Can the Subaltern Speak at Mahua Dabar?
Silence, Erasure, and the Limits of the Colonial Archive in British India, 1857–1871

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Abstract

This paper applies Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's foundational essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988) to the documentary archive surrounding the massacre of British officers at Mahua Dabar, Gorakhpur district, in June 1857, and the subsequent British punitive destruction of the village. Drawing on the primary source compilation assembled by David Bradbury (Missed History, 2020) which incorporates colonial administrative correspondence, newspaper accounts, military reports, and gazetteer entries from 1857 to 1907 - the paper argues that the Muslim weavers and small traders of Mahua Dabar are doubly silenced: first by the massacre and the burning of their village, and then, more pervasively, by the exclusively British documentary record which renders them as a collectivity defined solely by the act attributed to them. The paper further extends Spivak's analysis to examine how even those indigenous figures who actively aided British survival -the unnamed Brahmin who sheltered Sergeant Busher, the village jemadar who guided the fugitives across the Gogra, the loyal sepoy Teg Ali Khan - are rendered as functionaries serving British narrative rather than as subjects possessed of interiority, motivation, or independent social existence. The paper also addresses the second, cartographic dimension of silencing: the systematic omission of the name 'Mahua Dabar' from Survey of India maps after 1857, a bureaucratic erasure which continued to distort census mapping into the twenty-first century. Finally, the paper evaluates the limits of twenty-first century counter-memory attempts - journalistic, academic, and communal - arguing that these efforts, while recovering the existence of subaltern suffering, are unable to restore subaltern voice and frequently replace colonial narrative with a nationalist or communalist counter-narrative that reproduces the same fundamental epistemological problem.

Keywords: *subaltern studies; Gayatri Spivak; 1857 Rebellion; colonial archive; Mahua Dabar; postcolonial silence; cartographic erasure; Gorakhpur; indigenous intermediaries; epistemic violence*

1. Introduction: The Archive as the Final Weapon

In June 1857, a group of British officers fleeing the mutiny at Faizabad were killed by the inhabitants of a Muslim-majority village called Mahua Dabar, located in the pargana Nagar East of Gorakhpur district in northern India. The village was subsequently burned to the ground on the orders of the British colonial administration. Five men from the village were publicly hanged on 18 February 1858. The village was formally designated *gair chiragi* - uninhabited, off the revenue rolls - and its name was systematically omitted from Survey of India maps for more than a century thereafter.[1]

These facts are, in broad outline, recoverable. What is not recoverable - and what this paper argues is structurally, not merely accidentally, irrecoverable - is the perspective of the people of Mahua Dabar themselves. We do not know how the inhabitants understood their action. We do not know whether the killing was a decision of the whole community, of its leadership, or of a faction. We do not know what the women of Mahua Dabar thought or did. We do not know what the village weavers, the *Nagaads* whose textile craft may have brought their ancestors from Bengal, experienced in the hours and days that followed. What we have instead is a body of texts produced by, for, and about the colonial administration: administrative letters, military dispatches, newspaper accounts of the flight from Faizabad, casualty lists, gazetteer entries, court reports. These texts constitute the entirety of the accessible archive on Mahua Dabar, and every one of them records the village and its people as an object acted upon - first as a source of violence, then as a target of punishment - never as a community of speaking, feeling, historically situated subjects.

This is precisely the condition that Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak anatomised in her 1988 essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Spivak's argument, developed through a critique of Foucault and Deleuze's unexamined universalism of the oppressed subject and through a rereading of the Indian widow-immolation debates, is that the subaltern - the colonised subject, and especially the colonised woman - is constitutively deprived of access to the enunciative apparatus through which subjectivity is produced and recognised. It is not simply that the subaltern's voice is drowned out or ignored; rather, the very conditions of colonial knowledge production are such that whatever the subaltern says, when it is heard at all, is heard through a framework that transforms it into something that serves the hegemonic narrative. The subaltern cannot speak not because she is literally mute, but because there is no position within the dominant epistemic order from which her speech could be received as speech.[2]

The Mahua Dabar archive offers an unusually concentrated case for the application of this argument. The village produced no texts. Its inhabitants left

no petitions, no diaries, no letters, no administrative records. The structures of British governance that surrounded them - the revenue settlement, the district courts, the police - generated documentary traces of their existence only in contexts of taxation, criminality, and punishment. When the village was destroyed, those traces were partly destroyed with it; and the deliberate subsequent omission of its name from Survey of India cartography completed a process that began with the burning of its physical fabric. This paper traces that process across five analytical dimensions: the structure of the colonial archive itself; the specific silencing of the Muslim weaving community; the reduction of helpful Indian figures to unnamed narrative functions; the cartographic and bureaucratic erasure of the name; and the paradoxes of twenty-first century counter-memory.

2. Spivak's Framework and the Colonial Archive

2.1 The Mechanics of Epistemic Violence

Spivak's concept of epistemic violence is central to what follows. She defines it as the imposition of a cognitive and representational framework on a subject population in such a way that the population's own modes of understanding themselves and their world are rendered illegible, irrelevant, or non-existent. This is not a violence of simple suppression - a silencing from without - but a more insidious violence that operates through the very acts of knowing, categorising, and recording that constitute colonial governance.[3]

The archive at Mahua Dabar illustrates this with particular clarity because it was not simply incomplete; it was structurally shaped by the administrative purposes of those who produced it. The letters between Commissioner Wynyard and William Peppé, the honorary deputy magistrate who commanded the burning of the village, are concerned with military effectiveness and administrative order. Wynyard writes on 15 June 1857 that he wishes Peppé to proceed to Mahua Dabar and "utterly to burn and destroy that village," and that he will "be glad to hear that not one stone of it is left upon another."[4] The purpose of this correspondence was not to record the history of Mahua Dabar

but to authorise its destruction. The archive was produced, in the most literal sense, by the exercise of colonial power over the village, and its existence is inseparable from that exercise.

