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Documentation and the Discourse of Hegemony: Understanding "State" and "Non-state" Spaces

Himanshu Parmar
Department of English, H.P. University, Shimla, Himachal Pradesh, India.

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Abstract: The present milieu, marked by Data and its Documentation has engulfed almost all domains of study and life in terms of availability of information that, in turn, offers validity and authentication. However, there remains a facet of humanity that stands beyond the domains of objective data: Culture. The scope and ken of Data and Documentation fall short when it comes to accumulation or 'validation' of Cultural information of a people or physical space. In addition, culture is not a singular concept as physical space comprises "State" and the "Non-state" spaces inhabited by peoples, as elucidated by James C. Scott in *The Art of Not Being Governed.* Moreover, whilst the State does document its culture owing to the luxury of a script, the Non-states, either cannot document their cultural data owing to a lack of script or are incredibly naïve to it owing to their primary focus on orality. This, in turn, generates a hierarchy where the State imposes itself on Non-state spaces. The paper tries to place Culture in its traditional as well as esoteric definitions before assessing how conventional data collection and documentation adversely affect the Non-state spaces and its implications on their cultural continuity. The paper concludes with a feasible alternative to traditional data collection and documentation that shall ensure, in State terminology, a 'record' of the fast-receding Non-state spaces

Keywords: Data, Documentation, Script, Orality, Culture.

1. Introduction

If you didn't document it, it didn't happen. (Qtd. in Shoremi) Contemporaneity stands at a threshold, stepping across which would mark a paradigm shift in human epistemology and its application. Moreover, as members of this ephemeral milieu the'nudge' to go a tad further across this threshold is persistent. What more, for once, there is unanimous and unequivocal support for this "brave new world." The significance of the transition to this new world, metaphorically, is seen akin to that of the shift from verbal to print and from print to digital. This epistemic shift in and to this new world rests on two attributes, the second leading to the first: Artificial Intelligence and Data Collection. The entire corpus of AI, as Artificial Intelligence is called, depends on an 'encryption' and 'decryption' of what it knows and this *Mundus*,relies, in turn, on Data which, then, becomes the root source from where AI draws its 'superpowers.'Data is, hence, tenaciously promulgated as the "absolute determining factor," with all ciphering & deciphering, validationand meaning-making dependent on it. As Wietse Venema, the Dutch Programmer and physicist says, "lack of documentation is becoming a problem for acceptance" (Qtd. in Shoremi).

This data, however, is not innate to AI, but is a conglomeration of information gathered and organized through the process of collection and documentation. The impact of the kind of "luxury" that it offers is so pervasive that documentation has established roots in all domains of epistemology and ontology. Documentation has, then, in contemporaneity, usurped the primary space of human ken, reducing it to the amount of Data that has been documented.

Data, the term has been variously defined: Merriam Webster Dictionary defines it is "factual information (such as measurements or statistics) used as a basis for reasoning, discussion, or calculation;" while Cambridge Dictionary elucidates it as "information, especiallyfacts or numbers, collected to be examined and considered and used to help decision-making, or information in an electronicform that can be stored and used by a computer." Amongst the disparate definers for Data, the common factors that emerge are it being "information" which is, more often than not, "factual" and can be furthered utilized for analysis and, to use research terminology, to authenticate a proposed hypothesis. Two significant factors stand out in this representation of Data: factual information and pre-existing grounds to be argued upon. The entire paradigm of Data, then, becomes affixed to the statistical domain.

The importance being accorded to data has, undoubtedly, led to the accumulation to a substantial amount of it through documentation, and organized, arranged and digitized, it has led to the creation of a huge and ever-expanding reservoir for people, ordinary as well as experts, to draw from. It is an established fact that accumulation of Data and its documentation have worked wonders in multiple spheres of human life, but by being an accumulation, it remains a collection of "factual information," restricting its ambit to a rigid science-oriented approach where universals have a foregrounding presence.

