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## Subalternity and emancipatory elocution: A spivakian exegesis of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's 7<sup>th</sup> march speech

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### Abstract

This article applies Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's concept of subalternity to critically analyze Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's historic 7<sup>th</sup> March speech, a cornerstone of the Bangladeshi independence movement. Through Spivak's theoretical lens, this study examines how the speech articulated the voices of the marginalized Bengali population, deconstructed hegemonic Pakistani narratives, and mobilized the subaltern for collective action. The analysis elucidates the speech's enduring influence on national identity formation, political socialization, and contemporary socio-political movements. Practical implications include integrating this historical narrative into educational curricula to foster civic consciousness and developing policies that promote inclusivity and representation. This research contributes to subaltern studies by highlighting the speech's role in empowering marginalized voices and shaping resilient national identity.

**Keywords:** Subalternity, emancipatory discourse, national identity, political socialization, marginalized voices

### Introduction

Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's 7<sup>th</sup> March speech is a defining moment in the history of Bangladesh, delivered at a time when the Bengali population was yearning for liberation from the oppressive rule of West Pakistan. This speech articulated the collective aspirations and struggles of the Bengali people, embodying their cry for freedom, survival, and rights. The speech's historical significance lies in its immediate impact, galvanizing the masses towards a concerted effort for national independence. As Bangabandhu recounted the oppressive history marked by bloodshed and tears, he underscored the persistent fight for democracy and constitutional governance, setting the stage for the subsequent liberation war. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's concept of subalternity provides a critical framework to analyze this speech. In her seminal essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Spivak explores the notion of subalternity, referring to groups that are socially, politically, and geographically marginalized within dominant power structures, often rendered voiceless in hegemonic discourses (Spivak 24). Spivak critiques the way Western intellectual traditions have historically marginalized these voices, emphasizing the challenges subaltern groups face in being heard and recognized (25). Her theory highlights the complex dynamics of power, representation, and agency, offering a lens through which to examine how Bangabandhu's speech gave voice to the marginalized Bengali population, challenging the dominant narratives imposed by the West Pakistani regime.

The purpose of this article is to explore the enduring legacy of Bangabandhu's 7<sup>th</sup> March speech through the lens of Spivak's subalternity theory. By doing so, it aims to shed light on how the speech articulated the demands and aspirations of the subaltern Bengali population, deconstructed hegemonic Pakistani narratives, and mobilized the masses for collective action. This analysis not only contributes to the field of subaltern studies by highlighting the speech's role in empowering marginalized voices but also examines its implications for political socialization and contemporary socio-political movements in Bangladesh.

### Articulation of Subaltern Voices

Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's 7<sup>th</sup> March speech is a quintessential example of how the subaltern voices of the Bengali population were articulated during a crucial moment in history. This speech was delivered at a time when the Bengali people were under severe political, economic, and cultural marginalization by the West Pakistani authorities. According to Spivak's subaltern theory, the subaltern are those groups that are oppressed and overlooked in the political landscape, and the Bengali population at this time fits this description precisely. Spivak emphasizes that subaltern groups are often voiceless and marginalized within dominant power structures, making it difficult for them to express their grievances and aspirations (Spivak 24).

In identifying the subaltern groups represented by the speech, it is important to note the diverse nature of the Bengali population. The rural gentry, impoverished landlords, rich peasants, and other marginalized groups constituted the subaltern classes in East Pakistan. These groups faced systemic discrimination and were denied equitable representation and resources. Despite these differences, Bangabandhu's speech unified these subaltern groups by addressing their common grievances and aspirations.

The speech gave voice to the marginalized Bengali population in several significant ways. Firstly, Bangabandhu explicitly acknowledged the bloodshed and suffering of the Bengali people, thereby validating their experiences and bringing their plight into public consciousness. He stated, "The streets of Dhaka, Chittagong, Khulna, Rangpur and Rajshahi are today being spattered with the blood of my brothers, and the cry we hear from the Bengali people is a cry for freedom, a cry for survival, a cry for our rights" (Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib's 7<sup>th</sup> March Speech 21). This powerful excerpt illustrates the direct appeal to the subaltern, emphasizing their struggle for representation and justice.