The newspaper accounts that followed – in the *Morning Chronicle*, the *Daily News*, and Lloyd's Weekly Newspaper – are similarly shaped by their communicative purpose: they relay events to a British metropolitan audience whose primary interest was in the fate of British officers and the suppression of the mutiny. The *Daily News* of 29 September 1857 describes how the party reached a "large bazaar, called Mahadewa [i.e. Mahua Dabar, misheard], a large body of armed men sallied forth, and, without the slightest provocation, cut the unfortunate fellows to pieces."[5] The parenthetical note that the name was misheard is itself significant: the newspaper did not even attempt to record the correct name of the village that had been destroyed. Its inhabitants existed in this account only as an undifferentiated mob acting "without the slightest provocation."

2.2 The Subaltern Studies Debate and Its Limits

Spivak's engagement with the Subaltern Studies collective, the group of South Asian historians founded by Ranajit Guha whose project was precisely the recovery of subaltern agency and voice from the colonial archive, is central to her essay's argument. She acknowledges the political urgency and methodological sophistication of the collective's project while insisting that it runs up against a constitutive epistemological limit: the very archive from which subaltern consciousness must be recovered is an archive produced by the apparatus of its suppression. To read the archive "against the grain," as Guha and his collaborators proposed, is a necessary and valuable act of historical imagination; but it does not, Spivak argues, actually recover subaltern subjectivity. It recovers, at best, the traces of subaltern action as registered in colonial texts, which is a fundamentally different thing.[6]

The Mahua Dabar material provides a vivid illustration of this limit. The events of June 1857 unquestionably involved active choices by people who were not

British: the choice to attack the officers, the choice made by individual villagers about whether and how to participate, the choices made by those who did not participate (about whom we know nothing), the choices made by figures like Jafir Ali, who is described in The Pioneer of 25 September 1871 as having "deliberately shot him in the breast" as Lieutenant Cautley lay wounded.[7] These choices constituted subaltern agency in Guha's sense: intentional, strategic action by subordinate actors against the dominant order. But the textual trace of those choices is entirely mediated by the records of those who punished them. We know of Jafir Ali's action because it was prosecuted through the colonial legal system, tried, appealed, and ultimately condemned fourteen years after the event. We know his name because he became a named target of colonial justice. We know nothing of his interior life, his understanding of what he was doing, his relationship to the village, his experience of the subsequent years of flight and pilgrimage. The archive gives us a silhouette of agency, framed entirely by the punitive apparatus that responded to it.

3. The Muslim Weavers of Mahua Dabar: A Community Defined Only in Death

3.1 The Archive of Erasure

Who were the people of Mahua Dabar? The pre-1857 sources provide a skeletal demographic and economic profile. Montgomery Martin's *History, Antiquities, Topography and Statistics of Eastern India* (1838), based on Francis Buchanan's survey of approximately 1813, records the Mahuyadabar police circle as containing 693 Muslim families and 9,533 Hindu families, out of a total of 10,266 families, covering 212 square miles. Seven market places served the circle, with exports valued at 35,138 rupees and imports at 18,800 rupees annually.[8] Mahua Dabar village itself is described as "a scattered place buried in plantations, but contains 200 houses, many of which are tiled, and some have two stories."[9]

John Kaye's *History of the Sepoy War* (1876) adds one significant further detail: in a footnote on the village of "Mahwah-dabur," Kaye notes that "This was a Mahomedan village, held by a family that had discharged the office of Kagee" -

that is, a kazi or Muslim judge.[10] This note, brief as it is, is the only source in the entire archive that attributes to the community a specific institutional function within the pre-colonial order. The village was not merely a settlement of Muslim families; it was a community whose leading family had held a judicial and administrative role, a role that would have been both diminished and restructured by the imposition of Company administration.

The *Pioneer*'s account of 1871 adds another detail: the village is described as "a famed bazar, where Mahomedan cotton-printers congregated in large numbers and drove a thriving trade."[11] This is consistent with the 2008 *Telegraph India* article's account of a family tradition that weavers' families had migrated from Bengal, where, under the pressure of East India Company coercion of silk and cotton weavers, they had found a new home under the protection of the Nawab of Oudh.[12] The Bradbury compilation is cautious about this claim, noting the absence of contemporary evidence for the specific story of thumb-cutting as Company policy, while acknowledging that migration from Bengal to Awadh was historically plausible and consistent with wider patterns of population movement.[13]

What is remarkable about this thin profile is not merely its thinness but its character. The people of Mahua Dabar appear in the pre-1857 archive only as economic and demographic data points, as entries in a revenue register or a police circle census. They are visible to the colonial knowledge apparatus only insofar as they contribute to its categories: numbers of families, value of exports and imports, number of houses, architectural style of those houses. The archive records the surfaces of their lives as measurable and taxable phenomena. It records nothing of their political culture, their memory, their understanding of the changes wrought by colonial administration in their district, their relationships with the surrounding Hindu-majority communities, their experience of the annexation of Awadh in 1856 and its administrative consequences.

