

Everyday Life of the “Subjects” in an Alienating Lifeworld

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Abstract: *Highlighting the dialogical and dialectical method of subject formation and engagement with the alienating lifeworld the present paper argues that the self is not only historically and socially constructed within the asymmetrical power relations but also grows up with a unique critical agency that can act, both individually and collectively, to bring about the desired changes in the lifeworld for a responsible and ethically rich “good life”. It is in this duality that the author locates the post-modern politics, where subjects, living a similar precarious life, laden with injustices and violence, can join hands for transformative actions without sacrificing their subjective autonomy or individuality.*

Keywords: Subject, subjectivation, agency, structural duality, lifeworld, alienation, subversion.

Introduction

There are two possible approaches, combined into one, to understand the everyday life of ordinary people in an alienating lifeworld: (1) theoretical, where we can select and examine the philosophical, psychological, economic, political and sociological discourses that help decode the immediate and larger lifeworld, and (2) empirical, where we select a population in an alienating, overpowering, constraining historical-social-cultural-political-economic locale (context) and examine how the subjects individually and collectively construe their subjective and intersubjective existential-phenomenological experiences and concerns and act upon them. From the perspective of a subject (or subjects), the segregation of theoretical/philosophical and empirical/existential/ontological is possible only at the conceptual plane; in reality, however, the processes of theorization and action are integrated into the process of transcendental self-formation. I

will proceed, in this paper, with the presumption that every individual is privy to the power of cognition, reflection, critical self-objectification, and a certain level of philosophization or discourse formation and action, at both individual and collective levels. I would argue that compared to the vulnerable oppressed classes, who experience a higher degree of precariousness and violence the intellectuals have better access to social and philosophical discourses, critical consciousness, economic freedom, and social capital to express themselves in a greater social space. However, a large section of them might also work as an active agent of the system.

To understand the nuances of the complex everyday life of differentially located, and often undefined social beings we need a sound methodology that has to be theoretically holistic, comprehensive, eclectic, flexible, and empirically rich. The core subject matter in the sociology of everyday life, I reckon, is the subject (self)-social world (or lifeworld) relationship, which is essentially dialectical. Therefore, it is important to understand (1) the process of subject (or self) formation or “subjectivation” and the dynamic transcendence of the subjects and their actions in a social-historical-social space, and (2) how the gradually forming selves and agencies critically reflect on the forces of the lifeworld and change their constituent elements and form. The constituent elements of the social or life world that impact the process called “subjectivation” are the social-cultural traditions and discourses, and the local, national, state-centric, and global forces that are external to the subjects; they operate with endless power and leave a colonizing-alienating impact on the subjects-in-the-making. This, however, does not deter the autonomy-seeking subjects from consciously, dialogically, and dialectically engaging with both the process of self-transcendence and intersubjective transformative social and political actions. The asymmetrical power relations not only impact the process of self-formation but also grant space to the subjects to reflect, objectify, examine, and transform the self-constitutive elements and experiences.

What is everyday life?

Henri Lefebvre begins with the simplest definition of everyday life as ‘how we live ... for example, a day in the life of an individual, any day, no matter how trivial’ (Lefebvre 1991: 196). It refers to the mundane or trivial everyday, which we live habitually without much reflection or criticality. Lefebvre, however, was prompt in cautioning that everyday life may be familiar to us but that does not mean we understand it; we have to search for the extraordinary in the ordinary (Lefebvre 1987: 9). A definition of

everyday life, according to Lefebvre, would be everything left once the work is removed: 'everyday life is sustenance, clothing, furnishing, homes, lodging, neighbourhoods, environments' and something that is "continually being rewritten" (Lefebvre 1971: 21) in the light of 'contact and conflict between desire and need, the serious and frivolous, nature and culture, the public and the private' (Elden 2004: 111).

Lefebvre's understanding of everyday life, according to Elden (2004) is located in the philosophical tradition set by Lukacs and Heidegger. Lukacs, in *History and Class Consciousness*, critiqued the "inauthentic life" in capitalism, which offers a trivial life of commodity fetishism and mechanical existence (Lukacs 1971). Heidegger's notion of *Alltaglichkeit* (everydayness) outlined in *Being and Time* (1962), refers to an "inappropriate" or "inauthentic" way of being, where humans do as one does, and the authentic or "appropriate" way of being is not open to them (see, Elden 2004: 112). Heidegger elaborated on the repetitive nature of everyday life. Lefebvre dismissed Heidegger's attribution of "primitivity, triviality and anonymity" to the notion of everyday life on the ground that it sounds homogenous and partial and tends to overlook the contraction between the trivial and the extraordinary and the dialectical possibilities (Lefebvre 1991: 20). The study of everyday life, which, in essence, is structurally alienated and full of contradictions between "trivial" and the extraordinary, theory and praxis, requires a combined informed and critical approach by the sociologist and the philosopher. Everyday life, for Lefebvre, is not life in a single day, today, or a day in history. Still, it is a fair representation of one's life reflecting the dialogical encounter with the alienating structural and historical forces.

Lefebvre decodes how the structural forces in capitalism alienate the mundane life of the working class appropriating its work time, leisure time, and constrained time (preparation for work, travel, bureaucratic formalities, and so on). While Marx focused on alienation at the workplace (through the appropriation of surplus labour and surplus value) Lefebvre argued that modern capitalism had colonized the social, cultural, political, and geographical space through commodification and accumulation of profit. The workers' limited leisure time, for example, was appropriated by setting up gin house or pub for getting a part of the workers' wages back into the system. Lefebvre considers modern capitalism as the "bureaucratic society of controlled consumption" (Lefebvre 1971: 69), where everyday life is both under-developed and over-organized. One such area is life in planned and packaged new towns, where everyday life is "colonized" by new

technology and “consumer society”. The new townships, for example, offer a standardized homogenous lifestyle with fetishized consumption – fashion, home furnishing, healthy eating, beauty products, and so on (Lefebvre 2003: 101-2). There are even instances of commodifying ethnic artefacts, performative culture, dress, and cuisine in modern life. Like the workers, the women also experience an alienated life. In the third volume of *Critique of Everyday Life* (2014), Lefebvre construes the alienation of women in modern life - in their work, at home women, in their use of technological appliances around the home, in their consumption of advertisements, in their relaxed time with lifestyle magazine and romantic novel.

The critique of everyday life, for Lefebvre, also refers to the critique of the “elite” by the masses, critique of the trivial by the exceptional – of the festival, dreams, art, and poetry by the reality, which again is not a one-way critique of either this or that, but a dialectically driven process, which will lead the masses towards a “cultural revolution”. The “cultural revolution” is not an aesthetic revolution, but, for Lefebvre, it is a revolution in culture to create a new style of life, free of the forces of alienation; the revolution will “put an end to everydayness” (Lefebvre 1971: 36). Lefebvre gives a call to ‘let everyday life become a work of art! Let every technical means be employed for the transformation of everyday life’, which will end the conflicts of interests and the shrewd strategies of dehumanization and all forms of fragmentations and alienation; the true critique of everyday life will, thus, imply a rehabilitation of everyday life (Lefebvre 1971: 36-7; 1991: 127).

