

Research Note on Subaltern Studies

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The Subaltern School of historiography emerged in the 1980s. From its inception it resulted into a major transition in South Asian historiography and posed a vigorous challenge to existing historical scholarship. It was largely by its relentless postcolonial critique that Indian history came to be seen in a different life. Indian History had thus found a new approach that was so critically needed. The Nationalist and the Cambridge Schools became the focus of their criticism due to their elite based analysis of history. They also contested the Marxist School due to the fact that their mode of production based narratives have a tendency of merging inevitably into the nationalist ideology of modernity and progress. Moreover the Subalterns rightly pointed out that the Marxist found it really difficult to accept the ideology of caste and religion as crucial factors in Indian History, which to them was somewhat backward and degrading. They were thus, according to the Subalterns, totally unable to gather vital historical data from lived experiences of various oppressed classes, which were submerged in religious and social customs.

The Subaltern Historians originally started as an Indian version of “History from below” approach of the west. They were also influenced by the British Marxist Historians. The term “Subaltern” came from the writings of Antonio Gramsci and is referred to the subordination in terms of class, caste, gender, race, language and culture. Gayatri Chakraboty spivak in an essay titled, “*Can the Subaltern Speak?*” wrote :

The Subaltern cannot speak. There is no virtue in global laundry lists with woman as a pious. Representation has not withered away. The female intellectual has a circumscribe task which she must not disown with a flourish. (p. 308)

She cited the examples of widows burnt at the pyre of the husband in her essay. She emphasized the condition of women who

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are doubly oppressed—firstly by patriarchy and secondly by colonialism. Leela Gandhi says;

By 'Subaltern' Spivak meant the oppressed subject, the members of Antonio Gramsci's Subaltern Classes or more generally those of inferior rank and her question followed on the work began in the early 1980s by a collection of individuals now known as Subaltern Studies group. "The stated objective of this group was to promote a systematic and informed discussion of Subaltern themes in the field of South Asian Studies. Further they described their project as an attempt to study the general attribute of subordination in South Asian Society whether this is expressed in term of class, caste, age, gender and office or in any other way". Fully alert to the complex ramification arising from the composition of subordination, the Subaltern studies group sketched out its wide ranging concern both with the visible 'history, politics, economics and sociology of subalternity' and with the occluded "attitudes, ideologies and belief systems- in short, the cultural informing that condition." In other words, Subaltern studies defined itself as an attempt to allow people finally to speak within the jealous pages of elitist historiography and in so doing, to speak for, or to sound the muted voices of, the truly oppressed. (1-2)

Ranjit Guha is undoubtedly the most famous name among all Subaltern Historians. His *Elementary Aspects of Peasants Insurgency in Colonial India* is considered to be the most powerful example of Subaltern historical scholarship. By returning to the 19th Century peasants' insurrection in Colonial India he offered a fascinating account of the peasants' insurgent consciousness, rumours, mystic visions, religiosity and bonds of community. In this interesting account, Guha attempted to uncover the true face of peasants' existence in colonial India. In one place he pointed out that the peasants were denied recognition as a subject of history in his own right even for a subject that was all his own. Elitist historiographies were unable to put the peasants' conditions and their insurgency in correct perspective as they could not go beyond limitations that were characteristic of their historiographical schools. He claimed that there existed in colonial India an 'autonomous' domain of the 'politics of people' that was organized differently than the politics of the elite. This in a sense summed up the entire argument put forward by

Subaltern historians. Peasant uprisings in Colonial India, he argued reflected a separate and autonomous grammar of mobilization in its most comprehensive form. The Landlords, the money lenders and the Colonial Government officials formed a composite apparatus of dominance over the peasants. Their exploitation according to Guha was primarily political in character and economic exploitation, so upheld and stressed by the other schools, mainly the Marxist, was mainly one of its several instances.

The Subaltern Studies began in the beginning of 1980s. It aimed promoting, as the preface declared, the study and discussion of the subalternist themes in South Asian Studies. The principle aim was to rectify the elitist bias found in most of the academic works in South Asian Studies. Guha believed that the politics of the subalterns constituted an autonomous domain, for it neither originated from elite politics nor did its existence depend on the latter. Subordination in its various forms has always been the central focus of the Subaltern studies. But throughout subsequent volumes the whole concept of subalternity underwent various shifts. The essays of the subsequent volumes reflect divergence in interest, motives and theories. But in spite of these shifts, one aspect of the Subaltern Studies has remained unchanged. It is an effort to see and rethink history from the perspective of the Subalterns and to give them their due in the Historical process. The new contributors ended up giving new form and substance subalternity.