3.2 After the Silence: The Kill and the Burning

The events of 10 June 1857 are reconstructed almost entirely from Sergeant Busher's statement, published in the *Morning Chronicle* of 30 September 1857. Busher's account is the foundational text for virtually everything that has been written about the massacre. It is, by its nature, the account of a survivor who experienced the attack as a victim and who was, at the moment of telling, a military man speaking to a British newspaper for a British audience. It is not an unreliable account - its details are broadly consistent across the sources, and there is no reason to doubt that Busher described what he saw with reasonable accuracy - but it is an account that structurally cannot represent the perspective of those on the other side of the nullah.[14]

Busher tells us that as the party approached the village, one of the three burkundages "started off ahead, with the pretence of getting ready a place of accommodation and the sherbet." On reaching the village, the party "observed to our horror that the whole village was armed." At the nullah crossing, "the villagers rushed on us sword and matchlock in hand."[15] This is a narrative of sudden, unprovoked collective violence by "the whole village." It does not and cannot tell us what deliberation preceded the attack, who led it, what proportion of the village's population participated, what the women and children were doing, whether there was dissent within the community, or what happened to the families of those who were subsequently hanged. The archive records the action of the village as a unified lethal agent and then as a target of punishment; it records nothing of the community as a community.

The 1871 *Pioneer* account, written fourteen years later and at the time of Jafir Ali's trial, is somewhat more detailed but structurally identical in its silencing function. It describes the village and its trade, then shifts to characterise the killing as an act of "bigotry" inflamed by the burkundage: "It was no difficult task to inflame the bigotry of the Mowadabur mob."[16] This framing performs a complex ideological function. It attributes the violence to a religious passion understood as inherently irrational and susceptible to manipulation, thereby both deindividuating the actors and implicitly naturalising the colonial

judgment that the village's Muslim character made it dangerous. The people of Mahua Dabar are simultaneously reduced to a "mob" and given a motive - "bigotry" - that is not a motive at all in the sense of an articulated, historically situated reason but a psychological category that places them outside rational agency.

3.3 The Double Silencing

Spivak's concept of double silencing is directly applicable here. The first silencing is material: the killing of the officers brought down upon the village the full coercive apparatus of colonial punishment. Five men were hanged. The village was burned. The houses, the mosque, the bazaar, the accumulated fabric of the community were destroyed. The physical destruction of the community was also, necessarily, the destruction of whatever material records the community itself had produced: account books, property deeds, letters, whatever documentary traces of its own existence it might have possessed. The burning of Mahua Dabar was simultaneously the burning of its archive.

The second silencing is epistemic: the documentary record that replaced those destroyed traces was produced entirely by the apparatus that destroyed the village, and it records the community only in the categories relevant to its own administrative and military concerns. Wynyard's letter of 4 July 1857, acknowledging that the destruction of the village "was progressing satisfactorily, but that it would take several days before all the houses are levelled to the ground,"[17] treats the community's physical existence as an administrative problem to be solved. The Basti Gazetteer of 1907 summarises the events of 1857 in a single sentence: "at Mahua Dabar in pargana Basti West they were treacherously killed on the 10th by the Musalman inhabitants, the only member of the party to escape being Sergeant Busher of the artillery."[18] This sentence is not only inadequate; it is incorrect (the Basti Gazetteer places the massacre at the wrong Mahua Dabar), illustrating that by 1907 even the basic spatial identity of the village had been obscured by the erasure of its name from official cartography.

Between these two silencings, the people of Mahua Dabar are not simply absent from the record. They are present as a menacing collectivity, as a criminal category, as a target of punishment, as a figure in colonial discourse about Muslim fanaticism and the dangers of the bazaar. They are, in Spivak's terms, constructed as the Other of colonial order: not absent from representation but present only in representations that deny them subjectivity.

4. The Named Subaltern and the Problem of the Functionary

4.1 Teg Ali Khan: Loyalty Without Interior

If the people of Mahua Dabar are silenced by their construction as criminal Other, the indigenous figures who aided British survival present a different and in some ways more subtle problem. They are present in the archive, named or unnamed, and their actions are recorded with gratitude. But they appear exclusively as the occasion for the expression of British survival and British values; the archive consistently forecloses any inquiry into their own motivations, social positions, or interior lives.

Teg Ali Khan is the most extensively documented of these figures. Colonel Lennox's formal certificate of character, preserved in the Parliamentary papers of 1857, describes him as a "faithful, loyal, and true man, and highly deserving the notice of Government." It records his rank (sepoy), caste (Patan), age (38), height (6 feet), village (Noemuch), and length of service (19 years of good character).[19] Sergeant Busher's account traces his movements across several days: he was picked up in a canoe on the Gogra on the morning of 9 June, made himself useful in procuring boatmen, guided the party through hostile terrain, organised the search for the survivors after they entered the Gogra at a village, and met up again with the party at Amorha.[20] At the end of Busher's account, we learn that Teg Ali Khan managed to escape the attack at Mahua Dabar and rejoined the party at Basti.

This is a substantial documentary record by the standards of any indigenous figure in this archive. But what does it tell us about Teg Ali Khan's experience of

these events, his understanding of his own choices, his social situation, his emotional life? Precisely nothing. He enters Busher's narrative when he first becomes useful ~ "An hour or so after he was taken up he made himself useful in procuring boatmen" ~ and exits when he ceases to be required. He is "a sepoy of the 22d (Teg Ali Khan), who had not joined the mutineers"; he is defined entirely by what he did not do (join the mutiny) and by what he did do (help the British officers). The archive gives us no access to why he made this choice, how he experienced the weeks of danger, what he thought about the killing of his superior officer Lieutenant Lindesay (described in Busher's account as having been "cut to pieces" at the nullah crossing), or what became of him after Lennox granted him a certificate of character and he went home to his village near Buxar.[21]

The Lennox certificate performs a further, more specific ideological function. By formally certifying Teg Ali Khan's loyalty in terms that map onto colonial categories ~ rank, caste, height, years of service, the formal language of military recommendation ~ it absorbs him entirely into the administrative apparatus of colonial governance. His loyalty is defined, measured, and rewarded in the terms of that apparatus. It is not ~ and cannot be, within the archive ~ the expression of a self-understanding that exists independently of those terms. The certificate is both a recognition and a transformation: it recognises Teg Ali Khan's action as significant while simultaneously translating it into the only language the archive possesses.

