

# Contextualizing Subaltern Studies in Indian History: A Critical Study of Texts, Phases and Significance

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**Abstract – The Subaltern School of Thought marked an exemplar change in the writing of history. Initially, the subaltern narrative was restricted to the political processes of the national movement of India. The social undercurrents were not taken into consideration. The emphasis was on the political involvement of people. This paper attempts to scrutinize the phases of subaltern school and analyze the school's pre-occupation with political rather than social processes. The paper also aims to analyze whether the written history of the school did not do enough justice to its ideological agenda.**

**Keywords: Subaltern, Independence, Nationalism, Society, Class**

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## INTRODUCTION

Subaltern Studies asserted itself as a radical form of history-writing with special reference to Indian history and soon became the new 'history from below'. The purpose of this new historiographical trend was to rectify the elitist bias which was a mainstay of the research and academic work in South Asia. This act of rectification sprang from the conviction that the elites had exercised dominance over the subalterns from time immemorial.

The emphasis on subordination has continued dominant to Subaltern Studies, however, the outset of subalternity has perceived swings and diverse uses. Individual contributors to the volumes have also varied in their orientation. A shift in welfares, attention, and notional grounds is also evident. Yet what has remained consistent is the effort to rethink history from the perspective of the subaltern.[1]

## Phases of Subaltern Writing in Indian History

The historical development of Subaltern Studies in India can be seen within this context. For the purpose of convenience, it can be considered into primarily two phases. In the first phase the emphasis (writings of Ranajit Guha, Shahid Amin, Gyanendra Pandey, Stephen Henningham, David Hardiman, Sumit Sarkar, among others) was on the struggle between the hegemonic elite and the suppressed subaltern. In this phase, the writings focused on the concerns of the lower, exploited classes and a criticism of the elite or the exploiting classes. The

influence of Gramscian thought was immense in this phase as is evident in the writings of the scholars. In the second phase (writings of Partha Chatterjee, Gautam Bhadra, Gyan Prakash, Dipesh Chakrabarty, among others) the influence of postmodernist and postcolonial ideologies became the mainstay of subaltern scholarship.

The main aim of the Subaltern Studies project in the first phase was to:

- Show the bourgeois and elite character of Congress nationalism which restrained popular radicalism
- Counter the attempts by many historians to incorporate the people's struggles in the grand narrative of Indian/Congress nationalism
- Construct the subaltern consciousness and stress its autonomy.

Ranajit Guha in the very first volume of the Subaltern Studies declared that "The historiography of Indian nationalism has for a long time been dominated by elitism- colonialist elitism and bourgeois nationalist elitism." According to Guha 'people's politics differed from the politics of the elite.' First, its roots lay in the traditional organization of the people such as caste and kinship networks, tribal solidarity, territoriality, etc. Second, while elite mobilizations were vertical in nature, people's mobilizations were horizontal.

Third, elite mobilization was legalistic and pacific, subaltern mobilization was relatively violent. Fourth, elite mobilization was more cautious and controlled, while subaltern mobilization was more spontaneous.

The 'subaltern' for Guha is 'that clearly definite entity, which constitutes the demographic difference between the total Indian population and all those whom we have described as the elite'. He defined the Subaltern Studies as 'a name for the general attribute of subordination in South Asian society whether this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office or in any other way'. [2]

Guha asserts that, 'The subalterns had acted in history on their own, that is, independently of the elite; and their politics constituted an autonomous domain, for it neither originated from elite politics nor did its existence depend on the latter'. [3] In his article, 'The Prose of Counter Insurgency', Guha argued against the earlier notions of considering the peasant and tribal rebellions as 'purely spontaneous and unpremeditated affairs'. According to him it was wrong to ignore the consciousness of the rebels.

In this phase, the emphasis was on studying the peasant rebellions and placing them within the larger context of the movement for India's independence. Therefore, scholars following the subaltern line wrote articles and books on peasant rebellions and tried to construct the 'peasant identity' as a distinct identity which was different from that of the elite Congress leaders and supporters.

