
Counter-Histories from the Margins: Dalit Testimonies and Adivasi Narratives of Resistance

Anjana S.

Research Scholar,
PG and Research Centre,
English NSS Hindu College, Changanassery
Email: anjanas0330@gmail.com

Dr. Sreeja S Nair

Assistant Professor (English) NSS Hindu College
Changnacherry
Email: sreejakrishnaprasad@gmail.com

Abstract

History has been a powerful tool for the dominant group to tell their story and marginalise the experiences of other groups. This research paper, instead, focuses on the voices at the margins, on the voices of Dalits and Adivasis, who have recorded their experiences of suffering, hunger, resistance, rebellion and resilience. It aims to explore other archives created through oral accounts, folk memory, personal stories and lived experiences that present alternative accounts to official and bureaucratic histories. A set of marginal stories place on the spotlight those lives and struggles that have often been left out of the mainstream history. Comparing the Dalit autobiographical text, *Karukku* of Bama and the collection of Adivasi advocacy essays; *Dust on the Road* by Mahasweta Devi, the paper examines the strategies and approaches used by marginalised communities to challenge the postcolonial systems of domination and the erasure of their history. Both texts are from different social, cultural and regional contexts, but there is a common theme of oppression, dignity, identity and survival. These narratives are told in different ways, however: While Mahasweta Devi's approach is activist documentation, collective suffering, and political resistance, Bama's is personal testimony, memory, and spiritual questioning. These texts offer an example of the ways in which personal and communal anguish is rendered in effective modes of resistance. They produce other histories that are stories of, victimhood, courage, self-assertion, survivance against caste, class, state and postcolonial hegemony.

Keywords: Resistance, counter-history, hegemony, narrative strategies, subaltern

The Voice of Creative Research

Vol. 8 & Issue 2 (April 2026)

Introduction

The post-independent history of India paints the picture of a united nation on a path of progress; an image modelled on the Gandhian and Nehruvian idealistic vision. History, then, has been an ally and faithful servant that has remembered and retold only the stories that restore the existing hierarchical power structure. However, the life of the marginalised groups like the Dalits and the Adivasis has been continuing to be a tragedy without anyone's voice being documented in history. Their narratives were either largely forgotten or actively removed and were instead viewed solely as "disturbances" of the passive reaction type, which were not to be taken seriously. The present paper, however, hopes to discuss such narratives from the margins – Bama's autobiographical work *Karukku* and Mahasweta Devi's work *Dust on the Road* as narratives of resistance, that would dismantle hegemonic histories by repurposing subaltern suffering into politicized survivance, revealing caste-colonial continuities that postcolonial nationalism obscures.

Theoretical Framework

Ranajit Guha's idea of subaltern studies pioneered the introspective reading of the elitist Indian history, bringing into light the groups that were "largely shunted to the margins, undocumented altogether," and "privilege the agency" of those groups sidelined by years of structured conditioning (Betik, 2020). This envisioned transition of the Dalits, the Adivasis, and other designated lower caste groups, from being mere objects and passive spectators to active participants in the history-making process, would reiterate their very existence and rewrite their narrative so far.

Spivak in her seminal work *Can the Subaltern Speak?* exemplifies the layered discrimination in the margins, especially that of colonized women. Her idea of 'epistemic violence,' wherein the Western knowledge systems overwrite subaltern realities, causes their narratives to be either co-opted, mistranslated, or made inaudible by colonial patriarchal and nationalist systems. Guha's *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* furthers this idea, bringing in the variables of power and wealth into the equation. As summarized by Betik in his essay, power and capital exist as independent variables within the Indian context and are deeply entrenched in the idea of "subjecthood," an idea that has been central to all discussions since then. (Betik, 2020). The voice of defiance from the margins against the existing discourse of history, reinforced in subaltern studies by Guha and Spivak, is further strengthened by emergent Dalit Studies, which have an exclusive focus on caste. These narratives are attempts by the subaltern or the indigenous at reinstating their own identity, falsifying the colonial and bourgeois historiography. Thus, texts like Bama's *Karukku* and Mahasweta Devi's *Dust on the Road* offer staggering disruption of the hegemonic narrative through vernacular testimonio and subaltern speech.