4.2 The Brahmin of the Village and the Village Jemadar

More revealing, because less documented, are the figures of the unnamed Brahmin who sheltered Sergeant Busher after the massacre and the village jemadar who guided the survivors of boats Nos. 1 and 2 across the Gogra and to safety on 9 June. These figures appear in Busher's account and nowhere else in the archive. They have no names, no biographical details, no recorded words beyond those directly relevant to their protective functions.

The Brahmin's appearance in the narrative is brief and structurally symmetrical with the burkundage's betrayal. Busher, alone and exhausted after the massacre, enters a village: "the first person I met was a Brahmin, of whom I begged a drink of water, telling him I was exhausted. He asked me where I came from and what had happened to me." The Brahmin "assured me that no harm would come to me in his village, and that, as the villagers were all Brahmins, others would not dare to enter it to do me any harm," and provided sherbet. He then suddenly warned Busher to run, as "Baboo Bully Singh was approaching the village."[22]

The narrative function of this unnamed Brahmin is to provide Busher with a moment of respite and a warning that enables his next stage of survival. But what does the text tell us about the Brahmin himself? Why did he help? Was it compassion, solidarity with a wounded stranger, calculation that sheltering Busher might be rewarded, moral conviction, or some combination of these? Did he know about the massacre at Mahua Dabar? What was his understanding of the political situation? What did he think after Busher fled? Did Bully Singh's men arrive and interrogate him? Was there a cost to him for the brief hospitality he showed?

The archive is silent on every one of these questions. The Brahmin appears in the record only in the moment when he is useful to British survival; he disappears from it the moment Busher leaves his village. His social existence - his family, his position in the village, his understanding of what was happening around him - is entirely irrelevant to the narrative and therefore entirely absent from the text. He is, in Spivak's terms, produced as a subject-function of the colonial narrative: he exists in the archive not as a person but as an agent who temporarily secured the survival of a British sergeant.

The village jemadar who helped the survivors of the Gogra ambush - who sent his men to search for the fugitives after receiving intelligence from Teg Ali Khan and the cattle-herding boy, who "very kindly took us to his hut and entertained us as hospitably as he could, supplying us with provisions and cots to lie on," who accompanied the party to the next village and arranged for a chain of

handoffs through chaukidars - is similarly unnamed and similarly present only as a function of British survival.[23] The scale of his assistance was substantial: he organised a search and rescue, provided food and rest to exhausted and traumatised men, and personally escorted them to safety. Yet in the archive he has no name, no biography, no speech, no subsequent history.

The cattle-herding boy who first spotted the fugitives in the grass, swam the river holding on to a buffalo's tail, and alerted the jemadar is perhaps the most completely subalternised figure in the entire archive. He performs a critical narrative function - without him, the survivors might not have been found - and he appears in a single subordinate clause: "a boy herding cattle caught sight of us and ran towards the river, and with his herd crossed over, himself holding on by a buffalo's tail."[24] He is not named, not thanked, not followed beyond the moment of his functional usefulness. The image of a child clinging to a buffalo in floodwater to alert someone to a group of British soldiers, and the subsequent effacement of that child from the record, encapsulates the condition of the subaltern in the colonial archive with unusual economy.

5. The Tahsildar of Captainganj: The Subaltern Who Cannot Be Heard Straight

The most complex case of subaltern silencing in the Mahua Dabar archive is that of the tahsildar of Captainganj. His namelessness is itself significant: unlike Teg Ali Khan, whose name was recorded because his loyalty was formally certified, the tahsildar's name was never entered into the record. He is identified only by his office.

The account of his conduct is preserved in Sergeant Busher's statement. When the party of six officers and one sergeant arrived at Captainganj, the tahsildar "furnished us with five ponies and 50 rupees, and put us under the protection of three Burkundages, giving them directions to proceed directly to Ghie Ghat." He also counselled the party to avoid Basti.[25] This appears, on its face, as an act of substantive assistance: material provisions, armed escort, practical guidance. The *Pioneer*'s 1871 retrospective account is explicit that "the fatal as this advice turned out to be, it is believed to have been given in all good faith."[26] This is the

extent of what the colonial archive will say in the tahsildar's favour: his potentially lethal advice is retrospectively credited as well-intentioned.

The circumstantial evidence for something more sinister is, however, preserved in the same archive. The burkundage who rode ahead, ostensibly to prepare sherbet, was the tahsildar's appointment. The village of Mahua Dabar was within the tahsildar's administrative jurisdiction. The chain of events - reception, provisioning, escort, one escort riding ahead, massacre - follows a pattern that is difficult to read as pure coincidence. Yet the archive neither prosecutes the tahsildar nor exonerates him. He disappears from the record after the massacre, unnamed and unaccounted for.

This silence is itself a form of representation. The colonial administrative apparatus that burned Mahua Dabar and hanged five of its inhabitants had an interest in not pursuing the question of tahsildar complicity too rigorously. Revenue collection in a district still partially under insurgent pressure required the co-operation of surviving tahsildars. An investigation that implicated the revenue apparatus in the massacre would have been embarrassing and practically disruptive. The silence around the tahsildar is not an accident of record-keeping; it is an active, interested silence.

What is most striking, from a Spivakian perspective, is that the tahsildar's silence in the archive renders him not merely absent but structurally ambiguous in a way that serves colonial narrative interests. He can be read as a loyal subordinate who gave well-intentioned advice that was tragically exploited by a villager under his command; or he can be read as a sophisticated operator who managed his own exposure to both colonial and insurgent power with considerable skill. Neither reading is the tahsildar's own. Both readings are available only to the colonial archive and to subsequent scholars reading it. The tahsildar himself - his own account, his own understanding of what he did and why - is nowhere.