The last two decades of the twentieth century have witnessed the emergence of diverse themes within the subaltern historiographical School. Historians have noticed that the later volumes of the Subaltern Studies were dominated by the desire to analyse the portrayal of subalternity by the dominant discourses. Apart from these volumes a number of books appeared in the decades of 80s and 90s. Historians like Partha Chatterjee made notable contributions in this respect. His works proved crucial at this juncture to understand that engagement with elite themes is not altogether new to the subalterns.

A number of earlier essays have revolved around these themes during the formative years, most important among them being Ranajit Guha's *Prose of Counter Insurgency*. The difference in the later essays lies in the fact that while the earlier works wanted to establish the subalterns as subjects of their own history, the latter works concentrated on various aspects of dominance confronted by the

Subaltern sections. They also shed new lights on the domains of culture and politics of the period and their roles in the whole picture. These writings have been able to outline the whole process of history being written from the point of view of elite nationalism and their limitations. Mention can be made in this respect to the essay by Shahid Amin called *Gandhi as Mahatma : Gorakhpur District, Eastern up, 1921-1922* [*Subalterns Studies III OUP, Delhi, 1984*] and his other essay *Approvers Testimony, Judicial Discourse: The Case of Chouri Choura* [*Subalterns Studies V, OUP Delhi, 1987.*] Communalism also emerged as a significant theme in Subaltern writings of 90s. Gyan Pandey has some notable works to his credit about the Hindu Muslims riots in modern India. This theme has become all the more important with the resurgence of Hindu and Muslim fundamentalism in the recent times. Historian Gyan Prakash in one of his essay once said that the real significance of the shift to the analysis of discourses is the reformulation of the notion of subaltern.

The decade of the 80s assumes a special significance due to the fact caste, gender, and religion became important reference points in history writing, subaltern history in particular understood the need to document the lives of all the oppressed people, like peasants and workers, tribals and lower caste women and dalits, whose voices were seldom heard before in history.

It is necessary to note that the rise of the subaltern historiography in the decade of the 1980s concurred with that of the Dalit Movement. This movement questioned the basic assumption of Brahminism as well as various historical schools. Including the subalterns, historians have noticed that 'subaltern studies' is used as a blanket term for communities inside it. But each of these communities under this massive all inclusive umbrella possess a different vision of history and a distinct approach to it. So it is not surprising that the historians of Dalit communities do not hesitate to dismiss Subaltern school as elite or non-Dalit. For example, Gandhi was the voice of the Dalits in spite of not being a Dalit himself. Ambedkar and Mayavati are the Dalits articulating the protest of Dalits.

Subaltern school has no doubt made great contribution in the realm of Indian historiography. But nevertheless, it is not totally free from shortcomings. Sumit Sarkar in his famous essay "The Decline of the Subaltern" in his book *Writing Social History* states;

Subaltern studies does not happen to be the first Indian historiographical school whose reputation has come to be evaluated primarily in terms of audience response in the west. For many Indian readers, particularly those getting interested in postmodern trends for the first time. The sense of being 'with it' strongly conveyed by Subaltern Studies appears far more important than any possible insubstantiality of empirical consent. Yet some eclectic borrowings or verbal similarities apart, the claim (or ascription) of being postmodern is largely spurious, in which ever since we might want to deploy that ambiguous and self-consciously polysemic term. (p. 103)

Vinay Bhal in his essay "Relevance (or Irrelevance) of Subaltern Studies in Reading Subaltern Studies" edited by David Ludden observes:

Members of Subaltern Studies group felt that although Marxist historians produced impressive and pioneering studies, their claim to represent the history of the masses remained debatable. Their main thesis is that colonialist, nationalist and Marxist interpretations of Indian History had robbed the common people of their agency. The Subaltern Studies collectively thus announced a new approach to restore history to the subordinated in order to rectify the elitist bias characteristic of much academic work in South Asian Studies. The subaltern's agency was restored by theorising that the elite in India played a dominant role and not simply a hegemonic one. Thus, with the logic of this theory the subaltern were made into autonomous historical actors who then seemingly acted on their own since they were not to be led by the elites. (p. 361)

There is no denying the fact that Subaltern School has contributed a lot in the study of history, economics and social sciences in Third World countries in the end of the twentieth century. Subaltern Studies form a part of postcolonial theory in literature and its application is indeed very useful in the study of certain texts (for example – Dalit Literature). B.K. Das Says, "Literature is not a branch of Social sciences and therefore cannot be evaluated according to the methods adopted by Subaltern Studies". (p. 147)

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