While Guha foregrounds autonomy, Vizenor extends it to active narrative sovereignty. Gerald Vizenor's concept of 'survivance' becomes poignant in the context of the counter-histories created by the marginalized. Survivance, as a notion, places the marginalized as creative perpetrators of ways that counterpose their stature mandated for them "by the settler-state through stereotypes, popular culture and national mythology" (Vizenor, 2008).

The Voice of Creative Research

Vol. 8 & Issue 2 (April 2026)

The theory of survivance thus considers their attempts to actively document their narratives as a conjunction between resistance and survival (Saggar, 2021). This fusion further offers a sovereign narrative strategy for indigenous people and marginalized groups against terminal clichés of victimhood. Accordingly, when subaltern studies provide the structural critique of hegemony, survivance adds narrative dynamism, both of which can be detected in the selected works of study.

Historical Contexts of Oppression

The post-independent period marked a pivotal turning point in the representation of Dalits and other marginalized groups in the Indian political and social scene. By the twentieth century, there was a rise in mass conversions into Christianity to escape caste humiliation, including Bama and her family. But little did they know that the hegemonic system of caste has permeated the semantic institution of the church as well, reinstating her new identity as a Dalit-Christian. Being a Dalit woman, Bama faced triple erasure on account of her gender, caste, and religion. Bama's autobiographical account of her days training to be a nun sheds light upon the degrading sub-human treatment she received at the same institution that she sought for its emancipatory, egalitarian values (Kumar, 2017). She recounts in detail the nuns' favoritism towards upper-caste girls, forcing menial tasks of cleaning the toilets to her and her companions, taunting her with names like "blackie," and even sexual exploitation by priests. Bama's accounts historicize Ambedkarite ideas of Christianity's incomplete rupture from Hinduism, which is exposed by Bama in her writings and interpreted as internal colonialism, where missionary paternalism and condescension reinforce humiliation over liberation.

An even more systemic and subtly brutal oppression could be traced in the case of the tribals or the Adivasis. Mahasweta Devi's work *Dust on the Road*, which includes real-life reports from eastern India between the 1970-90's period covers the merciless oppression of the Adivasis under the existing system. The existential crisis they endure when their land is brutally robbed from them in the name of "development projects by the landlords or the "Dikus" – outsiders or their people being trapped across generations as bonded labourers paying off an infinite loan, and their dignity questioned and their voices brutally silenced through violence by the police are only glimpses into the years of calculated and systemic abuse that the tribals have been subjected to (Mahasweta Devi, 1997).

Both textual contexts reveal hegemony's continuity, which is deeply embedded within the subtle yet relentless control over the lower castes in *Karukku*, and the hard and systematic primitivism in *Dust on the Road*. These shared grammars of oppression and dehumanization further fuel the testimonial resistance that becomes the bedrock of their respective narrative strategies.

Core Themes of Resistance

All their narratives have a common grammar of resistance, a resistance that refuses death by erasure and actively challenges hegemony, by the subalterns. The stories that are investigated represent the voices of the marginalized and historically discriminated communities who break the silence with their stories of suffering, not so much in order to

The Voice of Creative Research

Vol. 8 & Issue 2 (April 2026)

“victim monger,” but in an impulsive, creative outpouring, one that can never be censored or sanitized by the current grand narratives. These themes of reclaiming identity, of unity, of defiance and of a spiritual rejection of the dominant culture are the elements at the heart of resistance in these texts. As Bama discovers pride and confidence in her caste identity and an ideological and intellectual opposition to the oppressive trivialities of her caste's immediate society, Devi's collected vignettes and reportages mark and unsettle the mechanisms of trauma in the everyday social traditions and institutions and institutions – ones that were invisible and inconsequential until then.