Moreover, Bangabandhu's speech empowered the subaltern by highlighting their historical struggles and asserting their right to self-determination. He recounted the continuous fight for democracy, mentioning significant events such as the imposition of Martial Law in 1958 and the Six-Point Movement in 1966. He said, "We gave blood in 1952, we won a mandate in 1954. But we were still not allowed to take up the reins of this country" (Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib's 7<sup>th</sup> March Speech 25). By narrating these historical injustices, Bangabandhu reinforced the legitimacy of the Bengali people's demands and mobilized them towards collective action.

Through Spivak's subaltern theory, we can analyze how the speech not only addressed the immediate political situation but also resonated with the broader aspirations of the subaltern classes. Spivak argues that the subaltern are often deprived of a platform to express their voices, and Bangabandhu's speech provided such a platform, thereby challenging the dominant narratives imposed by the West Pakistani regime (Spivak 25). The speech articulated the grievances and aspirations of various subaltern groups, including the rural gentry and impoverished landlords, who were historically overlooked in the political landscape of East Pakistan. According to Beverley, subalternity involves a "position without identity," and Bangabandhu's speech provided an identity to these voiceless groups by

acknowledging their struggles and aspirations (Beverley 37).

One of the key excerpts that illustrates subaltern articulation is Bangabandhu's declaration, "The struggle this time is a struggle for emancipation, the struggle this time is a struggle for independence" (Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib's 7<sup>th</sup> March Speech 28). This statement encapsulates the collective aspiration for freedom and self-determination, rallying the subaltern population towards a unified cause. By emphasizing the need for emancipation and independence, Bangabandhu empowered the subaltern to view their struggle as just and morally right, thereby fostering a sense of agency and solidarity. As Chakrabarty points out, such speeches are essential in "transforming the consciousness of the subaltern" and enabling them to see themselves as active agents in the historical process (Chakrabarty 23).

### Deconstructing Dominant Hegemonic Narratives

Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's 7<sup>th</sup> March speech not only articulated the voices of the subaltern Bengali population but also effectively deconstructed the dominant hegemonic narratives imposed by the West Pakistani regime. By critically challenging these narratives, the speech reframed the struggle for independence, presenting an alternative narrative centered on the aspirations and demands of the marginalized groups.

Firstly, Bangabandhu's speech challenged the dominant narratives by highlighting the systemic injustices and oppression faced by the Bengali people. The West Pakistani regime had long portrayed the Bengali demands for autonomy as illegitimate and rebellious. Bangabandhu refuted these claims by detailing the historical and ongoing injustices inflicted upon the Bengali population. He stated, "We gave blood in 1952, we won a mandate in 1954. But we were still not allowed to take up the reins of this country" (Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib's 7<sup>th</sup> March Speech 25). This statement not only highlights the continuous struggle for self-determination but also underscores the betrayal and oppression by the West Pakistani authorities.

Spivak's theory of subalternity is crucial in understanding how the speech reframed the struggle for independence. According to Spivak, dominant knowledge systems often marginalize and silence subaltern voices, imposing an epistemic violence that denies their agency (Spivak 24). Bangabandhu's speech directly confronted this epistemic violence by giving voice to the Bengali people's grievances and aspirations, thereby challenging the hegemonic discourse. The rhetoric used in the speech aimed to empower the subaltern groups by asserting their right to determine their own destiny, as seen in his declaration, "The struggle this time is a struggle for emancipation, the struggle this time is a struggle for independence" (Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib's 7<sup>th</sup> March Speech 28). This statement reframed the struggle as a legitimate fight for justice and self-determination, empowering the Bengali population to view their struggle as morally and politically justified.

