The topical post-colonial episteme within the larger ambit of deconstructive theoretical mindset has facilitated the redefining and thereby reconstituting the notion of the Indian nation state. The Subaltern mode of narration can be treated as a reinstative mode where muted channels of history are voiced by facilitating the foregrounding of the hitherto unheard and the subordinated. Gaps in the narrative edifice that goes by the name of mainstream History of both the nationalist and the colonial variety are filled in by the mode of countering it by a meticulous interface of oral and archival sources. This has been primarily facilitated by the emergence of vigorous sub-nationalistic and ethnic assertive discourses. These discourses are increasingly seeking to historically relocate and redefine themselves in the aftermath of the post-independent euphoric and ironically mimetic discourse of nation building and nationalistic consolidation in the model of the western nation state from whose yoke it had perceivably emerged. The contemporary subaltern mantra is to strive against the essentialist grain that turns “difference of space...” to “Sameness of time, turning territory into tradition, turning the people into one” in order to displace the irredeemable plural modern space (Bhabha 2000: 149) of the modern western nations and their post independent Asian and African mimetic entities.
Complicit in the nationalistic consolidative discourse is the practice of retrospective and effacing history writing that seeks to provide a hinterland to contentions that turned ‘territory into traditions’ and feuding contentions into markers of cultural homogeneity. Such history writing also suffers from the limits of experience, the inability to narrate those that are on the fringes of experiential familiarity. Thus, one has a proliferation of ‘wish away the fringes’ histories celebrating nationalistic and patriotic strivings from a mainland/centrist/mainstream perspective in propping up pillars that would act as the foundational basis of a newly defined nation. However, the subaltern space of nationalism is different from the appropriative and coercive brand of nationalism, and the subaltern space is constantly interrogating such nationalistic narratives.

Hardiman enters his narrative premises with the declaration of being a facilitator rather than being a spokesperson; he does not “…advance any claim to speak for them, this they do for themselves… would like it to be of some value for people who have shown so much resilience in the face of continuing oppression” (viii). This can be construed as a response to Spivak’s contention that the subaltern does not know or express itself in any form of narrativised representations (Spivak1988: 285). He makes it clear that he does not subscribe to Spivak’s argument that the subaltern historian’s efforts to understand the subaltern consciousness would be impeded by the historian’s subjective beliefs and agendas that would result in the binaries of the ‘authorial self’ and the ‘subaltern other’. Rejecting such ‘extreme dichotomies’, Hardiman advocates the need to “…emphasize the fact that Subaltern Studies focuses on the relationship between elite and subaltern as a historical process… the bonds between the dominant and subordinate are always strong, and often mirror each other… Their relationship is being ever modified through an ongoing process of mutual dialogue” (20-21). Instead his avowed method is what Spivak calls ‘moral sympathy and empathy’ in trying to develop “…a rapport with present day descendents of the subjects of…” his histories (21). This in turn gives rise to the fear that Hardiman might fall prey to the syndrome of ‘secondary ethnocentrism’ that folklorists and anthropologists are often prone to. He however reassures the reader otherwise:

In focusing on specific communities, I have tried always to present a rounded, sympathetic, but – but if necessary – critical understanding of their history. It does them no service, in my opinion, if we inflate their virtues and ignore their blemishes. This is often done with good intention as a means to combat a prevailing derogation of the group in question, but creates an unrealistic positive identity and has to be seen as a form of myth-making rather than historical investigation. As a corollary, such writing tends
to be wholly negative about those who dominate the community in question. Although this may be understandable, it does not in my opinion justify the creation of histories that ignore either the faults of the powerless or the possibility of virtue among the powerful (02).

Hardiman’s field is Western India; Gujrat, Rajasthan and Maharastra to be precise. Consisting of nine essays written over the last twenty years, they can be approached broadly through two appreciative categories. The first group consisting of six essays can be termed as an exploration of fringe movements (in the sense of their historical representation or rather non-representation) contextualised against the larger canvas of colonial rule and the subsequent pre-Independence nationalistic struggle. A rather varied group, they wonderfully bring to fore the stakes that different communities had in the nationalistic struggle, and how it is not a monolithic and homogenous edifice that many would like us to believe with the occasional radical and violent aberrations. The main motifs informing this group of essays are usury and the tribals’ struggle against it, the exploitative economics and politics involved with the traditional custom of drinking and its subsequent mutation into a socially undesirable and legally unacceptable practice and community specific manifestations of the struggle against the colonisers grounded against localised issues and the attempt to accommodate such struggles within the larger nationalistic canvas. The second group is Hardiman’s study of the Environmental histories in western India and the indigenous knowledge system that went into a balanced tapping of natural resources. This group is particularly relevant with topical interest on traditional knowledge systems and the need to harness it in order to save the eco-system from the exploitative and degrading mechanism of macro-level exploitation of natural resources.