6. The Nazim and the Logic of Strategic Speech

Syed Muhammad Hasan Khan - referred to in the Lennox account as Meer Mahomed Hossein Khan - is the one indigenous figure in the Mahua Dabar archive who arguably approaches the status of a speaking subject. He sheltered Colonel Lennox and his family for ten days after the Faizabad mutiny, then joined the insurgency when the British evacuated Gorakhpur in August 1857. After the British reconquest, he refused to recognise the general amnesty, writing two letters to the Gorakhpur magistrates whose content is partially preserved in Surendra Nath Sen's *Eighteen Fifty-Seven* (1957). In the first letter, he states: "I have never killed any official or subject, although the European officers and their soldiers have slaughtered thousands of innocent and insignificant men, including women, blind men and mendicants, and have burned down their dwellings, looting their property." In the second: "The Government having committed every description of oppression, it is foolish in me, to have any hope, for my having saved Col. Lake [i.e. Lennox] and his two ladies."[27]

These are remarkable documents. They are, to my knowledge, the only texts in the entire Mahua Dabar archive in which an indigenous figure directly addresses the colonial authority in his own voice, on his own terms, invoking his own understanding of legality, morality, and political history. The Nazim's letters frame the colonial reconquest as a criminal act, describe the burning of villages and the killing of civilians as "oppressions," and refuse to accept that his service to Colonel Lennox creates any obligation of submission to British authority.

Yet even these texts - arguably the closest the archive comes to a subaltern voice that speaks back - are preserved only because they were included in Sen's nationalist historiography of 1957, which was itself a centenary counter-narrative to British colonial history. The letters are accessible to the scholar only through the mediation of an Indian nationalist academic project that found them useful for its own purposes. They are not accessible in their original form in the British administrative record, where their content would have been entered as

evidence of rebellion rather than as political speech. The Nazim's voice reaches us, a century later, because it was instrumentally useful to a counter-narrative; not because the documentary apparatus that surrounded the events of 1857 had any interest in preserving indigenous political argument.

Furthermore, the Nazim's letters say nothing about the people of Mahua Dabar. His political speech, though directed against colonial authority, does not constitute or enable speech on behalf of the community whose village was destroyed. His eloquence in his own cause does not translate into representation for those who were silenced by the burning. The presence of one articulate, politically sophisticated subaltern voice in the archive does not challenge the fundamental structure of that archive's silencing; if anything, it throws that silencing into sharper relief by demonstrating that the absence of other voices was not a natural or inevitable condition but the product of specific historical and political forces.

7. Cartographic Silence: The Erasure of the Name

7.1 The Map as Instrument of Double Erasure

The physical destruction of Mahua Dabar was followed by a second, cartographic destruction: the systematic omission of the village's name from Survey of India maps. The Bradbury compilation documents this erasure through a series of maps from the 1889 plan to twentieth-century Survey of India editions, all of which label the settlement that existed within the old boundaries as "Idgah" - a term for an outdoor site used for Muslim festival prayers - rather than as Mahua Dabar.[28] The 1922 Survey map uses the Idgah label; subsequent editions perpetuate it. The community that had re-established itself within the old boundaries by the 1880s is visible on the maps; its historic name is not.

This cartographic erasure is not, pace some twentieth-century commentators, a simple act of colonial vindictiveness. The Alexander gazetteer of 1880 makes clear that by that date "The head-quarters of the circle, Mahuadabar village,

was destroyed during the Mutiny, and must not be confused with the small mart thus called in tappa Atroh of parganah Basti."[29] The existence of a second Mahua Dabar in pargana Basti created a cartographic problem: to label the re-emerging settlement near the destroyed village with its historic name risked confusing it with the separate, inhabited Mahua Dabar to the north. The omission of the name may have had, at least in part, a practical administrative rationale.

But the consequences of that omission were not merely practical. As the Bradbury compilation demonstrates in detail, the absence of the name from Survey maps created a feedback loop of cartographic confusion that persisted into the twenty-first century. Census enumerators in the 1971, 1981, 2001, and 2011 censuses were aware of the community's existence but could not locate it securely on maps that did not carry its name, resulting in its appearance "wandering around" on successive census maps.[30] The community was real, inhabited, and enumerated; but its spatial identity in the official record was perpetually uncertain because its name - the name that would have anchored it to a specific location - had been removed. The practical effect of the 1857 cartographic erasure was still being felt in census documentation a century and a half later.

This is what we might call a third-order silencing. The first order was material: the burning of the village. The second order was epistemic: the production of an archive that represented the community only as criminal object. The third order was cartographic: the removal from official spatial knowledge of the name that would have allowed the community to locate itself within the administrative system and to be located by others. Each order of silencing reinforced the others. The absence of the name from maps meant that the re-emerging community could not be securely identified with the historic community; the absence of a secure identification meant that the counter-memory of the historic community could not be anchored to a verifiable physical location; the absence of a verifiable physical location allowed sceptics to question the community's claims.

7.2 The Idgah and the Mosque

The Bradbury compilation notes a detail of the cartographic record that is worth pausing over. Survey maps from at least 1922 onwards carry the symbol for a functioning mosque in the centre of the pink-tinted village area, south of the Idgah. The compilation also notes that in the 1990s this structure was "only a roofless shell." It observes, with characteristic precision, that "the British demolition in 1857 had nothing to do with the ruin of the mosque" - since the mosque symbol appears on maps up to at least 1975, indicating that the structure was at some point functioning or at least standing, and deteriorated subsequently rather than being destroyed in 1857.[31]

This observation raises a question that the archive cannot answer. If the mosque was rebuilt after the burning of 1857 - as it appears to have been, given its symbol on twentieth-century maps - who rebuilt it? When? Under what circumstances? The rebuilt mosque is evidence of a community that had re-established itself, had collective resources to invest in religious infrastructure, and had maintained a sense of communal identity across the trauma of 1857. None of this is recorded anywhere in the colonial archive. The mosque appears on a map symbol; the community that rebuilt it is invisible.