In my understanding, the word “everyday life” refers to the mode and method to organize and live our routine mundane life with a certain degree of regularity, which, in essence, requires a definition of our social location, our ontological or existential and aesthetic concerns (or needs and goals) and selection of the course of actions necessary to address those concerns. It is the social space where individuals are constituted as distinctive subjects and interact with others following some rules and methods, conscious or unconscious about the structural forces that tend to control and alienate them; it is a social space where they constitute and reconstitute themselves and make changes dynamically not only in the subjects that they are but also on the forces that impact their lives. In living a life, the individual subjects learn and put into effect the techniques of addressing their ontological and existential concerns, construct a dynamic discursive order, with elements of cognition, interests, priorities, technology of life, aesthetic and ethical standards, engaging dialogically and dialectically with the

available social-cultural forms in all these areas. The elements that constitute the subject are always relative, tentative, and pregnant with possibilities of chances and alterations; yet, the individuals venture to live their everyday lives, based on logically selected relative discourses and styles.

The routine present life is an “average of life” which reflects and represents the style of one’s life; a dissected slice of one’s life in a time. The accumulated information and wisdom, the learned technology of life, and the rules and ethical standards, which, in Bourdieu’s terms, constitute one’s “habitus”¹, consciously or unconsciously (habitually) help or hinder the organization of the subject’s everyday life. Again, living in the present involves a strategic preparedness for tomorrow – a pre-emptive articulation of future concerns and preparation, full or partial. Since every individual is located in a differential social “field” and her/his concerns and interests are also different; the mode of living the everyday life for an individual is therefore bound to be unique. However, this does not rule out a group of people living with shared and similar concerns and applying some collective efforts to address them. The sufferings and struggles of the ethnically homogenous impoverished tribe, a micro linguistic group on the verge of extinction, or an extremely exploited dehumanized class of factory workers may focus more on their collective or group identities in addressing their everyday sufferings and struggles for a change. Even in such cases, the individual members retain their subjective uniqueness.

Some foundational elements, which could vary from subject to subject, construe a normal human being, namely, the sensory organs, neurons, the brain that feels, and imagines, the world of desires, the pre-linguistic expression of desires called semiotics, and so on. The subject then decodes and interrogates the symbolic world; and operates with the power of interpretation, cognition, decision-making, and action while interacting with fellow members of the micro and macro social spaces. In this open-ended process, which is integral to living one’s life, the individual subjects are constituted and reconstituted through the objectification of self and the symbolic forms, reflection, interrogation, dialogical and dialectical engagements, integration, rejection, reformation and, in the process, they create new life forms. The relationship between the subjects and the structural forms thus moves dialectically; while the symbolic forms shape and constrain the subjects it is the latter who brings about changes in the social forms through amendments and replacement (of the old forms with the new ones). For example, it is the individuals who make the idea of God (courtesy Feuerbach, Marx), and once God and religion are formed, they

discipline and control the social (and moral) life of social beings. The dialectical relation does not end there; as God ages (Durkheim) and dies (Nietzsche) with the spread of secular discourses, scientific knowledge, new political ideologies, and atheism. Another example of this structure-agency dynamics could be that many Indians, born and raised in caste culture, gradually grow in agency and reject caste through dialogical and dialectical engagements.

The cognition, practice, and transformation of the given social institutions and discourses by the individuals are not without a purpose. In moving through these cognitive and social processes the individual is driven, consciously or unconsciously, by the Socratic realization that the ultimate goal of human existence is not just to live but to live a good, meaningful, aesthetic, and virtuous life. It is on this foundational principle that the everyday ontological or existential world is constructed. "Virtue" according to Socrates, is a combination of "knowledge" and "ethics"; it is not simply a matter of doing good things; it is also a matter of knowing what is good and acting accordingly². The existential (or ontological) and aesthetic concerns of human life in society are ideally addressed through a method that demands adherence to socially accepted institutions, rules, and moral (ethical) principles. Every society has an elaborate ethical standard and disciplining institutional mechanisms (or technology of discipline and control) or "traditions" at a given time, which are never fixed and keep changing depending on the demands of the situation.

The language and the given symbolic world constitute our tradition or social-cultural space. There is a complex institutional network that reproduces traditions to maintain a social equilibrium with "disciplined", repressed, and interpellated individuals. The desires, needs, interests, and differential understanding of the purpose and mode of living motivate individuals to reflect on the styles of living, experiences, and cognitive elements and the given symbolic and institutional patterns and create multiple dialectical loops and the points of subversion. This can happen in the ontological, aesthetic, and ethical fields between the in-the-making subjects and the given forms, the habitus, and the existing discursive orders. Thus begins a life-long course of construction, deconstruction, and reconstruction of the given cultural forms at the subjective and collective (objective) levels.

Through a dialogical and dialectical engagement with the given cultural forms we not only transform ourselves (in the process of being and becoming) but also inject dynamism into the elements of culture and practices through constant interrogation and subversion. The power of interrogation

and subversion depends on the relative social and ethical location of the subjects or the "agencies". Thus, those with material freedom and empowered with ethical-philosophical enlightenment and "will to transformation" can operate with greater freedom to question and subvert the given hegemonic forms while those who lack material self-reliance and political will or responsibility might live a "voiceless life"; they might live without a subversive agency and would be forced to make different kinds of compromises with the hegemonic social forces. Although material and intellectual freedom could be the preconditions for expressing one's agency, as in the case of the critical intellectuals of the civil society who play their role with a sense of responsibility, the so-called subaltern classes, despite not having a privileged position as the middle-class intellectuals, indeed raise their voices of protest against injustice.

Thus, the central questions in the study of everyday life are (1) to decode the dialectics of the formation of the transcendental conscious-critical self (or agency), the construction of discourses of life (or the perceptive order), and "the logic of practice" (or the language of everyday life actions), (2) to understand what kind of care the subjects take and the methods deploy to sustain their distinctiveness and autonomy in the face of the disciplining impact of the historical and social forces, and (3) to disentangle when and how the subjects communicatively reach an intersubjective ethical-normative position and engage in a politics of transformation in search of a better life. Everyday life, therefore, is the space where the processes of colonization and alienation take place; it is also the space that facilitates the struggle for autonomy and freedom.

The Subjects in the Alienating Lifeworld

Edmund Husserl, who had first used the word "lifeworld", had conceived it as the given and outer world that the subjects experience together. He introduced the concept in his *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Philosophy* (1936) stating:

In whatever way we may be conscious of the world as the universal horizon, as the coherent universe of existing objects, we, each "I-the-man" and all of us together, belong to the world as living with one another in the world; and the world is our world, valid for our consciousness as existing precisely through this "living together." We, as living in wakeful world consciousness, are constantly active based on our passive having of the world... This is true not only for

me, the individual ego; rather we, in living together, have the world pre-given in this together, belong, the world as a world for all, pre-given with this ontic meaning... The we-subjectivity... [is] constantly functioning (Husserl 1936: 108-109)

In Husserl's understanding, both the subjects and the lifeworld are intersubjectively constituted through interactions and experiences and the subjects are capable of arriving at the "objective truth", or at least as close to that (Husserl 1936: 133). In post-structural time, the idea of objective universal truth has lost much of its ground, yet people experience reality, live a shared life, and search for the "concrete", however fuzzy everything appears to be. We have to admit that there is a certain degree of givenness in the lifeworld; the cultural traditions, the larger structural forces, the linguistic-symbolic order, the power arrangements, the discourses endorsed by power, and so on. In the world of globalism, there are always some "unconscious" terrains of the external world and global forces that impact our lives. These relatively unconscious elements of the lifeworld often operate with the full backing of the asymmetrical national and global power hierarchies and leave an alienating impact on the lives of ordinary subjects; only the philosophically enlightened ones are capable of decoding those "unconscious structures" (to use Levi-Strauss' phraseology)³.