The anthology opens with the essay titled ‘A Forgotten Massacre: Motilal Tejawat and his Movement amongst the Bhils 1921-2.’ This is an interesting essay in many respects. Hardiman’s methodology of taking archival records back to the people to fill in the missing/expunged parts is best exemplified here. This is also an essay that clearly delineates the various machination at play in India’s nationalistic struggle, the fact that one could join the Indian National Congress’ led struggle spearheaded by Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi in Congress’ terms; all and sundry were not welcome:

Motilal Tejawat was an admirer of Gandhi, and he believed that his movement was a part of the non-cooperation movement being waged at that time by Gandhi. He was soon disabused of this by Gandhi, who on the one hand refused to support a struggle against other Indians—namely landlords
and maharajas – and on the other hand condemned the Bhils for carrying bows and arrows and other weapons. When the British eventually sent troops to crush the movement in a murderous manner in early 1922, the Congress leadership remained largely silent. The movement was as a result marginalized in nationalistic historiography. Whereas the massacre at Amritsar in 1919 became a major event in this history, the other massacre in a remote hill tract was forgotten (07-08).

This is also an essay that records the contribution of the adivasis in the National struggle.

Hardiman’s interest in this long lost historical fact was aroused as a result of Congress-Bharatiya Janata Party power politics, and the parties’ attempt to woo tribal voters in the 1990s. This resulted in the attempted retrieval of the ‘forgotten massacre’ from the historiographical vaults, ‘a crude and manipulative incorporation of the Bhils within the History of the nation’ (52). The event caught Hardiman’s eye when India Today published an article, ‘The Other Jallianwala’ in September 1997 where it was reported that almost 1200 Bhils were shot dead under the order of a British officer, H.G. Sutton, when they had assembled at Dadhav bordering Rajasthan and Gujrat under the leadership of Motilal Tejawat, “a renowned Rajasthani freedom fighter” (29). What follows is a meticulous interface of oral and archival sources to reinscribe the bloodied and forgotten pages of history.

The main grievances informing Motilal Tejawat’s movement were the oppressive and inhuman exploitative practices, both economic and human, of the Rajput thakors towards the Bhils. Tejawat himself became a victim of their brutality, and launched an anti-thakor movement in 1921 that went by the name of eki movement. The word eki meant unity. Though the main thrust of the movement was the refusal to pay taxes and other charges levied by the thakors, Tejawat also linked up with the reformist Bhagat movement that sought to persuade the Bhils to give up drinking, stealing, killing animals and to start taking daily baths and to adopt an agrarian lifestyle. Though Hardiman’s focal point was Tejawat’s movement, in an almost parallel narrative, he also explores the internal politics and compulsions at work within the Congress and the sphere of influence that encompassed Gandhi. Various strands of Hardiman’s narrative uncovered through meticulous archival research, personal interviews and taping of oral sources cohere into a comprehensive narrative that shows that much of what is part of the political and historical machination in the country today is often an unobtrusive legacy from the past that continues with varied topical mutations. If the suppression of the massacre was an act of political expediency in the 1920s, the attempt to retrieve it from the
forgotten annals of history is also an act of political expediency of the 1990s. Subaltern intervention like that of Hardiman’s can to a large extent put the record straight and clear up much of the muck. It can also reinstate the deserved historical space to peripheral communities like the Bhils.

Another essay organised apparently around the leadership qualities and organisational skill of an individual is the third essay of the compilation, ‘Community, Patriarchy, Honour: Raghu Bhangare’s Revolt’. Hardiman’s interest in usury and its evolution as an exploitative economic practice from the medieval times to the postcolonial times uncovered “a long and rather exceptional history of social banditry against Baniya usurers within the Mahadev Koli community of the ghat region to the north-east of Bombay city” (10). As such, the title of the essay is a misnomer in the sense that more than the study of an individual’s revolt, it is an exposition of the community in which the individual is located. The author’s research revealed that in popular legends of the community, banditry was a eulogised act of resistance not only against usurers, but also against all semblances of external structures of authorities like policemen or colonial officers. The essay starts with a meticulous description of the archival research. Of particular interest are Hardiman’s comments on the taping of oral sources as a legitimate mode of narrating history. Responding to the arguments put forward by an American researcher on social banditry in Maharashtra, Frederick Bruce Johnson, that written records “are more valid than oral remembrances of events that occurred three, four, even five generations ago” (100), Hardiman problematises the word ‘valid’ by his assertion that “all sources, whether written or oral, are constructed by processing a mass of information for certain distinct ideological purposes”:

Colonial officials at each level of the hierarchy had their own particular agendas, and however rich their writings may have been as historical sources, most information was inevitably omitted so as to favour a particular reading of the event. Both have to be used in an inevitably selective as well as critical manner by later historians in a way which reflects their own agendas (100).