Bama's testimonio *Karukku* carries within it the voices of a community that has long accepted its position at the lowest end of the hierarchy and has been conditioned to accept its lesser status and worth in comparison with the upper caste. However, in Bama's work, we witness the invalidation of this belief due to her access to education. Rather than blatantly casting away her past or familiar lifestyle, Bama chose to selectively abandon the mentality of servitude, humiliation, and silent endurance that had been etched into their DNA. For instance, when Bama was congratulated by her peers and teachers for doing well in the exams, rather than being complacent, she immediately sensed the double standards at play, which is evident in her response – “I thought, why? Is it impossible for a Harijan to study, or what?” (Bama et al. 19). Bama advocates reclamation of the pride in their existence, their skin colour, their customs and beliefs, flipping the existing hierarchy.

Devi's work shows similar self-reclamation in the instances of self-naming, wherein the tribals of West Bengal, once generalized, misrepresented, and prosecuted as “criminal tribes” under colonial rule and stigmatized ever since, now reclaim their original tribal names like “Lodha” or “Munda” with pride (Devi, 1997, p. xxxiv). In a similar instance, the ostracized people of low caste, especially women branded as witches and actively hunted for personal and political gains of a few (Devi, p.177), took to the road demanding to fight against the primitive custom of witch cults, and instead unite against the “oppression of the weak by the strong” (Devi, p.178). The self-reclamation was achieved not without its own share of bloodshed and sacrifices that have forever stained the pages of history.

Another striking theme explored in these texts is that of communal harmony that is either intuitively developed or intentionally created. Either way, the shift from individual rage to that of a communal ‘we’ is pivotal in their narrative of survivance. Bama recounts instances when communal gatherings on festive days helped dissolve inter-caste rivalries as well as gender divides. Songs and secrets were shared among the village folk. As seen in one such communal occasion when “[...] everyone took their share of meat, cooked and ate it, and then waited eagerly for the evening's cinema show,” a close-knit village scene materializes (Bama, p.58). Bama further rejects the ruthless caste divide that exists in the church community, choosing to stand by Dalit kinship instead.

Mahasweta Devi's *Dust on the Road* similarly fosters pan-Adivasi bonds. She archives instances of community solidarity in Adivasi groups uniting against exploitation, as seen in the 1981 Semra Bonded Labour Liberation Front, where landless tribals in Palamau marched en masse to the district office to demand freedom, men, women, and children chanting

The Voice of Creative Research

Vol. 8 & Issue 2 (April 2026)

together for the first time in local history (Devi, 1997, pp. 45-50). Similarly, in Purulia's Kheria Sabar Kalyan Samiti, tribals organize handicraft sales and protests, resisting Hindu fundamentalists' attempts to split Christian and non-Christian villagers to facilitate resource plunder, as seen in the introduction of Devi's book by Ghatak (Devi, 1997, p. xxxiv). We also find Lodha and Munda clans walk the dusty roads as one during Singbhum marches, rejecting police brutality and Naxalite divides to reclaim forests, proving unity as their strongest weapon against state-backed 'dikus' or outsiders (Devi, 1997, pp. 120-125).

Spiritual defiance, a theme that intricately connects the texts under consideration, is also explored to anchor their struggle against the selective apathy from the so-called upper caste. Bama recounts her falling out of the church's teachings after her harrowing experience at the convent. An appalling absence of devotion in their activities and behaviour, which Bama referred to as "play acting" (Bama, p.91), and their ingrained casteist tendencies, were for Bama the final straw that caused her to rethink her entire theological conditioning. From touching and biting the host at communion to see if it bleeds to openly calling out the nuns for their discriminatory behaviour, challenging the fear-mongering tactics built into the catechism classes was radical for a young Bama, thereby identifying Jesus as a Dalit ally and not an elite saviour.