David Hardiman focused on class analysis of agrarian society in western India, which helped in explaining the emergence and participation of peasants in the nationalist movement. His detailed local study of Kheda district in Gujarat helped to illustrate the ways in which the "middle peasantry" was the vanguard of agrarian nationalism. For him, this group constituted the subaltern class in Gujarat. Influenced by the writings of Eric R. Wolf and the 'middle peasant thesis', Hardiman explained that middle peasants, unlike poor peasants, rich peasants, or the landed elite, were politically most radical sections of rural society. According to him the middle peasants functioned autonomously and harnessed the support for the nationalist movement by influencing others in the locality. Hardiman's disagreement was an essential interruption from the historiography of the region, which had argued that rich peasants or elites were responsible for directing the ideas, sentiments, and politics associated with nationalism in Gujarat. [4]

Shahid Amin in his analysis of popular protests in eastern Uttar Pradesh opined that Indian nationalists in 1921-22, confronted with the millennial and deeply subversive language of peasant politics, were quick to claim peasant actions as their own and Gandhian. Unable to acknowledge the peasants' insurgent appropriation of Gandhi, Indian nationalists

represented it in the stereotypical saint-devotee relationship. Amin developed this point further in his innovative monograph on the peasant violence in 1922 that resulted in the death of several policemen and led Gandhi to suspend the non-cooperation movement against British rule. Returning to this controversial date in Indian nationalist history, Amin argued that this violent event 'criminalized' in the colonial judicial discourse, was 'nationalized' by the elite nationalists, first by an 'obligatory amnesia' and then by selective remembrance and re-appropriation. [5]

Interpreting the 1922 peasant violence, Amin identified the subaltern presence as an 'effect in the discourse'. This effect shows itself in a telling dilemma the nationalists faced. On the one hand, they could not endorse peasant violence as nationalist activity, and on the other hand, they had to acknowledge the peasant 'criminals' as part of the nation. [6] His monograph on the 1922 peasant violence in Chauri Chaura offers a description of a local event set on a larger stage by nationalism and historiographical practice. Amin inserts memory as a device that both dislocates and reinscribes the historical record. [7]

Gyanendra Pandey, in 'Peasant Revolt and Indian Nationalism, 1919-1922', argued that peasant movements in Awadh arose before and independently of the Non-Cooperation Movement and the peasants' understanding of the local power structure and its alliance with colonial power was more advanced than that of the urban leaders, including the Congress. Moreover, the peasant militancy was reduced wherever the Congress organization was stronger. Pandey suggests that the discourse of the Indian nation-state, which had to imagine India as a national community, could not recognize community (religious, cultural, social, and local) as a political form; thus it pitted nationalism against communalism. [8]

According to Stephen Henningham, in his account of the Quit India Movement in Bihar and the Eastern United Provinces, 'the elite and the subaltern domains were clearly defined and distinct from each other'. He opines that 'the great revolt of 1942 consisted of an elite nationalist uprising combined with a subaltern rebellion.' According to him their motives were also different- 'Those engaged in the elite nationalist uprising sought to protest against government repression of Congress and to demand the yielding of independence to India. In contrast, those involved in the subaltern rebellion acted in pursuit of relief from privation and in protest against the misery in which they found themselves.' He also contends that it was because of this dual character of the rebellion that it could not sustain for too long and was suppressed.

Sumit Sarkar in 'The Conditions and Nature of Subaltern Militancy' debated that the Non-

Cooperation Movement in Bengal revealed a picture of masses outstripping leaders. According to Sarkar, the term 'subaltern' could refer to basically three social groups: the tribal and low-caste agricultural labourers and share-croppers; landholding peasants, generally of intermediate caste-status in Bengal; and labour in plantation, mines and industries. These groups might have divisions among themselves but 'they formed a relatively autonomous political domain with specific features and collective mentalities which need to be explored, and that it was a world distinct from the domain of the elite politicians who in the early twentieth century Bengal came overwhelmingly from high-caste educated professional groups connected with *zamindari* or intermediate tenure-holding.'

This strand of subaltern historiography underwent considerable shifts, with the focus moving from class to community, from material analysis to the privileging of culture, mind and identity.[9] Over the years the yearning to improve the subaltern subject became increasingly intertwined in the analysis of how subalternity was organized by 'dominant' discourses. The influence of post-colonialist writings of Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida was immense in the 'subaltern' writing of Indian history in the second phase of the Subaltern Studies project.