Furthermore, Bangabandhu presented an alternative narrative that countered the accusations and propaganda of the West Pakistani regime. The regime often depicted the Bengali demands as a threat to national unity and stability. In response, Bangabandhu emphasized the legitimate and democratic nature of the Bengali movement. He recounted the peaceful and democratic efforts made by the Bengalis to achieve autonomy, such as the Six-Point Movement and the

non-cooperation movement. By highlighting these efforts, Bangabandhu refuted the regime's portrayal of the Bengali movement as violent and illegitimate. He stated, "I made it clear that I could not agree to any deviation from the Six Points. That right rested with the people" (Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib's 7<sup>th</sup> March Speech 23). This assertion reinforced the democratic foundation of the Bengali demands and positioned the movement within a framework of justice and rightful resistance.

The speech also employed rhetorical strategies that deconstructed the dominant narratives and empowered the subaltern. Bangabandhu's use of specific historical references and vivid imagery served to dismantle the regime's narrative and highlight the legitimacy of the Bengali struggle. For instance, he invoked the bloodshed and sacrifices made by the Bengalis, stating, "The streets of Dhaka, Chittagong, Khulna, Rangpur, and Rajshahi are today being spattered with the blood of my brothers" (Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib's 7<sup>th</sup> March Speech 21). This vivid imagery not only underscored the brutal oppression faced by the Bengalis but also evoked a sense of shared sacrifice and collective identity among the subaltern groups. Spivak's concept of epistemic violence, which refers to the imposition of dominant knowledge systems that marginalize and silence certain groups, is instrumental in analyzing this aspect of the speech. By presenting an alternative narrative, Bangabandhu's speech acted as a counter-narrative to this epistemic violence, foregrounding the experiences and perspectives of the Bengali subaltern and challenging the normative narrative constructed by those in power. The speech shifts focus to marginalized groups like the illiterate peasantry, tribals, and urban subproletariat, discussing how they can potentially articulate their experiences and form solidarity through political alliances (Spivak 27).

Furthermore, Homi K. Bhabha's theories on colonial discourse highlight how deconstructing dominant narratives is essential for marginalized groups to reclaim their agency. Bhabha argues that "narrative authority is a form of power that enacts the inclusion and exclusion of certain voices" (Bhabha 52). Bangabandhu's speech effectively dismantles this narrative authority by including the subaltern voices and presenting their grievances as central to the national struggle. This aligns with Spivak's emphasis on the need to make space for subaltern voices within dominant discourses. Additionally, Edward Said's concept of "permission to narrate" is relevant here, as it underscores the power dynamics involved in who gets to tell their story and whose stories are marginalized (Said 78). Bangabandhu's speech, by giving the Bengali people the permission to narrate their own experiences and aspirations, directly challenges the hegemonic control of the narrative by the West Pakistani regime.

### **Empowerment and Mobilization of the Subaltern**

Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's 7<sup>th</sup> March speech stands as a powerful call to action that effectively mobilized the Bengali masses against oppression and injustice. This section examines how the speech galvanized the subaltern population, fostered a collective identity, and instilled a sense of agency among the marginalized communities, ultimately empowering them to resist oppression.

Bangabandhu's speech was a clarion call to the Bengali people to rise against the injustices they had suffered under the West Pakistani regime. The speech's call to action is

encapsulated in Bangabandhu's directive: "I now declare the closure of all the courts, offices, and educational institutions for an indefinite period of time. No one will report to their offices that is my instruction to you" (Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib's 7<sup>th</sup> March Speech 26). This bold statement urged the Bengali population to participate in a non-cooperation movement, emphasizing active resistance against the oppressive regime. Spivak's theory underscores the importance of such calls to action in mobilizing subaltern groups by providing them with a platform to express their grievances and assert their rights (Spivak 24).