8. Counter-Memory and Its Paradoxes

8.1 Twenty-First Century Recovery Attempts

The Bradbury compilation engages with a series of twenty-first century texts - journalistic, academic, and communal - that attempt to recover the history of Mahua Dabar from the colonial archive and to give voice to the community's suppressed perspective. The 2008 *Telegraph India* article on Abdul Latif Ansari's fourteen-year search for his ancestral home is the most human of these: a Mumbai businessman using a "tattered, hand-drawn, two-century-old map and family lore" to locate a community from which his family had been separated for over a century.[32] The 2010 *Open* magazine feature by Jaideep Mazumdar describes "an atrocious slice of Raj history" and invokes the testimony of octogenarians whose grandfathers had heard accounts of the destruction. A

2015 web article by Dr. Radheshyam Dwivedi describes the events in terms that suggest mass execution by British soldiers.

These texts are significant as evidence of a living counter-memory in the communities of Basti district, and as evidence that the destruction of Mahua Dabar remained, a century and a half later, a point of communal identification and grievance. But they pose, from a Spivakian perspective, a problem that their authors do not acknowledge: they do not restore subaltern voice. They restore, at best, a counter-narrative produced by later, differently positioned subjects - nationalist journalists, diaspora businessmen, academic heritage advocates - who fill the silence left by the colonial archive with their own discursive frameworks.

The *Telegraph India* article, for example, includes the claim that "the East India Company, eager to promote British textiles, had cut off the hands of hundreds of weavers in Bengal" and that twenty weavers' families had fled to Awadh as a consequence.[33] The Bradbury compilation addresses this claim directly and at length, arguing that the historical evidence does not support systematic hand-cutting as Company policy; that the documented cases involved silk-winders who cut off their own thumbs to avoid Company coercion; and that the *Telegraph India*'s version of events conflates different historical episodes across different regions and different decades. The point here is not to defend the East India Company against the charge of brutality - the documentary record of Company coercion of Bengali weavers is unambiguous - but to note that the counter-narrative available to Abdul Latif Ansari and to the *Telegraph India* journalist was itself constructed from a bricolage of historical grievances rather than from a recovered record of what the people of Mahua Dabar actually experienced or understood.

8.2 The Nationalist Counter-Narrative and the Reproduction of Silence

Dr. Dwivedi's 2015 article, which describes British soldiers chopping off heads and tearing bodies to pieces, is the most extreme example of what we might call the nationalist counter-narrative's own epistemic violence.[34] By constructing a

graphic account of British atrocities for which no primary source evidence exists - and which the documentary record directly contradicts (the burning of the village took several days, during which Wynyard expressed concern about not hurting anyone unless opposed) - the article performs a rhetorical rescue of the community's status as victim while simultaneously producing a representation of them that is no more accurate, and no less instrumentally motivated, than the colonial archive's representation of them as a fanatical mob.

This is the paradox that Spivak's essay anticipates: the attempt to speak for the subaltern, to restore her voice, to give her back her subjectivity, is itself an act of representation that risks substituting the speaker's framework for the silence it sought to fill. The subaltern who "speaks" through Dwivedi's article does not speak in her own voice; she speaks in the voice of a Hindu nationalist scholar writing in 2015, invoking the memory of 1857 for contemporary political purposes that have nothing to do with the Muslim weavers of Mahua Dabar. The silence has been filled; but it has been filled with noise that is no closer to the subaltern's own perspective than the colonial archive it purports to challenge.

The 2019 Hindi article from *navbharattimes.indiatimes.com* describes the *gair chiragi* designation as having been "posted on a board outside the village immediately after the punishment burning," implying that the site was to remain permanently uninhabited by official decree.[35] The Bradbury compilation points out that a settlement had re-established itself within the old boundaries by the 1880s, as evidenced by the 1889 plan. The nationalist narrative requires the colonial suppression to be permanent in order for the community's survival to be a story of resistance; the actual record shows a more complex history of partial destruction, re-establishment, and continued ambiguity. Once again, the counter-narrative's requirements distort the historical record in ways that do not serve the community's actual history.

9. Beyond Spivak: The Limits of the Argument and What Remains

9.1 The Grain Against Itself

Spivak's essay has attracted, over the decades since its publication, a substantial body of critique. The most sustained objection ‑ developed by, among others, Benita Parry in her response to the essay ‑ is that Spivak's insistence on the structural impossibility of subaltern speech risks becoming a self‑fulfilling prophecy: if we declare in advance that the subaltern cannot speak, we have no reason to look for the traces of her speech in the archive, and we therefore find nothing, which confirms our declaration.[36] This is a serious objection, and it deserves a serious response in the context of the Mahua Dabar archive.

It is true that the archive, read against its grain, does preserve traces that exceed the purposes for which it was produced. The Nazim's letters, preserved in Sen's nationalist compilation, are the most obvious example: they are the speech of an indigenous political subject arguing against colonial authority in his own terms. The detail in Sergeant Busher's account that the Brahmin's village was "all Brahmins" and that "others would not dare to enter it" is a trace of social geography ‑ the spatial segregation of religious communities, the implicit threat that non‑Brahmin attackers would face community resistance ‑ that exceeds what Busher himself was concerned to record.[37] The cattle‑herding boy holding on to a buffalo's tail is a trace of child labour, of everyday agricultural practice, of the kinds of children who herded cattle in Gorakhpur district in June 1857: it is a fragment of social texture whose richness exceeds the narrative function it serves.

