SUBALTERN STUDIES: AN APPROACH TO INDIAN HISTORY

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SYNOPSIS

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By

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In recent years, a significant change in the historiography of South Asia, and particularly India, has been brought about by the Subaltern Studies project, which began more than twenty-five years ago. As a perceptible intervention in modern historiography, the first volume of the *Subaltern Studies* appeared in 1982 from Oxford University Press, Delhi. The next two decades witnessed the coming out of a series of similar other volumes. The latest one (Vol. XII) saw the light of day in 2005. Ranajit Guha, once a Marxist and a full-time activist in the Communist Party of India, was the ‘intellectual driving force’ behind the concept of Subaltern Studies. He edited the first six volumes of the project with the help of a core group of younger historians whom he later remembered as ‘an assortment of marginalized academics’. The editorial collective that originally comprised young scholars like Shahid Amin, David Arnold and Partha Chatterjee among others was subsequently enlarged.

The central concern of the project was to produce an account of South Asian history and society from the point of view of Europe’s periphery. In doing this, subaltern historians rejected the ‘neo-nationalist, neo-colonialist and economistic Marxist’ modes of historiography. They contended that existing interpretations of Indian history had robbed the common people of their agency. The issues further raised were forms of power as well as ways of understanding the nature of resistance in a coercive society.
Subaltern Studies is in fact a critical history from the beginning. As Ranajit Guha writes in the ‘Introduction’ to Subaltern Studies I, “The historiography of Indian nationalism has for a long time been dominated by elitism -- colonialist elitism and bourgeois-nationalist elitism.” Subaltern historians primarily looked into the peasant insurrections. Not surprisingly, in the first four volumes of the series, twenty essays were published on peasant and tribal insurrections. It was argued that the peasant uprisings in the colonial period formed a separate trend not much connected with the Congress /nationalist politics. Hence, it was too much to say that the Congress helped peasantry to stand on its feet. Elite historians’ claim, argue the subalternists, that the subalterns joined the national movement under the aegis of Gandhiji is unfounded. The truth is that subalterns are makers of their history. It is not possible to do justice to such movements as the Quit India Movement of 1942 or the RIN Mutiny of 1946 without bringing to the fore the active role of the subaltern masses.

Subaltern Studies did not stand still as a project. It underwent considerable changes as the subaltern scholars engaged with various contemporary problems and theoretical formulations. Initially, they had been working on subaltern politics in the vein of E.P.Thompson and Antonio Gramsci. After 1988, many of them came under the influence of Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida. In a word, in the last 15-20 years, the temperament and orientation of the project have substantially changed. New agendas have been set out. The social and political problematics of contemporary India such as caste conflict, struggle between fundamentalism and secularism, gender
studies, police, prison, bureaucracy and related issues now overwhelm subaltern scholarship. Discursive deconstruction of cultural power has become compelling project for scholars who discovered the failures and betrayals of modernity, positivism, and Enlightenment. Old empirical certainties of modernization have been challenged under the rubric of postmodern and postcolonial scholarship.

In the present work, some major thematic areas of the project have been highlighted for locating the twists and turns in its journey. At the outset, the project was what may be called ontological in nature. Finally, it became what we propose to call discursive. The subalternists believed that through historical research on subaltern protest and actions, it was possible to describe the pure, total and autonomous formation of the subaltern being or consciousness. The question was: ‘What is the true nature of the subaltern?’ True, the Subaltern Studies, right from its inception, was already aware that the notion of the subaltern was constructed as the “other” of the elite. But it was believed then that the elitist construction would drop down if correctly analysed. The true nature of the subaltern would at once be revealed.

But over time, the new question became: ‘How is the subaltern represented?’ Many of the subalternists felt that it would never be possible to land into the realization of a hard reality transcending the limits of representation. In brief, a good intention of writing a “pure” and unadulterated subaltern history became untenable. The most important question now was the construction of the subaltern. As a result, the need for
an entirely different approach was felt. Subsequently, the Subaltern Studies became engaged in the study of such known fields as the expansion of the colonial apparatus, English education, the so-called Bengal Renaissance, emergence of Indian nationalism, etc. On the other hand, the attention was given to the different institutions of modern states and social system and the modern regime of power. As pointed out by Partha Chatterjee, it is now possible to see the whole world of society-institution-ideology through the subaltern viewpoint.