The shared historical-social-cultural-discursive tradition of a population bound to space and time and the larger national and global forces constitute our lifeworld and constrain our self-perceptions, experiences, and actions leaving an alienating impact on us, the subjects. The latter, however, use their cognitive and reflexive power and select the elements of their selves, strive for autonomy, and act back on the given forces to change the alienating lifeworld. Therefore, the task before us is to disentangle the forces of the lifeworld that impact the process of subject formation and alienation and how they work back on the forces of alienation in search of a freer space and the kind of life they desire.

How does the lifeworld leave an alienating impact on our lives? Marx's interpretation of ideology (which includes religion and the bourgeois political ideologies and cultural traditions) alongside the ideas of Nietzsche and Freud make us doubt the transparency of our everyday understandings of our identity and the social world we inhabit (Ricouer 1970: 32-33). In *The German Ideology* Marx and Engels refer to ideology as involving an "inversion" of the relation between individuals and their circumstances, and obscure the reality rather than generating genuine illumination (MECW Vol. 5: 36).

Marx argues that ideological beliefs constitute ideas of the “ruling” or “dominant” class of the time and are widely shared for a long period (MECW Vol. 5: 59); they are social since they impact the subjects’ understanding of self and society and their actions. The ruling class ideology reflected in the dominant legal, political, religious, and philosophical views helps discipline and integrate the people into the social order and gives it much-needed stability (MECW Vol. 29: 263). Marx’s account of ideology claims that the dominant social ideas in class-divided societies are generally false or misleading and work to the advantage of the economically dominant class; they essentially help reproduce the exploitative and unjust social orders. According to Marx, ideology always contains an obfuscating effect on the consciousness of the working classes. Ideology often portrays institutions, policies, and decisions as being in the interests of the society as a whole (MECW Vol. 5: 60); and ideology often portrays social and political arrangements that are contingent, historical, or artificial, as being necessary, or universal, or natural (MECW Vol. 35: 605). In the contemporary neoliberal and partially globalized capitalism that India is, private entrepreneur-led economic growth, social development or *Vikash* (progress) and peoples’ wellbeing are being propagated as synonymous or religion is propagated as fundamental to people’s wellbeing; these are examples of how ideology can obscure the reality-based consciousness.

Ideology alone cannot bind people to the social order; the other factors that might make people surrender, consciously or habitually, are livelihood concerns, the fear of punishment, the risks involved in moves for alternatives; sensitivity to the possible costs of radical social change; and collective action problems of various kinds which face those who do want to rebel and resist. Marx does not think individuals are perpetually trapped within ideological modes of thinking. The lived experiences and an informed understanding of the modes of exploitation and injustice and participation in political movements might push them towards a path of social transformation. The ruling classes spread the “unscientific” ideas not to enlighten people with truth but to conceal, misrepresent, or justify flaws in that society in ways that redound to the benefit of the economically dominant class (Rosen & Wolff 1996: 235–236).

Drawing from Marx, Horkheimer and Adorno in *Culture Industry* (2002) have argued (1) ‘The whole world is passed through the filter of the culture industry’ controlled by the owning classes (2002: 99) (2) that in modern capitalist societies culture (the whole entertainment culture) is produced like commodities and sold to the common masses or the consumers for the

accumulation of capital (2) that the “texts” or items produced in the form of films, plays, music, radio and television entertainment homogenise the mass culture⁴, (3) that the culture thus produced is cheap and vulgar repetitive and reproductive styles which create a world of fantasy, unrelated to the struggles of the working classes and bereft of aesthetic or “critical-political” elements which thrive by moulding the tastes of the masses and by marginalising the alternative cultural productions from the below which might have promoted critical-subversive consciousness, and (4) that by mediating mass culture through culture industry the owning classes achieve ideological integration of the masses into the order. The idea of commodity fetishism is highly relevant in neo-liberal capitalism, which thrives by turning everything into a commodity and all people as consumers.

The common people, the masses, or the non-owning classes that do not control power are thus faced with the gruelling task of fighting on two fronts - (1) the alienating “traditional culture” that travels through the “natural-social” institutions and channels of socialization and (2) the “modern culture” that flows from the culture industry as commodities of entertainment to keep their critical consciousness and hope for an alternative culture alive. In a country like India the distinction between “traditional” and “modern” is thin since all the modern media, controlled by the corporate houses with the backing of the state, reappropriate and reproduce the “traditional-religious” culture and thus reinforce the “Sonatoni-Hindutva” culture full of elements of pre-science, superstitions and fantasies. The task of the masses to keep themselves free of cultural (hence political) alienation is all the more difficult since both cultural styles are reproduced and popularised with the full backing of the classes, empowered with all control over the means of mediation, coercion, and sanction, with vested interests in the capitalist order. The colonization of the mass consciousness turns the masses into fanatic and violent defenders of the promoted culture as they do not hesitate to attack – through criticism, trolling, or physical attacks – those who take a critical position against the items of the culture industry. Even Satyajit Ray, the great Bengali filmmaker of the last century, was attacked for making a film called *Devi*, where the filmmaker criticized superstition and religious fanaticism and not the Hindu religion.

Henri Lefebvre critiques capitalist social formation based on his observations on the trivial details of everyday experience, which he termed as inauthentic since the “real” is hidden and mystified in the consumer society, which is colonized by capitalism. Although mystified and alienated, Lefebvre was optimistic that everyday life was the only possible source of resistance and

political change. He decoded the alienated everyday life of the common people while applying a bottom-up approach and asserted that humans, the creative beings, are capable of understanding the structural logic of their alienated everyday life and effect the necessary changes. Following Gramsci and Althusser, Lefebvre understood that 20th-century capitalism dominates not only the economic life but also the cultural and social spheres.

In his phenomenal volumes (1 and 2) of the *Critique of Everyday Life*, Henri Lefebvre picked up ideas and substances from Marx’s writings to build a grand theory of alienation of the subjects in their everyday lives. Lefebvre was aware of Marx’s preoccupation with alienation at the workplace in production relations at the same time he had a clear understanding of how Marx was concerned with alienation in a “wide range of areas” (Elden 2004: 110), leading to an overall “dehumanization” of lives in the capitalist system. Lefebvre quoted Lenin (1963: 141) (in the ‘Forward to the second edition’ of the first volume of the *Critique of Everyday Life*) who commented that Marx in *Capital* showed that the ‘whole capitalist formation to the reader as a living thing – with its every aspect’. For Lefebvre, ‘Marxism is a critical knowledge of everyday life’ in capitalist social formation (Lefebvre 1991: 148). This is one illustration of his point:

‘Alienation’ – I know there is the love song I sing or the poem I recite, in the banknote I handle or the shop I enter, in the poster I glance or in the lines of this journal. At the very moment the human is defined as ‘having possessions’ I know it there, dispossessing the human (Lefebvre 1991: 183).