The speech's impact on mobilizing the Bengali masses is evident in the immediate and widespread response it garnered. By calling for non-cooperation, Bangabandhu united various subaltern groups under a common cause, transcending individual differences to form a cohesive movement. The directive to shut down institutions and halt business transactions was not merely a protest but a strategic move to disrupt the functioning of the oppressive regime, thereby exerting collective power. As Guha notes, the success of nationalist movements often hinges on the ability to mobilize the masses, shifting the focus from elite achievements to the agency of the broader population (Guha 12).

Bangabandhu's speech fostered a collective identity among the Bengali population by emphasizing their shared struggles and aspirations. He stated, "The struggle this time is a struggle for emancipation, the struggle this time is a struggle for independence" (Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib's 7<sup>th</sup> March Speech 28). This rhetoric not only highlighted the historical injustices faced by the Bengalis but also united them in their quest for self-determination and sovereignty. By framing the struggle in terms of emancipation and independence, Bangabandhu instilled a sense of pride and agency among the subaltern, encouraging them to view their fight as a legitimate and noble cause.

The speech's role in empowering the subaltern to resist oppression is further demonstrated through its rhetorical strategies that inspired a spirit of resistance and resilience. Bangabandhu's use of vivid imagery and historical references served to galvanize the Bengali population, reminding them of their collective strength and capacity for resistance. He invoked the memory of past struggles and sacrifices, stating, "The Bengali people have learned how to die for a cause and you will not be able to bring them under your yoke of suppression!" (Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib's 7<sup>th</sup> March Speech 24). This statement reinforced the idea that the Bengali people, despite being marginalized and oppressed, possessed an indomitable spirit capable of challenging the dominant power structures.

Spivak's theory of subalternity provides a framework to understand how such speeches can empower marginalized groups by giving them a voice and a sense of agency. The speech transformed the consciousness of the subaltern by positioning them as active agents in their historical narrative rather than passive victims (Spivak 27). This shift in perspective is crucial in mobilizing the subaltern, as it empowers them to assert their rights and challenge oppressive systems. According to Bhabha, narratives that empower marginalized groups are essential in deconstructing colonial power dynamics and creating spaces for these groups to assert their agency (Bhabha 45).

The speech also addressed the challenges in understanding the consciousness of the subaltern, emphasizing the need to

view their perspective as a counter-narrative to the dominant colonial discourse. By doing so, Bangabandhu's speech empowered the subaltern to articulate their experiences and resist oppression, showcasing their agency in shaping societal narratives.

### **Subaltern Studies and Theoretical Contributions**

Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's 7<sup>th</sup> March speech makes significant contributions to the field of subaltern studies by articulating the voices of the marginalized Bengali population and challenging the dominant narratives imposed by the West Pakistani regime. The speech's impact on subaltern studies can be understood through its ability to highlight the experiences and aspirations of the subaltern, enriching theoretical frameworks within the discipline.

The speech contributes to subaltern studies by providing a concrete example of how marginalized groups can assert their agency and resist oppressive power structures. Spivak's subaltern theory emphasizes the importance of giving voice to the voiceless and challenging the dominant epistemic frameworks that silence these voices (Spivak 24). Bangabandhu's speech aligns with this goal by foregrounding the experiences and demands of the Bengali subaltern, thereby challenging the hegemonic discourse. By articulating the grievances and aspirations of various subaltern groups, the speech serves as a case study for understanding the dynamics of power, resistance, and representation in colonial and post-colonial contexts.

The speech enriches theoretical frameworks within subaltern studies by demonstrating the power of rhetoric and narrative in mobilizing marginalized communities. According to Beverley, subalternity involves a "position without identity," and Bangabandhu's speech provided an identity to these voiceless groups by acknowledging their struggles and aspirations (Beverley 37). The speech's emphasis on emancipation and independence reframed the Bengali struggle as a legitimate and morally justified fight for self-determination, thereby empowering the subaltern to view themselves as active agents in their historical narrative. This rhetorical shift is crucial for understanding how subaltern groups can reclaim their agency and challenge dominant power structures.