These traces are real, and the historian's task of reading against the grain ‑ attending to what the archive says inadvertently, noticing what it conspicuously fails to say, tracing the outlines of the absent through the shape of the present ‑ is a genuine, if limited, mode of recovery. But Spivak's point is not that no traces exist; it is that the traces that exist cannot be received as speech, because speech requires not only a speaker but an addressee and a mode of transmission. The people of Mahua Dabar have left no traces that constitute, or could constitute, a statement of their own perspective. The traces that exist of their community ‑ demographic data, a note about Kazi lineage, a description of cotton‑printing as

a trade, a list of people hanged - are traces of their existence as objects of colonial knowledge, not as subjects of their own history.

9.2 What the Archive Cannot Say

It is worth making explicit what we cannot know from the Mahua Dabar archive, because the catalogue of unknowns is itself a form of historical reckoning. We do not know whether the attack on the officers was a planned act of resistance to colonial authority or a spontaneous reaction to local circumstances. We do not know whether the leading family's history as Kazi - as judges under a legal and political order that had been dismantled by colonial administration - was a factor in the community's response to the presence of British officers. We do not know what the women of Mahua Dabar experienced during the burning or in its aftermath. We do not know how many people died in the British attack, because the colonial sources are interested only in confirming the destruction of property, not in counting indigenous casualties. We do not know how the five men hanged in February 1858 understood their situation, what they said or did not say at their execution, or whether they left families.

We do not know the name of the burkundage who rode ahead to Mahua Dabar. We do not know whether he was acting on explicit instructions from the tahsildar or on his own initiative. We do not know what he thought would happen to him if he did not alert the village. We do not know whether he survived the subsequent British punitive operations. His name - which he certainly had - appears nowhere in the archive. He is described in the *Pioneer*'s 1871 account as "the wretch" who "went forward to plan their destruction"; in Busher's account as the burkundage who "started off ahead, with the pretence of getting ready a place of accommodation." He has been judged, but he has never spoken.

We do not know whether there were people in Mahua Dabar who opposed the attack, who tried to warn the officers or protect them, or who suffered consequences for their opposition. Jafir Ali's subsequent career - flight,

pilgrimage to Mecca, return as a fakir, recognition crossing the Gogra at Tanda, trial, and execution c. 1871 - suggests a man of some resources and social connections.[38] The fact that his recognition was possible after fourteen years suggests that he was known to people in the region who had not forgotten his face. But the network of social relationships that connected these facts is invisible in the archive. We have the beginning and the end of his story in the colonial judicial record; the middle - the years of flight, the pilgrimage, the communal relationships that sustained him - is entirely unknown.

10. Conclusion: The Archive, the Void, and the Ethics of Historical Inquiry

This paper has argued that the Mahua Dabar archive constitutes an unusually concentrated illustration of the condition Spivak describes in "Can the Subaltern Speak?": the structural impossibility of subaltern speech within the enunciative apparatus of colonial knowledge production. The Muslim weavers and traders of Mahua Dabar are doubly silenced - by the physical destruction of their community and its material records, and by the production of a replacement archive that represents them exclusively as objects of colonial violence and justice. The indigenous figures who aided British survival - the unnamed Brahmin, the village jemadar, the cattle-herding boy, and even the more extensively documented Teg Ali Khan - are present in the archive only as narrative functionaries serving British survival stories. They are not absent; they are present in representations that deny them interiority, motivation, and independent social existence. The cartographic erasure of the village's name after 1857, and its consequences for census mapping over a century later, constitute a third order of silencing that extended the epistemic violence of the original destruction across time and space.

The twenty-first century counter-memory attempts surveyed in Section 8 demonstrate that the subaltern's silence generates its own counter-productive dynamics. The nationalist and communalist narratives that fill the void left by the colonial archive do not restore subaltern voice; they substitute a different set of politically motivated representations for the colonial ones. The result is not

the recovery of the people of Mahua Dabar's own perspective but a contest between colonial and anti-colonial discourses in which the community itself continues to function as object rather than subject.

What, then, is the ethics of historical inquiry in such a case? Spivak's essay does not, despite frequent misreading, conclude that the historian should abandon the archive or give up on the project of recovering subaltern experience. Her conclusion is more precise and more demanding: the historian must acknowledge the structural limits of the archive, must read it with awareness of the epistemological framework that produced it, must attend to the traces that exceed the archive's own purposes, and must resist the temptation to fill the void of subaltern silence with her own voice, however sympathetically intended. The historian who claims to speak for the people of Mahua Dabar is not giving voice to the voiceless; she is speaking into a silence that she has not honestly acknowledged.

The Mahua Dabar archive can tell us what the colonial apparatus thought it was doing when it burned the village and hanged its inhabitants. It can tell us something about the social geography of Gorakhpur district in the 1850s, about the administrative structures through which British power was exercised, about the relationships between European landholders and indigenous officials in a moment of crisis. What it cannot tell us - and what no subsequent scholarly or journalistic project has yet been able to tell us, because the archive does not permit it - is what the people of Mahua Dabar thought, felt, intended, and experienced. This void is not a gap in the record that further research might fill; it is a constitutive absence, produced by the deliberate and systematic destruction of the very conditions under which that knowledge might have been produced and preserved.

To say this is not to say that the people of Mahua Dabar cannot be remembered or that their suffering cannot be mourned. It is to say that remembering and mourning are not the same as speaking for. The ethical obligation of the historian, confronting the Mahua Dabar archive, is to acknowledge the void

with precision – to say, as clearly and as specifically as possible, what we do not know and why we do not know it – rather than to paper over that void with the noise of counter-narrative. The silence of the subaltern is itself a historical fact, produced by specific historical forces, and demands to be documented as such.