In Lefebvre’s understanding, the capitalist mode of production has integrated industry, agriculture, the historical city and its space, and the people’s everyday life. Alienation, prompted by capitalism, is thus economic, social, political, ideological, and philosophical (Lefebvre 1991: 249). Lefebvre argues that the workers have a life at the workplace, that is completely alienated; however, they feel the alienation in their social, political, and cultural life, even in their leisure as ‘alienation is leisure (is) just as in work’⁵ since culture has become a commodity: ‘everything is for sale’ (1991: 173).

We live in a symbolic world made of beliefs, ideologies, superstitions, traditions, collectively set styles of life, and pursue priorities without thorough examinations. Since most of them are historically and socially legitimized we are often constrained to follow them against our subjective will even when we have alternative discourses and ideas. Besides, there are visible and invisible powerful structural elements in social hierarchical situations,

such as in family, educational institutions, social and political organizations, markets, workplaces, national and global power arrangements, and trade organizations, where we always find some individuals or forces forcing their will on us. Thus, in our everyday life, we find ourselves in chains and unfreedom and do things we do not want to do, or, given a choice, we should not have done. In other words, we often find ourselves alienated in the given social-symbolic world that constrains our everyday life. Again, a lot of things that we do appear “normal”, “rational”, and “in line with our interests”, hence unproblematic. However, when examined with deeper insight these activities reappear as “illusory”, non-rational, and even against our interests; the things that we do under an ideological spell (political or religious and other illusory discourses), running after fetishized commodities while under the spell of the market-generated fantasy (like a youth committing suicide for not being given a smartphone of his/her liking or an IIT student, unable to cope with examination pressure, taking his life) would fall in this category.

The alternative and conflictual views strike the individual subjects when they are informed, have some theoretical-critical understanding of the situation, they have a feeling of uneasiness about the current situation and a will to subvert the given styles of life; in other words, when they have an “agency”. But every society has an elaborate arrangement for the reproduction of the given social forms through regularisation of the processes of socialization and “interpellation”⁶. This takes us to the naturalization of the social forms which generate in us a great deal of “voluntarism” to follow them; we then forget to enliven our subjective agencies to work for alternative social forms. In most cases, however, we are never either this or that; rather, we are a combination of conscious and unconscious positions and make “willful” or “unwilling” compromises even when we have other ideas. On the whole, however, the alienating, mystified lifeworld thus provides a site for the subjects to reflect and organize actions for the creation of a better lifeworld.

The “Death” and “Coming to Life” of the “Subjects”

Rene Descartes, the 17th Century philosopher, made a definitive statement “Cogito Ergo Sum” translated as “I think, therefore, I exist”, where the thinking mind is considered the only real thing, all other constituent elements of the self are the ideas about the body and the external world (the Cartesian “other”). The simple self, the mind, can also think about itself and its existence through “objectification of self” (Shapiro 2013). The self,

perceived as “sovereign” that can even “constitute God” and put everything (even the self) under a scanner (doubt) was indeed a revolutionary idea.

In the latter half of the 19th Century and the first half of the 20th Century, when social scientists were preoccupied with the interpretation of the individual-society relationship, the focus was on the all-inclusive and all-pervasive “society” which was taken to be the force that determined the individual or the self. The idea of “structural determination of self” gained prominence in British, American, and French structuralism and American *Culture and Personality School*. The “determined or constructed subject” seems to have been retained in Foucault’s anti-subjective hypothesis, particularly in his early archaeological and genealogical writings, where he stood by the idea of self, being historically constructed through the power-knowledge regime, where the subject is perceived to be constructed discursively and reproduced through an elaborate arrangement of surveillance, discipline and punish. Without going into details, we can argue that in his early writings, particularly, *The Order of Things* (1970), *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1972), and *Discipline and Punish* (1977) Foucault elaborated his early perception of the constituted subject, understandably under the influence of French Structuralism.

However, a close reading of Foucault reveals that even in his early writings, he was trying to decode the processes of subject formation or “subjectivation”, as a part of the preparation for his ultimate project of finding ways to the formation of free and active selves. Foucault, on the one hand, acknowledged the significance of historical and social forces and the asymmetrical power relations in subject formation and, on the other hand, granted the subject an active part in its formation. In other words, the Foucauldian “subject” is not the passive recipient of the character elements that are offered by the power-knowledge regime but is capable of reflexively and dialogically participating in selecting the elements of self. In his “afterward” to *Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics* (1982) entitled ‘The Subject and Power’, Foucault hints at the ways and means to free the subject from domination and control of the state. The prime concern, for him, was to liberate the subjects from the control of the power-knowledge. Foucault, of course, was not willing to accept any universal moral-ethical standard or any universal discourse that proposed the liberation of humankind, such as modernism or Marxism, on the ground that the “truth claim” of any discourse is questionable and a discourse always works on the principle of totalitarianism and violence, which is essentially detrimental

to the idea of free subjects. This is the central argument of Foucault when he critiqued the truth-claim of “Enlightenment” (Foucault 1997).

Foucault’s idea of autonomous post-structural self, empowered with the critical-creative agency, bloomed in his later writings, lectures, and interviews where he (1) critiqued the Freudian oppression thesis (*History of Sexuality, Vol. 1*), (2) elaborated the ideas of a self, capable of protecting his/her distinctive elements of self, such as the ethical standards and freedom (in ‘The Ethic of Care for the Self as a Practice of Freedom’ 1988), and (3) developed the idea of self, capable of critically engaging with power-knowledge regime while taking part in collective new political movements (such as students’ movement, gay rights movements, environmental movements and so on) without sacrificing the subjective autonomy (Foucault 1980, 1982, 1984, 2000).

Upholding the “progressive-modernity” project Habermas stood for a universal moral-ethical order, which could be arrived at through free intersubjective and argumentative communications (and free speech) and which would guide individuals to act politically for social transformation. Drawing from George Herbert Mead, Habermas argued that the subject or the self-conscious being emerges through social interactions:

The self ... is dependent upon recognition by addressees because it generates itself as a response to the demands of another in the first place ... The ego, which seems to me to be given in my self-consciousness as what is purely my own, cannot be maintained by me solely through my power, as it were for me alone – it does not “belong” to me. Rather, this ego always retains an intersubjective core because the process of individuation from which it emerges runs through the network of linguistically mediated interactions (Habermas 1992: 169-70).

This implies that what construes me (the self) depends on what others recognize in me, especially ‘recognition of my claim to uniqueness and irreplaceability’ (Habermas 1992: 186). The same is true of one’s ethical-moral standard, which is construed through conversations and arguments with others as a part of everyday social interaction and is reflected in her/his thoughts and actions. While fellow members attribute ethical accountability, an individual gradually shapes into an accountable moral agent. One’s subjectivity is thus produced through but not determined by socialization. Habermas said:

... identity is produced through socialization, that is, through the fact that the growing child first of all integrates into a specific social system by appropriating symbolic generalities; it is later secured and developed through individuation, that is, precisely through growing independence in relation to social systems (Habermas 1979: 74).