Moreover, there is scope for a misrepresentation of even apparently objective facts: "…documentary records are less useful sources of data for research than might be expected. Each type of record has its own specific types of limitations. Reliance upon such records is misleading unless their limitations are recognized" (Berreman, 6). Additionally, the repertoire of human understanding is not limitable to merely "factual information." In other words, the entire paradigm of human species does not only comprise facts and universal & transcendental information that surpasses spatio-temporality.

There indeed is a domain of human life outside the ambit of science and reasoning: the Lived Life. This "lived life" is the accumulation of life as executed and experienced by individuals and was nomenclatured as Culture.Defined variously and progressively, the term Culture has had an ever-expanding scope and gradual exclusivization as well. As Raymond Williams opines, "The difficulty about the idea of culture is that we are continually forced to extend it…" ("Culture and Society," 274). Conventionally, the term was intended to assemble forms of human expression, be it religious, political, intellectual or institutional. Eagleton explicates it as "'…an exceptionally complex word – the second or third most complex word in the English language, so it has been claimed – but four major senses of it stand out. It can mean (1) a body of artistic and intellectual work; (2) a process of spiritual and intellectual development; (3) the values, customs, beliefs and symbolic practices by which men and women live; or (4) a whole way of life" (Eagleton). In continuation, Williamsfurthers it as: "Culture is ordinary: that is the first fact. Every human society has its own shape, its own purposes, its own meanings. Every human society expresses these, in institutions, and in arts and learning" (Williams, "Culture is Ordinary," 6).

Based on these definitions, it is evident that Culture is the underlying foundation of a society: "The making of a society is the finding of common meanings and directions, and its growth is an active debate and amendment under the pressures of experience, contact, and discovery, writing themselves into the land" (Williams, "Culture is Ordinary," 6). Put in different words, culture of a society delineates the details of the lived behaviour and experiences of the individuals of that society. The idea of the "common meanings," however, also makes the very foundations of culture a problematic one because society as a physical space is not a homogeneous entity. The physical space in which a society exists, comprises of two very significant components: theState and Non-state spaces. Eagleton opines the same when he asserts, "There are no 'whole' societies, in the sense of societies absolved from conflict and contradiction."T. S. Eliot also asserted, "…the term culture…includes all the characteristic activities and interests of a people…We must not think of our culture as completely unified…There are always bits and traces of more primitive faiths, more or less absorbed; there is always the tendency towards parasitic beliefs; there are always perversions…(Eliot, 31-32).

Defining the two spaces vis-à-vis, Scott iterates, "Civilizational discourses never entertain the possibility of people voluntarily going over to the barbarians, hence such statuses are stigmatized and ethnicized. Ethnicity and "tribe" begin exactly where taxes and sovereignty end" (Scott, xi). Any space, then, at a point in temporality, is inhabited by two distinct groups, the mainstream and the peripheral. The binarization, however, has been compromised of late as Scott, while calling the barbarian spaces as "Zomia" (ix), reiterates, "…the largest remaining region of the world whose peoples have not yet been fully incorporated into nation-States. Its days are numbered" (Scott, ix). While originally the distinction was geographical, in terms of the establishment of the centres of governance and the inhabitants in remote regions, with the passage of the time, the distinction became less physical, as interaction happened, and more ideological and ontological. Once the erstwhile physical dimensions were subject to ideological hierarchization, the distinction metamorphosed into binarization and the non-state's days got "numbered" (Scott, ix).

Moreover, as the entire physical space, began to be dominated, influenced and motivated by the State,the term "society" began to refer to *the people* (emphasis mine)from this dominant section andState documentation of their "lived life" as *the culture*(emphasis mine). The structure of society, in State spaces, and its culture, ishomogeneous and rooted in the principle of standardization: "…projects of administrative, economic, and cultural standardization are hard-wired into the architecture of the modern State itself" (Scott, 4). As a result, the meaning and scope of the term "Culture," became esoteric rather than eclectic.The imposition of a standard homogenization on entire physical spaceis an act of forced assertion rather than a natural occurrence because the non-state space within its ambit has a culture distinct from that of the state, thereby making the entire construct of culture being esoteric a problematic and debatable one.

