SUB-CULTURES AS SPACES OF SOCIAL CHANGE

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Cultures, in their most widely studied and appraised form, emerge from communities. Communities that may be imagined or derived, churned around shared social practices, shared values, and a shared understanding of identities and desires. In a manner of speaking, a culture often becomes the pre-cursor to ethical social systems. A norm is made when a culture proclaims itself to society, whatever the consequences of this proclamation.

Forms of artistic expression evolved differently and distinctly from each other, evolving as genres, schools of thought, stylistic movements and so on. The history of art hinges on the idea that art belonged to different epochs/eras. The recognition that art from different regions acquires distinct aesthetic identities is firmly rooted in the implicit pre-supposition that cultures express themselves in art and design in a way that no individual expression may claim to express. These distinct identities and processes form what theorists today may call aesthetic norms – whereby to inhabit or adopt a particular aesthetic implies being consciously implicated in its cultural history.

The emergence of cultural studies and cultural history as a discipline of study gained wide currency 1950's - 60's, influenced largely by the socialist interest in unpacking and examining the implicit and explicit forces that govern our social lives and selves. Meanwhile, discourses on cultures also started becoming synonymous with the idea of relativism. The idea that anything that is culturally specific implied that they were also interpreted through the frame of relativist ideas of truth and experience. This meant that cultures were pre-supposed to have a necessary component of non-translatability or non-transferability. This kind of relativism is challenged by philosopher Martha Nussbaum who says in her well-known essay In Defence of Universal Values that contrary to the buzz on relativism, cultures do thrive foundationally on some understanding of universal values.

These views point us to the in-between space that cultural studies as a discipline inhabits; the conceptual terrain of 'cultures' appears to be thriving on paradoxes and contradictions. Given these contours, it appears to be more convenient to imagine cultures to be a relativist subset of society as opposed to thinking of cultures having absolute or universal essences – however, it also appears given that human connection are founded on a certain capacity of shared understanding edging on certain universal ways of being, one may also begin to wonder how an expansive interdisciplinary analysis of culture-forming may help in the imagining progressive and emancipatory futures in the design of societies at large.

The idea of the counter-culture, for instance, presupposes that all cultures operate as forces. However, are counter-

The Appalachian hills recollected by bell hooks in her book Belonging: A Culture of Place (2009)
(Source: Wikimedia Commons)

cultures synonymous to sub-cultures? Here-in lies the tease of the argument. While counter-cultures, in their contemporary understanding, stage themselves on an equal footing with the cultures they aim to counter, sub-cultures are a very different kind of creature altogether and perhaps should be engaged from a very different standpoint. Sub-cultures recognize that there exists a certain absolutist tendency in culture forming. The very basis of what we call a 'Sub' culture is embedded in the idea that there is a hierarchy – a structure of evaluation where-in one may identify a strata superlative and a strata diminutive. Sub-cultures, could be understood as cultures of groups, communities or practices and rituals that are not the status quo – not the mainstream – not the center.

Sub-Cultures reside in-between. They live in between destinations, at bus stops and train stations, enroute migratory trails, in the waiting rooms, in cafeterias and the hostel dorms, on the footpaths, at traffic junctions, under bridges and flyovers. The sub-cultures of a city pop into existence when the status quo is getting too much – when the status quo needs to be broken, diverted, subtracted, subverted – like
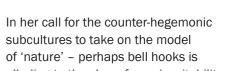
rivulets branching out from an ebbing river in full flood.

The question of urban sub-cultures is a peculiar one. To begin with, it is a paradox. The city in the history of social spatialization took center-stage of sociological discussions for a long time now. It would be no exaggeration, then, to say that urban spaces took the medal as favorite child in the family drama of social design. Cities upstaged all other kinds of spaces – the dessert, the hills, the farmlands, the coalmines, the flatlands, the forests. To take conscious stock of the 'subcultures' in cities is a step towards turning the monolithic image of the city into a porous idea.

bell hooks, in her book 'Belonging: a culture of place' makes a poignant argument when she says 'nature was the foundation of our counter hegemonic black sub-culture'. In that environment, she says, 'dominator culture [...] could not wield absolute power. For in that world, nature was more powerful.'