The validity of oral sources lies in the fact that they provide alternate ways to understand the documented and not in the sense that they provide an “accurate history” in themselves. In the subaltern exercise, oral sources “allow the historian to engage with the subaltern classes’ own understanding of their history” (100) and thereby their sense of situatedness in the temporal-spatial dimensions. A truly subaltern exercise consists of a scrupulous interface of the dual sources of the documented and oral sources that is a true reflection of the contradictions and the pluralities involved with an engagement with history and people. As Paul Hamilton, drawing on Foucault, points out, “History must be
contradictory to be adequate to the discursive effects characterizing an epoch. It is therefore neither systematic nor totalizing. Only that which keeps the episteme in place is intelligible to history. It records relations of power, not relations of meaning” (Hamilton 1996: 138). It is precisely this ‘relations of power’ that informs Hardiman’s delineation of the tradition of insurrection amongst the Kolis and how it has influenced the evolution of the word ‘bund’, which throws reflection on its varying significance at various points of time. From the pre-nineteenth century connotation of revolt against the state, the term evolved in the nineteenth century to encompass peasant rebellions against oppression to its present mutation of a person “who has put himself outside the law to fight the social oppressors of his community” (102). The ‘Bandkari’ is thus different from the dacoits of the ‘professional underworld’. Intrinsic to the varying significance is a complex interplay of power, benefit and dissent with agenda and alliances of convenience. An important mode of pacification of the various Koli insurrections during the Maratha period was the bestowal of policing rights over designated territories. The Kolis were a community not only at odds across the community, but also within. This according to Hardiman “was because their desire for independence was often balanced against their need for recognition by the state”:

Their local authority was based not only on their position in Koli society, but also their official posts they held from the Peshwas. A revolt represented a fracture of temporary nature, the aim being to exert sufficient pressure to force the state to settle for better terms. The state could counter this by offering pre-requisites to other nayaks on condition that they help suppress the revolt. A rebel could in turn counter this by allying with rival contenders for power at the centre... the struggle could go several ways... Conflicts thus gave rise to a complex range of loyalties (105).

This complex interplay of benefit and revolt continued well into the British period. After the deposition of the Peshwas in 1818, the Koli Nayaks were appointed as local police chiefs. But those left out or falling out of favours launched ‘bands’ as pressure tactics to coerce out titles and positions from the British. Rama Bhangare, Raghu Bhangare’s father, who fell out of favour of the British, was a dreaded bandkari till his capture and transportation for life. However, an important additional feature of these rebellions was the attack on Baniya usurers, which was absent in the earlier struggles for titles and positions from the state. Hardiman goes for a detailed analysis of the violence directed against the usurers and finds that a gradual decline in the state assistance to agriculture since the early nineteenth century and the subsequent total neglect by the British that ran contradictory to their refusal to lower land taxes were important reasons for this. The situation was
compounded with the collapse of agrarian prices in 1821. This forced the peasants into an increasing debt trap as they borrowed money to meet the increasing tax demands and the usurers appropriated their agricultural products, which earned them high profits in the market. Thus usury became a highly attractive profession and within a decade of British rule, the Koli peasants were totally impoverished. The peasant response was to become bandkaris, not for position or title, but for money to pay off debts; and when the chance afforded, they attacked the usurers directly and burnt their books to wipe out the records of their debt. Raghu Bhangare’s revolt had the violence against usury as a dominant feature with Marwari and Gujarati usurers being the prime target. This had the tacit support of the suffering masses that often provided them the logistics to carry on their raids. Raghu Bhangare’s rebellion started as a vendetta against affront to person and familial dignity and a campaign of pressure to harass the British in reinstating the family’s lost position of policing rights. Hardiman finds a combination of the old and new in Raghu Bhangare’s revolt in the sense that “rebels leaders whose agendas were often somewhat different to those of the mass of peasants would agree to act, as the later demanded so as to maintain the support base which was crucial if they were to sustain their revolt” (115). Raghu Bhangare’s uprising went on to assume a wider societal and political perspective in the sense that he tried to link it up with a perceived uprising against the British and the subsequent formation of a Maratha Government. Looting of the moneyed became a legitimate mode of funding the nationalist uprising. Raghu went on a looting spree as well as violence against semblances of British authorities. Policemen were killed and parallel taxes were levied with the decree not to pay taxes to the British.

