is also part of this process. While the availability of smartphones and the internet is crucial for people in rural areas, meaningful digital participation also requires language skills, digital literacy, reliable connectivity, and the capacity to utilize technology effectively. Consequently, formal access to an AI system does not guarantee that a rural individual will be able to derive equal benefit from the resulting social or economic opportunities. This disparity is even more evident in the case of informal and gig workers. In India, platform-based work encompassing task allocation, ratings, incentives, and performance monitoring has become increasingly intertwined with algorithmic systems. Recent studies focused on India indicate that algorithmic management impacts workers' autonomy, identity, and agency; a 2025 study characterized this as 'flickering agency,' wherein workers are able to navigate the algorithm to their advantage for brief periods, yet this agency is not sustained (Singh & Mishra, 2025) [20]. Research from 2026 has also highlighted processes of identity regulation and continuous evaluation by algorithmic systems among Indian food-delivery workers (Bisht et al., 2026) [4]. Here, the issue of the 'subaltern voice' emerges within the labor context: the worker is present on the platform, generates data, and undergoes constant evaluation, yet their voice may play only a limited role in algorithmic decision making.

The same question regarding the level of online visibility arises for religious and other marginalized communities. While digital platforms have expanded the possibilities for self-representation, visibility is not determined solely by content creation. Factors such as the language used by a community or individual, network size, platform norms, recommendation systems, and moderation practices can influence how a community is perceived. Therefore, in the Indian context, rather than limiting the concept of

‘algorithmic subalternity’ to a specific caste, tribe, or occupational group, it is more useful to view it as a process involving the complex interplay between voice, data, algorithms, visibility, and power. The fundamental question is not merely whether technology empowers or excludes marginalized groups; rather, it is about the social conditions under which their voices are transformed into data, gain algorithmic recognition through that data, and ultimately translate into socially impactful visibility. This is precisely the point that connects the long-standing concerns of Subaltern Studies with contemporary Indian digital society.

Critical discourse

The concept of ‘algorithmic subalternity’ offers a useful lens for understanding power and representation in contemporary digital society, yet it requires careful application. A primary question that arises here is whether every marginalized or deprived group can be termed ‘subaltern.’ Subalternity is not merely a state of social deprivation; as conceptualized by Guha and later Spivak, it is tied to specific dynamics of power, representation, historical positioning, and agency. Therefore, poverty, digital exclusion, or technological inequality do not, in themselves, render a group subaltern. It is essential to consider the social context and power relations in conjunction with these factors.

The second question is related to the agency of the algorithm. Algorithm itself is not an independent social force. Corporations, governments, programmers, data scientists and institutional interests work behind it. Therefore, it may be misleading to understand algorithmic power as an autonomous technical power. Algorithms create social biases as well as reorganize them in the processes of data, classification, and ranking. In this sense, instead of considering the algorithm as an actor separate from society, it would be more appropriate to see it as a technical system situated within social institutions and power relations.

A third and perhaps more significant question is whether technology should be viewed solely as a means of domination. To do so would be incomplete, as digital platforms have provided marginalized groups with new opportunities to speak for themselves, assert their identities, build networks, and engage in collective mobilization. The ‘counter-publics’ that emerge on social media challenge mainstream media and institutional forms of representation. Here, the subaltern is not merely an object rendered visible or invisible by algorithms; rather, they actively struggle for visibility through digital practices. Therefore, algorithmic subalternity should not be understood merely as technological determinism. While technology can reproduce power, possibilities for contestation and agency also exist within it. It is precisely this dialectic that renders the concept more sociological.

Conclusion

It is no longer sufficient to view the intellectual journey of Subaltern Studies merely as a historical school of thought. Its significance lies in the fact that this tradition challenged the processes of history, knowledge, and representation wherein the presence of certain groups is recorded while the voices of others are consistently relegated to the margins. Instead of viewing the subaltern as a passive object of history, Ranajit Guha highlighted their political agency. Taking this inquiry further, Spivak demonstrated that speaking and achieving representation are not the same process. Chakrabarty questioned the Eurocentric frameworks of knowledge and modernity, while Chatterjee drew attention to ‘political society’ and popular political practices existing outside formal political institutions.

In today’s digital society, this issue reaches a new level. In the era of globalization, the internet, social media, and digital platforms have created new opportunities for subaltern groups regarding self-representation, mobilization, and the formation of counter-publics; however, digital visibility does not automatically translate into equal visibility. Here, data, platform architecture, and algorithms begin to influence which voices become visible, which content circulates, and which experiences become legible to computational systems.

It is at this juncture that artificial intelligence and algorithmic mediation pose a new theoretical question for Subaltern Studies. While power previously determined whose voice would be recorded in history, today’s technological systems can influence whose presence within data is recognized, classified, and granted public visibility. In this context, algorithmic subalternity can be viewed not as a definitive or universal form of subalternity, but rather as a proposed concept for understanding evolving socio-technical conditions. Thus, the debate on subaltern political agency initiated by Guha and traversing the discourses of Spivak (voice and representation), Chakrabarty (knowledge and Eurocentrism), and Chatterjee (political society) extends to the new avenues of expression found in digital society. Artificial Intelligence introduces a new layer of algorithmic mediation to this entire process, giving rise to novel forms of visibility and exclusion. It is this trajectory that gives birth to the concept of ‘algorithmic subalternity.’ The contemporary relevance of Subaltern Studies ultimately forces us to ask who speaks in society, whose voices are considered knowledge, whose voices reach the public sphere and whose voices are now made recognizable by technological systems. From here the old question changes into a new sociological question “Can the Subaltern Speak?” Moving beyond this, Sociology today must ask: “Can the Algorithm Hear the Subaltern?”

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