Speaking about her childhood experiences of living in the Appalachian hills of Kentucky, hooks says that this life amidst the 'hillbillies' or the

mountain folk was 'my first experience of a culture based on anarchy.' Here is a very powerful proposition made by bell hooks; the idea that nature functioned as a model for sub-cultures which were anarchic and counter-hegemonic.

The heart of the city and its fringes are thriving ground for sub-cultures to emerge. A classic case to look at would be the art forms that emerge from such cultures – the rituals of leisure and play, remembrance and grieving that emerge from their spaces. Old men playing carrom and chess by the pavement, small time thieves on the streets, orphans and trans-genders at traffic signals, women weaving flower buds or cutting vegetables in heaps inside sub-urban trains – these are some Indian vignettes that come to mind. They could all very well be hashtagged as 'Thug-life'. Thug Life, a very popular phrase, meme, concept in contemporary usage today in the digital sphere emerged as a sub-cultural cry against oppression when first used by American rapper Tupac Shakur, or 2Pac in the 90's. A call against oppression of any kind, the phrase in fact was also an acronym for The Hate you Give Little Infants Fucks Everybody. Thug life became a sub-cultural revolutionary moment for urban America in the

Screenshot from a typical dinner scene from the series Sopranos (1999)

Screenshot from a typical living room scene from the series Banegi Apni Baat (1993)

Thug Life digital insignia
Source: Shutterstock

light of mass incarceration of African American folk as criminals and thugs at the turn of the 20th century. In rebellion, communities started reclaiming the phrase in way that it honored their journeys of struggle and oppression.

Thug-life transformed an identity thrust upon a community into a movement that signaled a way of life. Today, thug-life memes are pervasive all over the internet. A similar rise of rap music in the Indian urban consciousness, can also be seen as a manifestation of the rage and the euphoria that resides in the sub-spaces of our societies. The rap of Sumeet Samos which embodies and advocates for a situated lived experience of caste-based oppression particularly outside of the urban imagination, for instance, is very different in aesthetic from the rap of Baba Sehgal or Apache Indian, where their form is at most a stylistic adaptation but has nothing to do with

The Sub-Urb and its Stories
In the post-liberalization India of the 90's much like the post-Fordist America of the 60's, the 'sub-urban' atmosphere accrued a sense of ennui – a lackadaisical lackluster mood that functioned as the by-product of a hyper-productive city center or the Central Business Districts. Sub-urban lethargy synonymized a culture that was domesticated, leisurely and often functioning in implicit structures of domination and subjugation. The Sub-urban culture became synonymous with complacency, luxury, lives of excess and the privilege of not needing ambition or aspiration. The proverbial sub-urban lack of aspiration in any other direction except towards being upwardly mobile, economically finds apt metaphors in the slow transition from contents on

the artist's cultural and structural conditions of emergence.

billboards in our cities. For instance, as one travels from the Fort area in Mumbai all the way through the sub-urbs upto Thane, billboard hoardings selling cinema, stars, magic, dreams, entertainment slowly and unanimously start selling real estate, homes on EMI's and gated apartments.

Through the 80's and 90's, popular culture started tapping into the suburb as the quintessential setting for long-running family dramas. Indian television series like Banegi Apni Baat (1993), Nukkad (1986), Kacchi Dhoop (1987), Hum Log (1984) all tapped into narratives from this unique domestic culture of the aspiring middle class in Indian cities between urban and sub-urban identities. Meanwhile in America, The Sopranos lived in New Jersey, the Gilmore Girls lived in Hartford, both well-known sub-urban residential neighbourhoods, gentrified and marked 'safe'.