By the time Raghu Bhangare was caught and hanged, he had caught the imagination of the people. What elevated his insurrection to realm of enduring folklore were the popular dimensions of his uprising. He assumed the role of a spokesperson for the peasants against the usurers and their exploitative legal structure. And, he became an agent of popular justice by physically humiliating the usurers by publicly thrashing or cutting off the tips of the nose, a permanent badge of dishonour, and a traditional Maharstrian mode of punishment.

Hardiman also accommodates the issue of gender in this essay as a response to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s contention that women were a silenced lot in the subalternt studies. In the politics of honour and vendetta in a feudal-patriarchal community structure, the popular remnants of celebratory lores like legends celebrates women’s role as mother and wife in a supporting cast, but does not accommodate the “...the profound suffering for the women of the community, who—left isolated at such times—became the target for reprisals by police and other enemies of their erstwhile male ‘protectors’. They faced starvation, imprisonment, rape, and
even death in ‘honour’ reprisals” (11). Hardiman, through his subaltern mode of history writing explores the role of gender in the construct of community honour and dignity and tries to give voice to the doubly subalterns, the women.

Peter Brooker, writing of the subaltern mode, comments that it is an “attempt to assemble a counter-history of popular forms of action and culture to contest both colonial and nationalists’ account” (Brooker2003: 239). However, I would like to read two of Hardiman’s subaltern histories as counter narratives to each other. The second essay ‘Adivasi Assertion in South Gujrat: The Devi Movement of 1922-3” and the fifth essay “From Custom to Crime: The Politics of Drinking in Colonial South Gujrat” Central to the Devi movement being explored in the first essay was the movement against “liquor, meat and fish” supported by the moralistic and reformist order on both the colonial and nationalistic sides and resistance to the elite and exploitative Parsi liquor barons, while the second essay, which “flowed” from Hardiman’s “work on the Devi movement” (08), depicted the evolution of drinking from a traditional and customary practice amongst the subalterns to a regulated and highly taxed commodity, and the unsuccessful campaign by a considerate group of colonial officers to relax liquor laws and its continuous persistence through illegal practices like moonshining to the contemporary times. Both the essays study the intricate relationship of real economics, reformist tendencies and nationalist ambition in the politics played on drinking. Anti – Liquor movements were not only an attempt to reform the adivasis and initiate them into a rightful way of life, but also aimed at hitting at the resource base of the colonial government and dismantle the strong feudal and economic structure of the liquor barons. The Devi movement was a major movement against the colonial taxation policy as well as “on the Parsi liquor and toddy dealers. Parsis were subject to rigorous social boycott which destroyed their prestige... the adivasis in south Gujrat found their political voice; never again were they to form the passive object of colonial policy. During the course of the movement, an influential element among them forged an alliance with the middle-class Gandhian nationalists of Gujrat...” (224). However, Hardiman reveals that “contrary to expectations of the Congressmen and other high caste nationalists, prohibition did not in south Gujrat bring about a significant decline” (231) in the consumption of liquor and a social divide between the ‘varjelas’ (those who gave up drinking) and ‘sarjelas’ (those who went back to drink) was opening up with disturbing portends. In a movement for cultural revivalism, the adivasis opposed abstinence and championed a going back to the ways of the forefathers. Hardiman reveals that even during the Devi movement “there were many peasants who did not accept the need to change their habits” (231). Thus the two essays are examples of how historical narratives set against each other liberates history from totalising and homogenising nodes and rather set in motion nodes of diversifying
significance. Foucault says, “History has no meaning though it is not to say that it is absurd or incoherent. On the contrary, it is intelligible and should be susceptible of analysis down to smallest detail – but this is in accordance with the intelligibility of struggles, of strategies and tactics” (Foucault1980: 115). The subaltern strategy of counter narratives is a vindication of this and a deliverance from the charge of treating the subalterns as an essentialist category of people that does not take into account the “irretrievably heterogeneous” nature of the colonized subaltern (Spivak1988: 285). Hardiman himself makes this clear when he says that his essays

Examine a rich tapestry of classes, professions, castes, and communities – from colonial officials, to Indian princes, landlords, merchants, usurers, liquor dealers, forest contractors, middle-class nationalists, rich peasants, adivasis, the poor and the landless. Their fortunes can be seen to both intertwine and conflict in highly complex ways... All of this, I believe, provides a counter to a frequently-heard criticism of Subaltern Studies, namely that in focusing on conflict between supposedly undifferentiated elites and subalterns it ignores the complex and multifaceted intertwining of social and productive layers that are so strong a feature of Indian society (09).