In Habermas’s understanding, therefore, (1) a subject is constructed through inter-subjective communication, in which it has an active part, (2) an intersubjective ethical standard and a shared transcendental liberatory discourse (such as modernism) is possible, and (3) a collective course of political action for social transformation can always be worked out. In Habermas, one can thus notice a transcendence of the socialized self into a critical-subversive agency. In repudiating Foucault’s scepticism of “universal ethical standards” Habermas argued:

The consistent skeptic will deprive the transcendental pragmatist of a basis for his argument. He may, for example, take the attitude of an ethnologist vis-à-vis his own culture, shaking his head over philosophical argumentation as though he were witnessing the unintelligible rites of a strange tribe. Nietzsche perfected this way of looking at philosophical matters, and Foucault has now rehabilitated it (Habermas 1990: 99).

In *Gender Trouble* (2008) Butler discusses the subject-agency-structure (or power) relationship in terms of post-foundational subjectivation, reiteration, alteration (iterability), and subversiveness. Butler rejected the conventional perception of the subject as one “already socially constituted”, who is expected to reproduce the social forms voluntarily and argued in favour of a transcendental being and agency capable of “being free and acting freely”. She argues in favour of an agency capable of iteration and subversion. The shared condition of precariousness under certain conditions can prepare the ground for collective political action for the alteration of power relations.

Agency, for Butler, is always a contested possibility in a political process. She argues in *The Psychic Life of Power* that ‘no individual becomes a subject without first becoming subjected or undergoing “subjectivation”’ (Butler 1997: 11). Speaking on the power-agency duality she argues:

...the power that initiates the subject fails to remain continuous with the power that is the subject’s agency. A significant and potentially enabling reverse occurs when power shifts from its status

as a condition of agency to the subject's "own" agency (Butler 1997: 12).

Power, for Butler, is nothing but the condition of the subject's emergence and, therefore, cannot be considered independently of the inauguration of the subject. In her words: 'There is no power that acts, but only a reiterated acting that is power in its persistence and instability.' (Butler 1997: 12).

Butler argues that power subjugates and, at the same time, creates conditions for agency formation and subversion. She said: 'The subject is itself a site of this ambivalence in which the subject emerges both as the effect of a prior power and as the condition of possibility for a radically conditioned form of agency' (Butler 1997: 14). Butler further argues that 'the act of appropriation may involve an alteration of power such that power assumed or appropriated works against the power that made the assumption possible' (Butler 1997: 13). The subject can always 'undermine the force of normalization' (Butler 1997: 93). In her view, power must be reiterated to be stable and sustained in its relative stability but this does not rule out the possibility of radical alterability – a situation which Butler, following Derrida, calls iterability (Butler 2009: 168). Furthering her concept of iterability Butler argues that no norm can be deterministic and iterability evades every "determinism" and "voluntarism" and opens up the possibility of "subversiveness" at the level of the agency. The iteration can logically have "conservative" or "subversive" effects, and this opens up the possibility of different forms of iteration.

Drawing from the writings of three illustrious post-Marxist scholars we can thus identify a journey of how the "dead subject" in structuralism has come to life, empowered with a creative-critical agency to take on the deterministic, hegemonic forces of the conscious and unconscious lifeworld. Although all forms of domination and subversion work within the space of everyday life the questions remain: (1) whether the subjects are conscious about the process of subjectivation and subversion, and (2) whether all the subjects can play a similar role in countering the forces of domination, particularly when differential degrees of precariousness, vulnerability, and violence confront them.

Existential Worries in Everyday Life and the Subjects' Responses

A writer, an artist or an intellectual cannot express her/his creative critical self, a young woman is under the "gaze" wherever she goes and worried

about her safety and security, a young girl or boy studying the subject that she/he does not like, an educated youth anxiously observe the shrinking job-opportunities, an average-looking woman waiting for someone to marry her while her parents are anxiously arranging the dowry and cost of marriage, an average unemployed homemaker surrenders her sexual freedom and makes all efforts to be Laxmi Bahu, a corporate executive lives like a modern-day slave, a tea-garden worker managing a family with an income of Rupees two hundred a day, a delivery boy working 12 hours a day delivering goods riding his bike to all corners of the city defying hostile weather even when badly paid and badly treated by his employer/management, a maid living a subhuman life, a life without dignity, managing her family with a meagre income while doubling her role as a home-maker (the roles of wife and mother combined), an aged daily labour turned beggar begging with his/her frail health for survival, an old man or woman living alone in a house with none to care, a petty thief being lynched having been caught, an elderly tribal woman in a tribal village in Bengal, declared a witch, being lynched, a graduate selling vegetables in a road-side market, a Muslim being lynched by the Right-wing private vigilantes for eating beef – these are the common sites that construe our everyday life in the contemporary neo-liberal “democratic” India. One thing that appears certain is that the individual subjects are located differentially and live with differential concerns and priorities; thus, their everyday lives are also different.

In present-day India, the average citizens face restrictions on movements, dress, food, and speeches as they live under the surveillance of the state and its collaborators; we have come to a stage when our private space and private life, our movements and activities are under scanner; the state agencies and fraud stars use AI technology to gather information about all citizens and control our lives. Even privately-run communication channels and media houses are controlled by state agencies to regulate people’s lives in the name of national security and interest. It is thus not difficult to see how communication technology works as a double-edged instrument to sustain the ruling-class hegemony over the citizens; the communication technology disseminates the centrally produced knowledge and ideological information to generate consensus in support of power, and by collecting private information through the surveillance network the “coercive state” uses “discipline and punish” as a strategy to sustain its hegemony. The distribution of reliefs through welfare programmes (like direct cash transfer under different schemes, subsidized health, education, transport, scholarships, free insurance schemes, and so on) which follows the logic of “bio-power”

(courtesy, Foucault) indeed gives some relief to the lower and even middle classes and helps generate a “good feeling”, which, in turn, helps sustain the neo-liberal democracy. However, it can never address the fundamental problems like inequality, injustice, hunger, illiteracy, unemployment, and all-round moral degradation nor can it guarantee fundamental rights like the right to freedom, the right to a dignified and aesthetic life, right to freedom of expression or criticism and right to subversion. Some of these issues might appear discursive or philosophical but they are all our everyday concerns.

Naturally, any individual endowed with cognitive power and sensitivity would reflect on their worries and everyday life experiences. Since all individuals, whatever their social location may be, live with worries they would reflect on them and have a world of feelings and cognition which, in turn, would place them in a position of dialogue and dialectics with the social forms (institutions or conditions) that coerce them or trouble them in one way or the other. This is precisely the foundation of dialogue and dialectics between the agency (or the subject) and the lifeworld. Reflexivity is universal; every individual lives within a phenomenologically drawn world of feeling, cognition, or consciousness about the self and the situation. The primary question, however, is how the subjects negotiate with or respond to the feelings and elements of consciousness. There are many possible ways that an individual can respond to the situation and the nature of the response would depend on the circumstances, resources under the command of the subjects, and their level of agency formation. Thus, while one individual may make compromises with the situation the other could rebel against the arrangement, and between these two extreme responses there could be degrees of compromise and rebellion, which again could be contextual.