The consideration paid to address in locating the process and effects of subordination can be seen in the writings of Partha Chatterjee. He was perhaps the first 'subalternist' to engross with the writings of Foucault as a way to understand the capitalist mode of power within the Indian context. Chatterjee provided a break within Subaltern Studies by linking Marxian social theory with Foucaultian notions of power to argue for 'community' as the primary organizing principle for political mobilization.[10] His work *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World* was a study of how Indian nationalism achieved dominance. He traced the critical shifts in nationalist thought, leading to a 'passive revolution'. According to him, Indian independence in 1947 was a mass revolution that appropriated the agency of the common people. In his second work *The Nation and its Fragments*, Chatterjee opined that the nation was first imagined in the cultural domain and then readied for political contest by the elite that 'normalized' various subaltern aspirations for community and agency in the drive to create a modern nation-state.[11]

While the early writings of the subalternists primarily focused on political mobilization in the countryside, analyses of the working-class politics also figured within Subaltern Studies. Ranajit Guha had primarily comprised a brief explanation on the association between the working-class and subaltern politics in colonial India by stating that 'the working-class was still not sufficiently developed in the objective conditions of its social being and in the consciousness as a class-for-itself, nor was it firmly allied yet with the peasantry.'[12] For Guha, working-

class politics were too 'fragmented', 'sectional', and 'local' to develop into something larger in scale, like a 'national liberation movement.'[13]

Dipesh Chakrabarty offered the most extensive contribution within the Subaltern Studies project towards a 'rethinking of working-class history.'[14] Chakrabarty argued that while a Marxian political economy provided powerful explanations for working-class history in India, his central concerns about the 'particular logic of culture' or 'consciousness' simply could not be explained by political economy alone. In fact, according to him, 'culture is the "unthought-of" Indian Marxism.' For Chakrabarty, the turn towards a cultural analysis was a fundamental departure from what he characterized as the 'economism' of Indian liberal and Marxist historiography.

He reconfigured the problematic of writing about the working class within a cultural background of Bengal specifically, and a larger colonial context. According to Chakrabarty, 'the persistence of "pre-capitalist" social relations within a capitalist mode of power created historically specific conditions for the emergence of a working-class culture in Bengal, which even Marx did not anticipate. He stressed that the jute-mill workers were largely migrant peasants from neighbouring regions of northern and eastern India and they were situated within a 'pre-capitalist, inequalitarian culture marked by strong primordial loyalties of community, language, religion, caste, and kinship.'[15] For Chakrabarty, it was this specific culture which helped to explain the nature of political mobilization among jute-mill workers.

Gyan Prakash has argued that since the Indian subalterns did not leave their own records, the 'history from below' approach in imitation of the Western model was not possible. Therefore, the Subaltern Studies 'had to conceive the subaltern differently and write different histories.' According to him, it is important to see the 'subalternity as a discursive effect' which warrants 'the reformulation of the notion of the subaltern.' Therefore, according to Prakash 'Such reexaminations of South Asian history do not invoke "real" subalterns, prior to discourse, in framing their critique. Placing subalterns in the labyrinth of discourse, they cannot claim an unmediated access to their reality. The actual subalterns and subalternity emerge between the folds of the discourse, in its silences and blindness, and in its over-determined pronouncements.'[16]

The concept of the subaltern moved to a further more complex theoretical debate with the intervention of the Indian-American post-colonial feminist critic, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. In her essay, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', Spivak reconsidered the problems of subalternity within new historical developments as brought by capitalistic politics of undermining revolutionary

voice and divisions of labour in a globalized world. She disapproved Gramsci's assertion of the autonomy of the subaltern groups. According to her, this autonomy results in homogeneity of the subaltern group and subaltern subjective identity. Her second criticism of the Subaltern Studies Group was based on the premise that no methodology was adopted by the scholars.

Spivak also reconsiders the issues of the subaltern groups by dealing with the problems of gender and particularly Indian women during colonial times. She reflected on the status of Indian women relying on her analysis of a case of Sati women practices under the British colonial rule. She sought to include women in the realm of the subaltern.

She contends that 'The question is not of female participation in insurgency, or the ground rules of the sexual division of labour, for both of which there is evidence; rather, both were used as object of colonialist historiography and as a subject of insurgency, though the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant. If in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow.' [17]

## CONCLUSION

The Subaltern line of historiography has faced severe criticism from scholars in the past. However, it may be reiterated that Subaltern Studies marked a definite break in the writing of Indian history and shifted the focus from 'history of the state/elite' to 'history of the people.'

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