The methodological implications for studying subaltern voices and resistance are evident in the speech's approach to articulating the experiences of the marginalized. Spivak's theory highlights the challenges of representing subaltern voices within dominant epistemic frameworks, emphasizing the need for nuanced and context-specific analyses (Spivak 27). Bangabandhu's speech exemplifies the use of primary sources to uncover subaltern perspectives, demonstrating the importance of examining historical texts to understand the dynamics of power and resistance. By analyzing the speech, scholars can gain insights into the ways in which subaltern voices can be mobilized and represented within academic research, contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of subaltern studies.

### **Contemporary Relevance and Societal Implications**

The 7<sup>th</sup> March speech remains highly relevant in contemporary social and political movements, serving as an inspiration for modern struggles for justice and representation. The speech's emphasis on emancipation, independence, and self-determination continues to resonate

with marginalized communities worldwide, highlighting the ongoing relevance of its themes and rhetoric.

In contemporary contexts, the speech inspires movements for social justice, equity, and representation by providing a powerful example of how marginalized groups can mobilize and challenge oppressive systems. As Chakrabarty points out, such speeches are essential in "transforming the consciousness of the subaltern" and enabling them to see themselves as active agents in the historical process (Chakrabarty 23). The speech's call for unity and resistance against injustice encourages modern activists to adopt similar strategies in their own struggles for justice and representation.

The implications for policy and education in promoting subaltern perspectives are significant. Incorporating the speech into educational curricula can promote historical awareness and critical thinking among students, fostering an understanding of subaltern perspectives and the dynamics of power and resistance. Policymakers can use the themes and messages of the speech to inform initiatives aimed at promoting inclusivity, equity, and empowerment for marginalized groups. By emphasizing the importance of collective identity and agency, the speech provides valuable lessons for developing policies that support social justice and representation.

### **Practical Implications for Education and Policy**

To integrate the speech into educational curricula, educators can develop lesson plans and activities that encourage students to analyze the speech's themes and rhetoric. By examining the historical context and impact of the speech, students can gain a deeper understanding of the dynamics of power and resistance, as well as the importance of giving voice to marginalized communities. Additionally, incorporating primary sources such as the speech into history and social studies curricula can promote critical thinking and historical analysis skills.

Policymakers can promote inclusivity and equity by using the speech's themes to inform policy development. Strategies for promoting subaltern perspectives in policy include creating platforms for marginalized voices to be heard, developing initiatives that address systemic inequalities, and ensuring that policies are inclusive and representative of diverse communities. By fostering intergenerational dialogue and collective remembrance, policymakers can also help to preserve the historical significance of the speech and its impact on the independence movement.

### **Conclusion**

Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's 7<sup>th</sup> March speech is a seminal moment in the history of Bangladesh, articulating the voices of the subaltern Bengali population and challenging the dominant narratives imposed by the West Pakistani regime. The speech's emphasis on emancipation, independence, and self-determination continues to inspire modern struggles for justice and representation, highlighting its enduring relevance.

The speech's contributions to subaltern studies are significant, providing a concrete example of how marginalized groups can assert their agency and resist oppressive power structures. By foregrounding the experiences and demands of the Bengali subaltern, the

speech enriches theoretical frameworks within subaltern studies and provides valuable methodological insights for studying subaltern voices and resistance.

Through the lens of Spivak's subaltern theory, the speech's impact on mobilizing the subaltern and empowering them to shape their own destiny becomes evident, highlighting its significance in the history of Bangladesh's independence movement. As Spivak notes, empowering the subaltern to speak and act is essential for challenging oppressive power structures and promoting social justice (Spivak 29). The 7<sup>th</sup> March speech stands as a powerful testament to the enduring strength and resilience of the subaltern Bengali population, inspiring future generations to continue the fight for justice and representation.

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