Let us take up the case of the “underclass” as an illustration. A large majority of the members of the Dalit castes and tribes in India, who make a living by working as “labour” in tea gardens, in agriculture, or in the urban informal sector, have been living in extreme poverty for generations. Having no control over money, landed property, education, and skill they are made to live in precariousness and without any means to effect upward mobility. One can argue that the larger economic-social-political order is in a conspiracy to keep them resourceless for generations so that they are compelled to live as manual labour while producing surplus value of different forms for the beneficiaries of the iniquitous and unjust neo-liberal order. Besides economic deprivation members of the labouring classes are also humiliated and othered in their everyday life by their employers, the members

of the privileged classes. While their lives are unsettled, they are made to compromise with the situation in the absence of alternative and better livelihood opportunities; they are fragmented ideologically and politically and kept voiceless; they are made to find a space of relative comfort while remaining under the protection of the “bourgeois” political parties for some relief (in the form of cash or some meagre welfare benefits) which are out to sabotage the democratic institutions and ideals like equality and justice.

The work of maids in middle-class households in India and elsewhere helps produce leisure time for employers and facilitates their engagement in more productive works that, in turn, help the reproduction of the ranks and hierarchies in the capitalist system. The importance of the contribution of the maids to the middle and upper-class households could thus be hardly overstated. One can add to this category the “Aiyas” who provide cleaning and elementary health-care services in houses of the middle and upper classes and hospitals, government-owned as well as the private, are always badly paid and badly treated, and in society, they are hardly given any rank or respect. They are the “absolute others” of society; they are structurally conditioned to live as “physical labour” with the lowest status and privileges. There is no reason to think that they do not reflect on the “exchange packages” that they receive as a part of the general arrangements or that they do not live with “low” feelings and grudges but they are often unorganized and do not have the luxury, choice or platform to articulate and express their grudges. Indeed, some of them (or many of them) do ventilate their grievances and try to change the perception of the employer in demand for a better package (wage, work conditions, and treatment); some of them keep changing their employers for a better deal but any effective organized movement for a structural change is often invisible. Notwithstanding the stability in the mode of exchange of labour by the members of the underclasses express their agency in their feelings and grievances (for low pay, ill-treatment, humiliation, and othering) and in the occasional expression of such feelings in quitting one job for another. The “other” here operates with the power of cognition, reflection, and search for an alternative while encountering systemic violence in their everyday life, albeit their vulnerabilities force them to make ethical compromises.

The condition of tea garden workers, who directly offer surplus labour and produce surplus value for the capitalist production system in India, is no better. They are the ones, who, bereft of skill or education, work as labourers for generations without experiencing any form of economic or social mobility, and constitute the poorest of the poor in society. They take the sufferings

and humiliation that extreme forms of exploitation and poverty bring them. They live in a perpetual fear of losing jobs as the tea gardens are abruptly closed down or abandoned by the owners, leaving the workers jobless. When the gardens remain closed or abandoned for a long time the jobless workers take up jobs in the urban informal sector as labour while some others migrate to distant cities in search of new jobs. The women and children of the workers' families, or at least some of them, get trafficked to cities and are made to work as sex workers or domestic help. The employers impose unfavourable conditions, like non-implementation of the provisions of the Plantation Labour Acts, when a new owner takes over the closed garden and reopens it. To escape the provisions of the Plantation Labour Acts the garden owners recruit the workers on a daily contract basis – a strategy that is called casualization of the workforce, which, in turn, makes the workers even more vulnerable.

There are trade unions for the permanent workers under the leadership of the male workers and external leaders associated with the leading political parties of the time. The average workers are often unaware of the activities of the trade unions and their policies or programmes; their union affiliation also changes with the change of state power from one party to another. Besides “unconscious” and “uninformed” trade union membership the workers find themselves associated with religious and ethnic organizations; one could thus see the workers being organized in the name of Akhil Bharatiya Adivasi Vikash Parishad (ABAVP) or give their political allegiance along religious lines, like the Christian workers supporting Trinamool Congress (the ruling party in West Bengal since 2011) and the Hindu workers siding with the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP), which mobilizes people in the name of Hindutva. Thus, the workers always remain at the level of the “class-in-itself” and never elevate themselves to the status of “class for itself” because of distorted forms of mobilization and the spread of “false consciousness” (in the Marxist sense). The ruling and right-wing political parties do not come forward to elevate the conditions of the workers since the owners silence them by exchanging a share of the profit (for example, by purchasing electoral bonds or giving donations to the ruling party). The fragmented and “unconscious” workers thus fail to put up a united fight to change the production relations in their favour. This however does not negate the fact that the workers feel bad about their sufferings and humiliations and want a favourable situation but they are completely lost in the interest game (or power game) of the larger structural forces. The dominant forces and the neo-liberal state want to perpetuate the existing production and social relations. The women workers, in particular, are

subjected to double-edged exploitation; they are exploited at home (since they do all the household chores, besides satisfying their husbands sexually and taking care of all other members of the family) and at the workplace. In their unsettled life without a stable and secure livelihood, the tea garden workers play at the hands of the powerful players and wander for their subjective identities, which primarily exist in the world of feelings and suffering. The Indian Dalits are thus caught in what Foucault called the “city-citizen” game which was operational in the slave mode of production in ancient Roman cities, where the slaves, the non-citizens, were exploited, othered and disenfranchised in the interests of the owning classes, who lived in cities and monopolized the control over properties and the decision-making process.

In the male-dominated Indian society, where a large majority of marriages are socially arranged through negotiation and where the practices of caste endogamy and dowry are rampant, the acts of sex, conception, the frequency of conception, etc. are the choice of the husband and the role of the married women is limited to that of a wife and mother and a provider of free services to the in-laws. In certain parts of India, a wife is not considered complete or legitimate until she gives birth to a male child, who will carry her husband’s lineage forward; a mother of 2/3 daughters (and no son) runs the risk of being abandoned/divorced by her husband to be able to marry again and have a son with the second wife. These people are driven by traditions and beliefs and do not care to know the science of childbirth. Even among the Dalit castes gender discrimination and domestic violence are normal in their everyday life. In middle-class families, even in urban areas, where the level of education is much higher compared to impoverished classes, gender discrimination, and violence are present in overt and covert forms; “overt” in practices of marriage negotiation, exchange of dowry, demand for a boy child, unjust division of labour, non-recognition of the care services, restrictions on their movements and job selection, physical violence and so on, and “covert” in invisible surveillance (especially on those employed married women who spend a large part of the day outside home) “neglect”, exclusion from decision-making, non-recognition of their services and humiliations. In India the working women across the classes are subjected to double-edged exploitation, at home as homemakers and at workplace as the workers or employees; the beneficiaries are the men in most cases. It is no exaggeration to argue that the gender-based division of labour helps reproduce the patriarchal social order.

It is evident that the feminist movements in India so far have failed to launch a pan-India movement to bring about revolutionary changes to achieve gender equality; however, this does not mean, in any way, that the women in India are bereft of agency. The differentially located Indians live with a clear perception of the neglect, violence, and domination they negotiate in their everyday life but the expression of their responses depends upon their situations, interests, and vulnerability. The responses reported in the media and research literature vary from arguments in protest (Jhagra or quarrel) of different scales, changes in the living arrangement, separation and divorce, lodging FIR against the husband and in-laws, taking the husband to court on rape charges, and so on. In educated urban middle-class families, the husbands are often unaware of their patriarchal practices and do not feel the moral crisis while bossing over their wives (since they have been naturalized into it and have been practicing it since they entered into the symbolic phase). In other words, it is ingrained in their “masculinity”. The sensitive wives, however, ventilate their feelings and grudges to their husbands and in-laws through different forms of negotiations, conversations, dialogues, and exchange of arguments and effect some changes in the perceptions and approaches of the perpetrators. The changes brought about through dialogues and the exchange of arguments by women could be tracked at the micro and macro levels. At the micro level, gender perception and treatment are changing for the better, and this is evident in a growing sense of conjugal partnership and sharing of responsibilities inside and outside the home. Some macro-level changes could be (1) greater work participation of women and participation in unconventional jobs, (2) greater participation of women in public and civil life, (3) rising level of higher education among the women, (4) greater spatial mobility among the women, (5) the growing age at marriage, (6) greater freedom in the selection of life partner, (7) increasing incidents of divorce, separation and alimony claim, (8) the increasing incidents of cases where the women are in live-in relation, (9) the dropping fertility at the national level, or (10) more and more women deciding not to marry. None of these changes would have been possible without conscious efforts by enlightened women agencies.