The last three essays of the anthology turn to the issues of environment and the history of conservation and depletion of forest reserves, traditional irrigation practices and politics of power involved with it and the debilitating effect of colonial rule on them. In the seventh essay, ‘Small Dam Systems of the Sahyadris’, the author examines the “history of an extensive system of small scale irrigation works in the valleys of the Sahyadri mountain range of western India” (15). Starting of with a short historical sketch of small dam system in India and a review of scholarship available on it, Hardiman moves on to a specific analysis of the documented sources available on the small dam system in the valley of the Mosam river in the Baglan region of the Sahyadris, leaving the taping of oral tradition and archeological evidence for a future project. In a careful study, he airs his doubt about colonial documents crediting the construction of dam systems to the various rulers at different times and rather finds it more credible to think that it was the peasants themselves who constructed and maintained the dam systems with the occasional assistance from the rulers. As the grants dried up during the British rule, the dam system also went into a decline. A variety of reasons like civil war during the Maratha reign, famine, high taxes on irrigated lands, deforestation, colonial apathy towards the decentralised small dam systems in favour for centralised big dams over which strict state control could be maintained led to the final demise of a mode of irrigation that was truly people and environment friendly. Hardiman concludes with the hope

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that the state would initiate steps to revive this mode of environment friendly irrigation system inspite of obvious technical and social problems existing.

In the next essay, "Well Irrigation in Gujrat: Systems of Use, Hierarchies of Control", the gradual decline and increasing non-viability of a very widespread and traditional mode of irrigation in Gujrat is examined. One of the biggest environmental crises in Gujrat is the drying up of the wells. This is primarily due to the application of latest boring and pumping technology to meet the growing demand for water, which has resulted in the ground water table receding and traditional wells going dry. As a result, water has become a highly profitable commodity with only the affluent farmers being able to make investments in deep wells, the water from which they sell to those who cannot afford such wells. This has busted the myth of water as a free market commodity:

...water in Gujrat is in fact regulated very strongly by considerations of caste and community, with the dominant caste peasants, who tend to own more productive wells, favouring members of their own caste ...general crisis of water availability, ...is not one that affects well-off farmers who can afford to bore deep tubewells ...As in the past, a dominant group exerts power in rural society ...formerly an elite ruled through a combination of brute force and cultural hegemony, the new and much broader class of prosperous farmer maintains its power through a mix of financial power and dominant caste solidarity (16).

In the final essay, 'Farming in the Forest: The Dangs 1830 – 1992', Hardiman studies the dispossession of the Adivasis from their forest lands during the colonial period with the establishment of designated forest reserves and sanctuaries, their attempt at reclaiming the forests and the larger environmental and socio-economic issues involved with the utilization of forest resources by the adivasis in the present time. It is also an important analysis of colonial and postcolonial (which he finds more exploitative and appropriative) forest policies in the country. The immediate impetus that went into the essay was the movement in 1990 wherein some adivasis reclaimed areas of reserved forest that they claimed as traditional farming grounds and of which the British dispossessed them in the nineteenth century. He also problematises the notion of the eco friendly and harmonious life style of early forest dwellers, and finds that there was no awareness as to the potential for depletion of vast forest tracts amongst the adivasis. He finds it “difficult to argue that forest dwellers such as the Dangis were in any natural conservators of their environment. For the people of the Dangs the forest was eternal; there was no consciousness that human beings could destroy this massive expanse of
vegetation” (367). He traces the forest management policies since the British period till the contemporary times, and the political and social upheaval they caused. He ends his study by a thorough examination of the forest labour co-operative movement and the political issues that they gave rise to and got involved in. By the 1970’s the Dangs got organised against the exploitative policies of corrupt forest officials and politicians and under the guidance of an Australian social worker, Barry Underwood, the Gram Vikas Mandali was formed, with direct involvement of the educated adivasis, which was in sharp contrast to the earlier Gandhian co-operatives’ autocratic style of functioning. Later, other organisations came up, both under the patronage of benevolent officials and social workers. The involvement of a naxalite activist provoked a strong government response in 1991 and 1992 aimed at asserting the authority of the forest department. The mistrust and suspicion that had built up through the years is still a palpable presence that needs imaginative and humane mitigation. Sadly, this is nowhere in evidence.

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