This Christian subversion is mirrored in Devi's text in the reclamation of their sacred rituals and traditions despite attempts at state-backed erasure. This could be seen in Purulia Sabar, who proudly stage their ancestral songs and rituals during gatherings, channelizing the spirits of the "witch-hunted" women to bless communal resistance and curse the exploitative dikus (Devi, 1997, pp.80-85). Similarly, during the forest protests in Singbhum, the Munda tribals are found to invoke Sing Bonga – the supreme deity from Birsa Munda's Ulgulan legacy, through rituals and sacred thread ceremonies before marching against the police. Their deep connection with the forest becomes abundantly clear when they so declare their land to be the divine mother rather than a government commodity (Devi, 1997, pp. 115-120).

Intersectional Resistances

Resistance could also be found at various other junctures of Dalit and tribal life that contribute to the perverse levels of power and hegemony at work in the society. Both *Karukku* and *Dust on the Road* forge resistance at the volatile crossroads of gender, caste, ecology, and class, where overlapping oppressions intensify subaltern erasure yet catalyze potent survivance. Drawing upon Crenshaw's idea of intersectionality one could identify how women, especially those who bear the unbearable cross of untouchability or are underprivileged, "the imposition of one burden that interacts with preexisting vulnerabilities," would create "yet another dimension of disempowerment" (Crenshaw, p.1249). Women in Bama's *Karukku* and that of Devi's *Dust on the Road* are doubly oppressed – by the caste or tribe they belong to and the general patriarchy that demeans their very existence. Following along the theory of survivance, these recorded stories in itself; that of Dalit Cheri women actively resisting the church and upper caste atrocities, and the tribal women marching to reclaim their land, fighting against the sham of social forestry, proves the presence of Dalit and

The Voice of Creative Research

Vol. 8 & Issue 2 (April 2026)

Adivasi women not as fragmented victims but as embodied agents whose narratives expose the violences of upper caste patriarchy and developmental colonialism. These multiple resistances drive decolonial implications of which margins are the birthplace of transformative politics.

Conclusion

Other histories of resistance, introduced from the margins, refocus known history in a multi-faceted gaze of history, gender and ecology. A reality that is far removed from the familiar elite nationalist historiography is put in perspective by the perpetuation of the caste hierarchy and its terror in postcolonial India. Margins are truth-makers as Bama's records of ongoing caste humiliation in the Christian majority and Devi's archives of major land grabs in the name of secular development in the tribal areas do.

Works Cited

- Bama, et al. *Karukku*. New Delhi, India, Oxford University Press, 2016, p. 19, 91. Betik, B. (2020). *Subaltern Studies – Postcolonial Studies*. Scholar Blogs. <https://scholarblogs.emory.edu/postcolonialstudies/2020/02/17/subaltern-studies/>
- Bhagavat, H., & Arekar, M. (2018). On the Margins: Theorising Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?" *Ars Artium: An International Peer Reviewed-Cum-Refereed Research Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences*, 6, 38–44. <http://www.arsartium.org>
- Crenshaw, Kimberlé. "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color." *Stanford Law Review*, vol. 43, no. 6, 1991, pp. 1241–1299, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1229039>.
- Gerald Robert Vizenor. (2008). *Survivance: Narratives of native presence* (p. 1). University of Nebraska Press. <https://books.google.co.in/books>
- Mahasweta Devi. (1997). *Dust on the Road*. Seagull Books Pvt. Limited.
- Roy, P. (2024, January 28). *An Overview of the essay Can The Subaltern Speak?* Literary Sphere. https://www.literarysphere.com/2024/01/blog-post_28.html
- Saggar, S. A. (2021, April 15). *Survivance*. The Decolonial Dictionary. <https://decolonialdictionary.wordpress.com/2021/04/15/survivance/>