To locate this ideological evolution, I have mainly focused on themes like nationalism, colonial modernity, the problem of representation, and the questions of community. These are some of the more important questions problematized by the subalternists. In the early years of its career, the project’s central argument was that the nationalist leaders of India sought to mobilize the masses and thoroughly control their movements with a view to challenging the authority of the British Raj. But subsequently, the collective’s aim had been to reconstruct peasant consciousness itself, and to reveal its autonomy from elite nationalist thought. Subaltern Studies, it may be noted, appeared as an overriding critique of the traditional concept of nationalism and what Gyan Pandey calls the prejudiced way of history-writing. Challenging what they see as ‘the totalizing standpoint of a seamless nationalism’, the subaltern historians have argued that nationalism should not assert the cultural homogeneity of communities.
Scholars like Partha Chatterjee have shown that Gandhiji’s intervention in Indian nationalist politics fundamentally changed the course of its history. His thought of non-violence and *Satyagraha* strongly criticized modern Western political ideas and the notions of civil society. There were several possibilities inherent in the Gandhian political philosophy. But ultimately, they became the ideological weapons in the hands of the nationalist elite. The peasantry was politically mobilized by Gandhian politics. But this, according to the subaltern scholars, did not give them political rights. Peasants became a part of a nation, but were perpetually detached from the Indian nation-state.

Over time, I have tried to show, Subaltern Studies has moved away from its primary objective of recovering the subaltern autonomy. In 1985, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak pointed out that the subaltern historian should make a probe into the processes through the subaltern is constructed as the “other” of the elite. She thought that it was pointless to try to set apart the subaltern’s autonomous out of a thousand of noises. For whatever voices we hear in the documents of history are not the words of the subaltern, but some construction by others. Hence, it was necessary to discover the processes by which such construction takes place, and the institutions through which it is done. Thus, gradually Subaltern Studies used the subaltern as a space from which one could rethink the discipline of history.
The subaltern historians such as Chatterjee and Dipesh Chakrabarty have engaged in the debate on colonial modernity. In recent Subaltern Studies, a key argument has been built up about alternative or “hybrid” modernities. The focus has been centred on the diffusion of the ideas, practices and institutions of colonial modernity in India. I have highlighted this subalternist critique of modernity with special reference to how they problematize the Bengal Renaissance as an instance of a limited and fragmented episode in which the renaissances heroes failed to raise any basic questions on the structure of power in colonial India. In the view of the subalternists, the renaissance discourse was a’ derivative discourse’ that was over-influenced by the Western paradigm of Enlightenment.

I have sought to show that as a historical project Subaltern Studies does not represent any single intellectual lineage. It is in fact a summing up of various academic developments over the last few decades in political theory, social history, and cultural studies. The project’s look out for self-impulsive disciplinary appraisal has created inventiveness in the writings of the group and has affected other area studies scholars in Latin America and Africa. Inevitably, Subaltern Studies has encountered scathing criticism in India and abroad. I have discussed in some detail the critical literature on the school, especially the recent phase considered by some critics as Late Subaltern Studies. For example, historians like Sumit Sarkar have taken strong exception to the tendency of what they call ‘essentializing the categories of ‘subaltern’ and ‘autonomy’ in the sense of assigning to them more or less absolute, fixed, decontextualized
meanings and qualities.’ According to the Marxist critics, the subaltern scholars conveniently ignore the fact that an easy replacement of class by subaltern would not solve the problems. Rather, dissociation from socio-economic contexts would strengthen the liking for reification of a subaltern or community identity. It has also been argued that the subaltern school lost its original track by falling into the bad company of postcolonial theory. In a word, Subaltern Studies has invited infinite debates and opened up a treasure house for both activists and academicians. In having built up a commitment to the attempted combination of postmodern techniques and radical politics, the collective has provided an important paradigm to discuss to the Third World scholars.

Countersigned by Supervisors:

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