Data collection and documentation, focussed on state space and failed to present the "bits and traces," (Eliot, 31) and rather constructed sweeping and generalized representations of human society and culture by drawing on the State culture and ideology. Scott reiterates, "Hegemonic histories centred on courts and capital cities introduce other distortions as well. They are, forcibly, histories of "State spaces"; they neglect or ignore altogether both "nonState spaces" beyond their reach…" (Scott, 34). Any presence of Non-state spaces in the entire discourse, then, is labelled as "parasitic" and "perversions" (Eliot, 31-32) to the 'normal' and unequivocal State order that, by virtue of its being the "Self," impetuously becomes superior.

This proclivity towards an esotericness and superiorityis furthered by one potent tool that States possess whilst the no-States are invariably devoid of it: the presence of a script. The presence of a script makes documenting the culture of the State easier and also permanent. The significance of the scriptal data that States accumulate is akin to the significance of architectural ruins for history and archaeology: "The larger the pile of rubble you leave behind, the larger your place in the historical record! The more dispersed, mobile, egalitarian societies regardless of their sophistication and trading networks, and despite being often more populous, are relatively invisible in the historical record because they spread their debris more widely" (Scott, 33-34). The data that is, then, generated byStates in a scriptal form makes for the creation of a chronological sequence that foregrounds and glorifies a rich homogeneous culture.The homogeneity, in turn, leads to the creation of an identity that is singular and absolute.This

culture rapidly extendsits physical dominionoverthe Non-states in its tide. Consequently, the singular identity by the mainstream gets thrust on the Non-states, maligning their physical and cultural space. Eventually, theNon-states become inclusive within the ambit of States through an imposition of a culture and history that is alien to them: the data that was documented from the State space and was of the State space is thrust on the Non-states that are, more often than not, obverse to the mainstream State: "…living in a "State space,"…meant an additional and often unpredictable claim on his (resident of Non-state) labor, his grain, and, in the case of war, his very life" (Scott, 66).

The cumulative effect thereby is the production of a discourse of hegemony, one of its own kind, wherein the State, through cultural 'swamping' attempts to bring the Non-states into its social and cultural ambit even if physical affinity is restricted by geographical limitations.S. Abid Husain asserts when he says, "In every country we find different types of ideas and beliefs, but the concrete aspect of the culture determined by the geographical and social conditions is the same…It is the atmosphere which gives to the people of a country a common outlook and temperament though they may differ in their religious and philosophical ideas. This common national temper and mind is the most important source of the common national culture" (14). The very use of the terms "common" and "national temper" highlight how the entire discoursebecomes a narrative of a uni-directional Appropriation, one in which the documented data of the State defines the Non-state, generating in the process, a national homogenous singular culture which does not restrict itself to only homogeneity but also generates a national identity.

The creation of such a discourse marks the dawn of the process of Appropriation and Assimilation.The StateAppropriates the Non-state within its ambit by generating a structure where the Non-state institutions are synonymized with the institutions of the State. In other words, the Non-state culture is projected as a sub-category of the singular cultural discourse, foregrounding it only as an extension of the mainstream. In the process, various tools are resorted to, such as simplification of the *devta*culture of the Non-states by placing the*devtas*asderivatives or 'forms' and theirnames as corrupt or localnames of the State Gods.

This Appropriation, however, is not always resisted by Non-states, who,realizing the advantages of being closer to the State, often opt for Assimilation:

…active tendency toward emulation. The motivation is simply to be respected by plains people, for Paharis increasingly feel the effects of their unorthodox religious and social practices as a result of their increasing contacts with people adhering to plains values, especially with people in positions of authority or influence. Paharis are considered to be rustic, degraded Hindus by most plainsmen…By adopting some of the symbols of plains culture, Paharis hope to improve their status in the eyes of the plains people. Instrumental in this change have been those Paharis who have had the most extensive and intensive exposure to orthodox plains viewpoints. (Berreman, 139)

The example of *Mahasu Devta* in Himachal and Uttarakhand is a glaring example to substantiate the argument. Worshipped for centuries as four brothers who came from Srinagar, the Mahasu brothers are now believed to beforms of Shiva. Hagar Shalev and Asaf Sharabi assert this transition: "…Mahasu…is linked to Siva." (250). The connect, offers them a chance at equity with the State, otherwise unavailable: "Paharis, like low-caste groups of the plains, have lacked equivalent facilities and experience for acquiring the knowledge and competence" (Berreman, 140).