Mahua Dabar burned on 3 July 1857. The silence that followed is still burning.

Notes

[1] David Bradbury, 'Mahua Dabar: The Fate of the Killers and the Village,' *Missed History* (2020), https://missedhistory.co.uk/mahua-dabar. On the gair chiragi designation, see also 'When the Whites designated a village as "no lamps",' *Navbharat Times* (2019, in Hindi), summarised and evaluated in the Bradbury compilation.

[2] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (eds.), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), pp.271–313. Revised and extended in Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), ch.3.

[3] Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' pp.280–281. The concept of epistemic violence is developed in relation to Foucault's analysis of the subject and the archive. For its application to the Indian colonial context see also Ranajit Guha, 'The Prose of Counter-Insurgency,' in Guha (ed.), *Subaltern Studies II* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983).

[4] W. Wynyard to W. Peppé, 15 June 1857, in S.A.A. Rizvi (ed.), *Freedom Struggle in Uttar Pradesh: Source-Material*, vol.4 (1959), reproduced in Bradbury, 'William Peppé's War Experiences.' The full quotation reads: "utterly to burn and destroy that village ... I shall be glad to hear that not one stone of it is left upon another."

[5] 'The Indian Mutinies: Fyzabad,' *Daily News* (London), 29 September 1857, reproduced in Bradbury, 'The Massacre.'

[6] Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' pp.285–289, engaging with Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983) and Guha's introductory essays to the *Subaltern Studies* volumes.

[7] 'An Episode of 1857,' *The Pioneer* (Allahabad), 25 September 1871, reproduced in Bradbury, 'The Fate of the Killers.'

[8] Montgomery Martin, *The History, Antiquities, Topography and Statistics of Eastern India*, vol.2 (London: W.H. Allen, 1838), Appendix pp.9–10, reproduced in Bradbury, 'Mahua Dabar before 1857.'

[9] Martin, *Eastern India* p.377, reproduced in Bradbury, 'Mahua Dabar before 1857.'

[10] John William Kaye, *A History of the Sepoy War in India 1857–58*, vol.3 (London: W.H. Allen, 1876), p.468 footnote, reproduced in Bradbury, 'Mahua Dabar before 1857.'

[11] 'An Episode of 1857,' *The Pioneer*, 25 September 1871.

[12] 'Found: Raj-razed town,' *Telegraph India*, 8 December 2008, reproduced and evaluated in Bradbury, 'The Fate of the Killers.'

[13] Bradbury, 'A short note about thumb cutting,' *Missed History* (2020). The note draws on William Bolts, *Considerations on India Affairs*, vol.1 (1772) and vol.2 (1775); M.K. Gandhi,

'Who cut the thumbs?' in *Young India*, 30 March 1921; and the relevant Parliamentary reports.

[14] Statement of Farrier Sergeant R. Busher, in Colonel Lennox's communication, *Morning Chronicle* (London), 30 September 1857, reproduced in Bradbury, 'The Massacre.'

[15] Busher statement, *Morning Chronicle*, 30 September 1857.

[16] 'An Episode of 1857,' *The Pioneer*, 25 September 1871.

[17] W. Wynyard to W. Peppé, 4 July 1857, in Rizvi (ed.), *Freedom Struggle*, vol.4, reproduced in Bradbury, 'William Peppé's War Experiences.'

[18] H.R. Nevill, *Basti: A Gazetteer* (1907), p.158, reproduced in Bradbury, 'The Massacre.' The misattribution to pargana Basti West is noted and corrected by Bradbury.

[19] Long-Roll and Certificate of Character given by Colonel Lennox to Teg Allie Khan, in 'Further papers (No.4) relative to the mutinies in the East Indies,' UK Parliament (1857), p.53, reproduced in Bradbury, 'The Massacre.'

[20] Busher statement, *Morning Chronicle*, 30 September 1857.

[21] Lennox Certificate, Parliamentary Papers (1857), p.53.

[22] Busher statement, *Morning Chronicle*, 30 September 1857.

[23] Ibid.

[24] Ibid.

[25] Ibid.

[26] 'An Episode of 1857,' *The Pioneer*, 25 September 1871.

[27] Surendra Nath Sen, *Eighteen Fifty-Seven* (1957), pp.364, 366, quoted in Bradbury, 'Flight from Faizabad.'

[28] Bradbury, 'The Fate of the Killers,' with maps reproduced and annotated in the compilation.

[29] E. Alexander et al., *Statistical, Descriptive and Historical Account of the Gorakhpur District* (1880), p.789 footnote, reproduced in Bradbury, 'The Fate of the Killers.'

[30] Bradbury, 'The Fate of the Killers,' with census mapping examples reproduced.

[31] Ibid.

[32] 'Found: Raj-razed town,' *Telegraph India*, 8 December 2008.

[33] Ibid.

[34] Dr. Radheshyam Dwivedi, 'Mahuwa Dabar: The Untold Story of Another Jallianwala Bagh,' pravatka.com (2015, in Hindi), summarised and evaluated in Bradbury, 'The Fate of the Killers.'

[35] Bradbury, 'The Fate of the Killers.'

[36] Benita Parry, 'Problems in Current Theories of Colonial Discourse,' *Oxford Literary Review* 9.1–2 (1987), pp.27–58. For a detailed account of the debate see Stephen Morton, *Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak* (London: Routledge, 2003), ch.3.

[37] Busher statement, *Morning Chronicle*, 30 September 1857.

[38] 'A Mutineer's Fate,' *The Homeward Mail* 27 March 1871; 'An Episode of 1857,' *The Pioneer*, 25 September 1871. Both reproduced in Bradbury, 'The Fate of the Killers.'

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