A marked shift took place across the world in these past two decades after the 90s. As conservative governments took over the majority of the world, the complacent sub-urb also turned into a cauldron of conservative ways of life. Caste lines deepened, class lines deepened and the sub-urb often turned into an oozing superfluous mood of populism, harbouring undercurrents of banal violence and injustice.

It is in this context that a new sense of 'sub-culture' has begun to emerge in the heart of cities – one that seeks to critique and voice the obvious. Cultures that are interested in imagining new forms of governance and new forms of infrastructure – tacit and implicit.

The stories of new intermediate layers of self-governance are the beginning for sub-cultural transformation. The Namma Yaatri App is an interesting example in Bangalore in this regard – tapping into the corporate to help the drivers of Bengaluru's auto rickshaws directly ; a story of the auto-rikshaw drivers of Bangalore who got together and formed their own union, Bengaluru's Auto Rickshaw Drivers' Union (ARDU) and made the city pay them directly instead of being bonded to the multinational corporate schemes of Uber and Ola. The sudden surge of independent bookshops, for instance, is yet another sharp-edged sub-culture emerging in cities like Bangalore and Chennai – harboring books and ways of thinking newly as opposed to the self-help gurus and myth mongers who have colonized the shelves of all the popular bookshop fronts.

In the 70's and the 60's, the Pune-Bombay circles of literature saw a strong rise of a peculiarly fierce sub-culture in its Little magazine movement. Anjali Nerlekar in her book Bombay Modern: Arun Kolatkar and Bilingual Literary Culture (2016) recalls a time where print embodied radically new forms of expression at the margins and through the cracks of the mass-mainstream media. Little magazine literature renewed itself by re-imagining new material legacies for itself. The wide-spread emergence of Artist Run Initiatives (ARI's) thriving across the globe are the result of a strong urban sub-culture that aim at re-instating the power of art economy in the hands of the artists.

Spaces of Social Change: Learning from Nature as a Model
As for bell hooks and her call for looking at nature for answers - how may we understand nature as a possible model for counter-dominant movements? The age-old positivist discourse of culture as opposed and in tension with nature, has always posited that the natural must be in some form or the other measured, categorized, analysed and mapped into the discourses that constitute culture.

Post-colonial, post-modern and decolonial thinkers propose a complete dismantling of this forceful distinction in the history of ideas of the world. Perhaps an acknowledgement of nature as a foundation of certain metaphysical ways for the world would be a good place to begin with. For no

dominant culture could ever empirically give you enough tools to make you realise, that the limits of our knowledge inform the limits of our growth. To be the majority, to be dominant is a cage of its own knowing. Only the minor, only the striving know they need to be free of their condition. True growth, true change may happen from a place that is outside of reason and understanding, causal structures and known facts and perhaps the impulse to grow, comes from a desire to know and be more.

In her call for the counter-hegemonic subcultures to take on the model of 'nature' – perhaps bell hooks is alluding to the sheer force, inevitability and unpredictability that marks all things natural. The 'natural' is committed so forcefully to growth that it is able to find any means and ways possible to grow. Trust a tree to grow through a barbed wire or crack open a concrete wall.

Perhaps if our urban sub-cultures today begin emulating nature in their own ways, they may take on that very vital role in communities of becoming conscience-keepers; always attempting to disperse the invisible imbalances of flow or power or resources in a manner that the system does not fossilize or crash. Thriving as ecologies of excess, urban subcultures symbolize all those social processes without which cultures would merely accumulate, ossify and eventually land in museums. Sub-cultures are therefore, our vital spaces for social change.

Srajana Kaikini (PhD) is a philosopher, artist and writer. Her book of poems The Night the Writing Fell Silent in response to works by Jogen Chowdhury (long listed for the Oxford Art Book Prize) was released in 2023. She writes regularly on topics in metaphysics, aesthetics and culture. She teaches philosophy and aesthetics at SIAS, Krea University and is based between Bangalore, Mumbai and Chennai.