The educated, economically better-off men of today’s India also live in unfreedom and confront different degrees and forms of domination depending on their social locations. Generally, the middle-class people, the intelligentsia, and the managerial class, who are educated and informed (although not always enlightened) do not have financial worries and they are supposed to operate with greater intellectual freedom and critical consciousness and enlighten the less educated and less informed members

of the underclasses about the snares and injustices expressed in the functioning of the social-institutional arrangements. However, a large majority of them fail to take an ethical-critical standpoint in performing their responsibilities in social transformation. The better-paid “privileged” corporate executives have a stake in the neo-liberal social order and they are largely fragmented, depoliticized, and even disenfranchised; hence, it is non-logical to expect them to provide leadership in collective movements for social transformation. In reality, they are ideologically indoctrinated in neo-liberalism and consumerism work as an extended hand of the corporate capital. The intelligentsia (the college and university professors, writers, painters, media reporters, columnists, lawyers, and so on) are ideologically and politically fragmented; while a large majority of them work for the system helping its reproduction by generating “consensus” among the masses in its favour a small minority takes a “progressive-critical” position while enlightening the masses about the pitfalls of the system and even taking an active part in the collective moves for social transformation. Those who surrender to the system or actively work for its reproduction do so (1) for some rewards (mostly positions in the party, ministry, government administration, and committees or other institutions (for example, educational and research institutes), (2) to escape punishments for some of their past crimes, or (3) for fear of being persecution for their otherwise critical writings, creations, opinions and activities, which could have a destabilizing effect on the system. There is, however, another section of the middle-class intelligentsia, who take care in retaining their subjective freedom and position in civil society and express their critical insights about the ills and injustices embedded in the functioning of the system. Some of them could be a part of some Left-Democratic political formations, or writers’ or artists’ forums while others could be independent thinkers/writers. They are keen on performing the role of critical citizens while basing their activities on high moral or ethical grounds; they hate living a withdrawn and selfish life and make efforts to connect to the suffering masses driven by a sense of social responsibility (Jean-Paul Sartre) and empathy (Rousseau) or the role of a philosopher or organic intellectual (Gramsci). The last section of the intellectuals is always under the surveillance of the state and lives with the risk of being disciplined and punished.

The progressive-critical section of the intellectuals, be they Marxists or liberal-democratic, politically active or not, always contribute immensely to the advancement of aesthetic and moral standards of society; however, the precondition for them to be able to do their bit is uncompromisable intellectual freedom. In the liberal-democratic societies of the West (the

“bourgeois democracies”, according to Marx), this is to a certain extent guaranteed; as the subjective freedom and individual rights are not only the promises made in the Constitutions of those countries, but they are largely guaranteed in practice. This is precisely the reason why cult footballers like Maradona and Messi in Argentina can wear T-shirts with the picture of Che Guevara, the icon of revolution, firmly printed on it, Marcus Thuram and Mbappe, the celebrated footballers of France’s national team give call to defeat the Right-wing La Pen in the recently concluded national election, or the academicians and writers in England display the flag of the political party they support in the time of general elections. In the premature democracy with certain fascist characters, the critical voices are considered “anti-national” rather than national assets and that is why there are Kulburgies, Pansares, Davalkars, Lankeshes, Teltumbdes, Fida Husains, Sitalvads, Roys, Navalakhas⁷ who are either killed by the right-wing religious fanatics or subjected to state coercion for expressing their critical voices. Such a reign of terror unmistakably disseminates a message to the larger society, which is that ‘if you are too critical about the regime in your writings, creations, and speeches you will be met with a similar treatment’. This leaves a shivering message to the potential critical voices, a strong enough message to silence the critical-creative minds. People so easily forget the disservices done by Hitler, Mussolini, Stalin, and other dictators to the intellectual progress of those countries and the world as a whole. The everydayness of this technology of power lies in the fact that the freedom-loving intellectuals, the common citizens learn to suppress their subversive impulses as a strategy for a “peaceful life” in self-care. Nobody counts the national loss that comes with it.

It is thus possible (and methodologically essential) to select different groups of people and identify their ontological and aesthetic/ethical concerns to have a grasp of their everyday life and how, as differential subjects and agencies, they negotiate the constricting structural forces and approach them differentially depending upon their (1) reading of the precariousness of everyday life, (2) interests and priorities of life, and (3) aesthetic/ethical and value standards that they stand by.

Conclusion: Search for a “relative core” in individual and collective selves

From a brief journey through the contemporary discourses on self, we learn that the self or subject is not pre-constituted, or an apriori knower “I”

as Descartes had thought; rather it is formed intersubjectively through endless dialogues, and interrogations and that it is never fully formed; it is always in the process of becoming. In his alleged anti-subjective hypothesis, where Foucault asserted that the subject is the product of the power-knowledge regime or discourses of the time, he was trying to disentangle the technology of subject formation. This is why, in his later writings and speeches, he discovered the subjects who are empowered to care for themselves and to act on the discourses and systemic forces that impact their lives. Even in his latter writings, Foucault stood against all forms of hegemonizing and homogenizing discourses (such as modernism, enlightenment, liberalism, or socialism) on the ground that all discourses operate with violence and deny the subjects freedom to be different in their search for truths of life. The self or the subject thus uses its critical-cognitive-reflexive power to select a course of being and action, even collective action, to bring about changes in the constraining, alienating forces of the lifeworld.

Even in the poststructuralist era, a large body of social thinkers agree that there could be unique subjects with differentially empowered agencies, who have the power of cognition, and reflection, who can dream and work for a secure, dignified life, who reserve some aesthetic and ethical standards and who can connect with others to bring to address the concerns of everyday existential life and strive for a better life. The will to change, which is there in every individual, is the root of all anti-hegemonic politics for those who bear the wrath of visible or invisible local or global forces in their everyday life. Living as an integral part of the asymmetrical power relations, which we all do, there are always beneficiaries and losers; such relations work in families, micro institutions, organizations, and larger (even global) structures. However, the subjects are differentially located in terms of their control over resources, which gives them material security, in terms of cognition and consciousness, will to change, and level of organization.