However,the 'fusion' generates a problematic in terms of generating a palimpsest where the original ritual idiom of the Non-state is over-shadowed by the State idiom through a State deity. Consequently, not only is the local name lost, but also the folklore goes abegging because the newvisible layer "belongs" to the State order. Hence, the apparent 'advantage' comes at the cost ofcompromising Non-stateidentity, the pivotal point of this entire discussion on data accumulation and documentation.

This Appropriation, however, is not accepted absolutely by the Non-states, but, through selective and highly targeted choices they turn the process into *Selective* (emphasis mine) Assimilation. The Non-states, in the wake of their physical space being "flooded" by the State, realigned their "live experiences" and cultural autonomy to, what Gellner says, "a choice" (Scott, 29) wherein the Non-states religiously defended the primeval status of certain aspects of their life while accepting Assimilation in others. Gellner, while defining Marginal tribalism opines: "Such tribalism…knows what it rejects" (Qtd. in Scott, 30).But, in the process of Appropriation and Assimilation, the Non-state culture is adversely affecteddoubly. First, it is altered to suit the mainstream, leading to the loss of critical cultural nuances of the Non-state as is the case with *Mahasu*:

…the presence of Mahasu has become less concrete and more abstract…we were told that in fact Mahasu is everywhere…a drummer of Pabasi (one of Mahasu brothers) in Thadiyar village said, "This is how it is in all India. There is more than one *murti* (image). So you can say Mahasu is mostly in Hanol, but he is everywhere." The drummer was trying to explain this idea of abstraction of the *devta* by connecting it to the way he believes God is perceived all over India. (Shalev, 250)

Secondly, in the hierarchy that is often generated, the Non-state becomes an inferior subordinate to the generated ostensibly 'original' discourse and the Non-state*devtas*for whom an equivalentState God is not found are, then, relegated to inferior positions and placed subordinate to the State Gods:

…village *deotas* were subordinate to a more powerful territorial god. Territorial gods in turn, offered obeisance to the supreme deity of the State. (Singh, 9)

Thiseventual hierarchy also emerges vividly in the modes and language employed for Data collection and Documentation.Documentation, according to Cambridge Dictionary is "pieces of papercontainingofficialinformation" or "officialpapers, or written material that providesproof of something." The definitions emphasize on "paper" and "written material," which are exclusively scriptaland cumulatively, the *ecriture* is heavily burdened against the Non-state. So explicit is the decimation that the term "oral documentation" has become an example of a paradox.

Moreover, much like the Saussurean linguistics, the language generates a databank of binaries: the national vis-à-vis the regional; the civilized vis-à-vis the barbaric; the cultural vis-à-vis the brute; the urban vis-à-vis the rural; and the intellectual vis-à-vis the superstitious. As with every binary, the first, positive, represents the State, andit's absence, the negative, theNon-state.Consequently, the absence of governance defines the Non-state as a chaos; and the absence of culture, as the unpolished and crude. Given the Appropriation, scriptality and the labelling, then, any recipient of the documented dataencounters, not a

conglomeration of objective factual information, but a highly biased and flawed representation of the cultural and physical space in consideration.

What makes matters worse is that in the absence of a script or a corresponding "paper trail" (Scott, 34), the Non-state is found wanting in data and its documentation and consequently in empirical evidence to substantiate their culture. As a result, the Non-stateis stripped off of its agency: in the linguistic epistemology, the agency of script and agency of standardization, while they define State space, their absence defines the Non-state space. In the wake of the 'illuminance' of these State agencies, the Non-state agencies of oral documentation are relegated into the darkness as mere superstitions or primeval entertainments.

The idea of data collection and documentation, then, though significant whilst catering to the "factual" and the strictly scientific, falls short when assigned the task of cultural accumulation. Secondly, because its remaining restricted to the scriptal, aural or visual makes it a tool in State hands, the Non-states, without the traditional notion of data documentation face another dilemma:

The day may not be far-off when like the aborigines…will have ceased to walk on this earth…Only their skulls and skeletons will remain on display…in some museums somewhere…And that will be their last contribution to civilisation…They will not know what they gave to civilisation but the future generations will know what the civilisation gave to them. (Roy, 11)

In other words, having rejected data collection and documentation as an authentic source for the Non-state, what should their resort be for ensuringtheir chronological sustenance and continuity of their culture? The answer to this question navigates its way through another critical question. What should be documented and what not?

The basic premise for this question evolves from the basic character of the culture of oral communities: Sacredness.This sacredness is concretely embeddedin their mundane life and has a flexibility that bestows dynamismto it. Any form of conventional documentation is "face value" centric or denotative, focussing on what is tangible, but the sacredness of the non-states is intangible in the way it is executed in the physical world.In other words, the Non-state has a Ritual Idiom whose entirety cannot be statistically captured in its true essence and value, which lies "hidden."While documenting may work for the fixed idioms but dynamicidioms shall be lost in the process. On the other hand, not documenting may lead to a loss of the entire traditional idiom, more so in contemporaneity when, in the wake of globalization, less and less people are keen on sustaining their traditional life. Hence, it is crucial to delineate what "needs" and not "can" be documented because everything can be documented but not all needs to be documented.

Looking at the rituals of the *pahari*regions of Himachal, it emerges that while the sequence of *dev parampara* may be documented owing to its fixity in spite of the wave of modernity; the actual *dev karyavaahi*, like the *khel*of the *gur* should not be documented owing to its dynamism and flexible nature. So much so, that even aural or videographed documentation should be dissuaded because documentation, in any form, is the first step towards Appropriation as it prepares it for a pan State cultural paraphernalia and ideology. What is of utmost significance is that the orality of these communities or naivete with script should not become a license to indiscriminately collect data about their culture and document it.

An unhindered space for the continuation of the dynamic aspect of Non-staterituals, in their pristine and uncorrupted form,shall ensure the chronological sustenance of the Non-state culture.Being governed by the *dev agya*. This unhindered space implies leaving the *karyavaahi* part alone, to be executed, in its context, with its primeval liberty.Doing so shall ensure that the non-state space is not entirely Appropriated and sustained against the "thorns" of time. This becomes more relevant in the light of the fact that state has incessantly involved itself in appropriating the non-state through 'specific' documentation in synchronization with policies directed against the non-states and their way of living: "As one government ethnographer informed a foreign colleague, the purpose of his study of the hill economy "was to see how 'nomadic' slash-and-burn agriculture can be eradicated among the minorities." The "campaign to sedentarize the Nomads," began in 1954, has, in one guise of another, remained a steadfast policy" (Scott, 78).

Moreover, data collection and its documentation is a practice whose novelness is being transformed into a dangerous obsession in the current milieu. It is however, also pertinent to realize thatgathering information, is what it was primarily set out for, which, in itself, is indeed a novel purpose given that it is the sole source of recording the annals of human history. What makes it problematic is not the concept but the application of it. Data collection and documentation becomecontentious when stretched into domains that are not strictly informational, but primarily subjective and unmeasurable, like ethics and culture.

Abiding by the right process, ethics and culture could, at the most, be derivatives from a study of objective data and yet, the very thing shall divest ethics and culture of their most significant property: immediate dynamism, the ability to be different every time it is executed, much like the *dev karyavaahi*, which though under the fixity of *dev Parampara*, is still different each time it is executed. The idea of proper data collection and documentation, then, is one where it does not interfere with the "immediate dynamism" of lived experiences, and certainly not promulgated as the sole authenticator and validator as it is professed to be.

The greatest irony is that in pursuit of "verifiable scriptal sources for authenticity" (used by me only, in the previous line), originality, "lived experience" and first-hand knowledge, most potent weapons of Non-state identity, as authenticators and validators are swept under the carpet through their systemic negation: Where to get answers to the Primary questions from if everything is to be produced from documented sources?

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