The dialogical engagements with the systemic forces give the subjects a relative core, that construes the agency of the time and the ethical-political position. Even in a pre-organized (collective) state the individuals, such as the wretched, homeless, slum and pavement dwellers, the maids, the workers in the informal sector, the agricultural labourers, the tea garden workers, the disenfranchised corporate workers feel the pain and agony and violence in their everyday treatment and dream of amending their living conditions and put in micro efforts to elevate themselves to a life of dignity. Then there could be a phase where the organized-sector workers, the workers

in the public sector, the enlightened section of the white-collar employees, the writers, and the media persons, who enjoy some level of material security and status, can afford to exercise their agencies in a much more authoritative way. Even when they are a part of a surveillance and authoritarian regime, they are aware of their civil rights and at least some of them take the risk of being a part of a subversive movement. Thus, the kind of agencies the likes of Butlers and Kristevas and Beauvoirs⁸ are privy to in relatively tolerant Western and American democracies our own Arundhatis, Teestas, Medhas, and Sudhas, Navlakhas, Teltumbdes⁹ are not. The latter in the present Indian context face the wrath of the ever-vigilant and disciplining state.

The agency or the critical-cognitive self is unique in every individual. However, when a group of individuals experience similar kinds of external violence and precariousness, they might activate the altruistic side of their self and join hands in the politics of subversion and transformation. With or without taking an ethical-political position the subject considers her/his pragmatic, immediate interests in assessing the vulnerabilities and violence she/he encounters in everyday life and logically looks for a way out. The precariousness inflicted by the lifeworld on the subjects may not always lead to collective political action; it can sometimes act negatively on the individuals who might take recourse to religiosity or spirituality¹⁰ or plunge into drug addiction – a mystified route to escape from the precarious life.

Judith Butler in her *Precarious Life* (2004), written in the aftermath of the 11 September (2001) twin-tower terrorist attack, captured the precariousness and vulnerability of life in modern times overtaken by mindless violence and hatred. One can extend the idea of precariousness beyond violence induced by religious extremism. Extreme poverty is also a crude form of violence (Gupta 2012)¹¹. The different forms of helplessness (unemployment, underemployment), casualization of labour, and extension of working hours, the disenfranchisement of the labour force are a “normal”, integral part of the neoliberal state. Even the freedom-loving educated intellectuals, writers, artists, and social workers in present India, who take a critical posture vis-à-vis the ruling powers experience precariousness and violence as they are put under a surveillance and disciplining regime. Besides economic and state violence there are caste and religious violence.

Living in sustained precariousness and its devastating toll on the body and mind and the value system of the people creates a condition that enlivens the agency, the will to act and transform, to step out of the confines and comforts of selfish withdrawn life and join hands with others on the common

agendas to strive for freedom and dignity, even if these ideals are never fully attainable. In doing so, the participant subjects can retain their individuality and distinctiveness, they don't have to surrender to a liberatory discourse, yet they can collaborate in their strive for a better life by bringing about the desired changes in their lifeworld. This expression of agency and participation in collective action for change is a part of their being and that is precisely what they do in their everyday lives in a lifeworld.

Foucault and Habermas lent support to environmental movements, feminist movements, gay movements, and many other civil rights movements. To be a part of an issue-based movement we do not always need a complete consensus or ideological-ethical unity among the participants; they can do it while retaining their subjective distinctiveness. When the new regime, the outcome of a revolution or mass movement, turns into an oligarchy, subverting the dreams and ideals for which the masses had participated in the regime-changing movement the latter must exercise their critical agency to withdraw and even turn against the new regime. This mood of new social movements has been articulated by Butler in the following two passages:

We could disagree on the status and character of modernity and yet find ourselves joined in asserting and defending the rights of Indigenous women to health care, reproductive technology, decent wages, physical protection, cultural rights, and freedom of assembly (Butler 2004: 48).

By the same token, various routes lead us into politics, various stories bring us onto the street, and various kinds of reasoning and belief. We do not need to ground ourselves in a single model of communication, a single model of reason, or a single notion of the subject before we can act (Butler 2004: 48).

Notes

1. Habitus is 'the way society becomes deposited in persons in the form of lasting dispositions, or trained capacities and structured propensities to think, feel and act in determinant ways, which then guide them' (Wacquant 2005: 316). It is neither a result of free will, nor determined by structures, but created by a kind of interplay between the two: dispositions shaped by past events and structures that shape current practices and structures (Bourdieu 1984: 170).

2. Socrates believed that the ultimate goal of human existence is not just to live but to live a good, meaningful, and virtuous life. He defined a good life as one guided by reason, virtue, and moral principles (Cited in ‘Not Life, But a Good Life is The Ultimate Goal — Socrates’ by Thomas Oppong, 6 April 2023 (Source: <https://hive.com/blog/not-life-but-a-good-life-socrates-meaning/#:~:text=Socrates%20believed%20that%20the%20ultimate,%2C%20virtue%2C%20and%20moral%20principles.>).
3. Lévi-Strauss argued that the native people are largely unconscious of the cultural determinants of their life; unconscious of the organizing principles the natives are unable to explain their social practices rationally; they are also unconscious of ‘the conscious representations prevailing among the natives themselves for those stemming from the anthropologist’s own culture’ (Levi-Strauss 1963: 282).
4. According to Horkheimer and Adorno ‘All mass culture under monopoly is identical, and the contours of its skeleton, the conceptual armature fabricated by monopoly, are beginning to stand out. Those in charge no longer take much trouble to conceal the structure, the power of which increases the more bluntly its existence is admitted. Films and radio no longer need to present themselves as art. The truth that they are nothing but business is used as an ideology to legitimize the crash they intentionally produce. They call themselves industries, and the published figures for their directors’ incomes quell any doubts about the social necessity of their finished products’ (2002: 95).
5. Henri Lefebvre “Foreword” to the second edition of *Critique of Everyday Life* Vol. 1, 1991.
6. Louis Althusser explains “interpellation” as “hailing.” Ideologies “call out” or “hail” people and offer a particular identity, which they accept as “natural” or “obvious.” Through ideological indoctrination, the dominant class in modern capitalism exerts power over individuals. Althusser argues that individuals are interpellated from the day that they are born - and perhaps even before, since parents and others conceive of the role and identity that their child will assume in the process of their socialization (Althusser 1970).
7. Narendra Davalkar, Govind Pansare, M. M. Kulburgi and Gauri Lankes are some of the free-thinking, rational-secular social

activists and writers who have been murdered allegedly by the right-wing fanatics in recent years; Maqbool Fida Husain, the Padma Bhushan awardee, was banished from India for his radical paintings while the other activists-writers are booked under the provisions of the UAPA Act.

8. Simone de Beauvoir, Julia Kristeva, and Judith Butler are the noted feminist theoreticians and activists of Europe and America who express themselves in writings and actions without being purged by the State.
9. In contrast with the Western and American writers and activists some of the recent writers and social activists in India, namely, Sudha Bharadwaj, Arundhati Roy, Teesta Sitalvad, Anand Teltumbde, and Gautam Navlaka have been subjected to different forms of surveillance and punishment under the nonmailable sections of the UAPA by the Indian states for their speeches and activities in recent years.
10. This is what Tulasi Srinivas argues in her book *The Cow in the Elevator: An Anthropology of Wonder* (2018)
11. Akhil Gupta has depicted extreme poverty as a form of structural violence as it denies the poor the right to live in dignity (Gupta 2012: 3-39). Gupta, Akhil. 2012. ‘Poverty as Biopolitics’. In Akhil Gupta. *Red Tape: Bureaucracy, Structural Violence, and Poverty in India* (Durham: Duke University Press: 3–39).

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