

Mapping Subaltern Historiography of India as an Epistemological Question

Soumen Das

Assistant Professor, Department of Sociology, Asutosh College, Kolkata

Abstract:

Subaltern historiography is essentially an epistemological question of the very idea of India. Ranajit Guha observed that both colonialist as well as nationalist historiographies of modern India are elitist in nature and ignored the politics of subaltern people as prepolitical based on false consciousness. But, subaltern politics in colonial India, he claims, was a separate political process, organized in an 'autonomous domain' independent of elite politics as resistance to the domination of the elites. This intellectual journey of making subaltern historiography suddenly experiences a change with the retirement of Guha from the editorial team of Subaltern Studies group. Since then, the journey took a postcolonial turn to study fragmentary and incomplete consciousness of subaltern people in India and recently taken an ethnographic turn by focusing on the subconsciousness of different marginal groups.

Keywords: subaltern studies, elitist historiography, prepolitical/political, domination and consciousness, autonomous domain, postcolonial turn,

Subaltern approach, broadly designated as 'subaltern historiography' is first and foremost a theoretical paradigm that aims to revisit specifically the history of peasant movements in colonial India. The word 'subaltern' has a long past. It applied to vassals and peasants in late medieval period. By 1700, it denoted lower ranks in the military; and soon after the Russian revolution, Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937) for the first time in his celebrated work "The Prison Notebooks" (1971), written while he was in prison between 1929 and 1935, used the word as a substitute to 'proletariat' to escape prison censorship (Ludden, 2002: 5). Gramsci used the word to mean two things – firstly, the industrial proletariat, and secondly, the subaltern groups of peasantries in the pre-capitalist social formations (Chatterjee, 2011: 2). Therefore, the vagueness of the term proved to be an advantage as it came to gain various meanings over time. Spivak (2000: 325) gave a proper description of its use among subalternist scholars in South Asia – "for the historians of South Asia who took the word from Gramsci, 'subaltern' came to mean persons and groups cut off from upward – and in a sense 'outward' – social mobility". The origin of the subaltern approach was rooted in the fact that post-colonial historiography in Europe based on Enlightenment Philosophy totally neglected experiences of non-Western societies. This is what Dipesh Chakrabarty (1998: 265) called 'asymmetric ignorance'. This is what the subalternist scholars of South Asia had in their minds when they started their journey for the first time in the early 1980s under the tutelage of historian Ranajit Guha at the University of Sussex. For subalternist scholars, another provocation came from post-structuralist theories that encouraged them to de-construct elitist and Eurocentric historiography of South Asia in general and India in particular.

Subaltern approach of Indian society and its people attempt to alter the conventional source of knowledge and the method of knowledge production. It is essentially an epistemological question about the very idea of India. Government of India during British rule always claimed that colonial rule is beneficial for India and its people. It served India with political unity, a sense of nationalism, the rule of the law, modern educational institution, and so on. But, since 1960s, Indian historians started to challenge this pro-colonial narrative and claim that colonial rule in India made devastating impacts on economic, political and cultural developments of the country (Chatterjee; 2010). Thus, colonialism and nationalism emerged as the two contesting research areas of modern Indian history in the 1960s and 1970s (Chakraborty; 2002: 5). At one extreme of this debate, Cambridge historian Dr Anil Seal who gave leadership to the colonialist school claimed in his noted book *Emergence of Indian Nationalism* (1968) that Indian nationalism was the work of a tiny elite who “competed and collaborated” with the British in search for power and privilege. At the other extreme, Indian historian Bipan Chandra of Jawaharlal Nehru University in Delhi in his pioneering work *The Rise and Growth of Economic Nationalism in India* (1969) claimed that Indian modern history was an epic battle between the forces of nationalism and of colonialism. For him, Indian nationalism, primarily led by Gandhi and Nehru, was a regenerative force that united “People of India” by mobilizing them against the imperialist rule. These two contesting approaches were outright rejected by Guha (1982: 3) claiming them as elitist and unable to understand ‘the contributions made by people on their own, that is, independent of the elite to the making and development of this nationalism’. His *The Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (1983) serves us with an exclusive entry point of doing alternative history of India (Kundu and Yadav; 2021: 30). However, Guha’s *Subaltern Studies* had much in common with “the history-from-the below” approach of English Marxist historiography pioneered by E. P. Thompson, E. J. Hobsbawm and others. Both schools were inspired by Marxist orientation, particularly by the work of Gramsci. *Subaltern Studies* particularly aimed to produce historical analyses for subaltern groups as the subject of mainstream history. As Guha (1984: vii) put it- “We are indeed opposed to much of the prevailing academic practice in historiography...for its failure to acknowledge the subaltern as the marker of his own destiny. This critique lies at the very heart of our project”.

However, Guha’s theorization had some key differences with English Marxist historiography. Chakraborty (2002: 8) has identified three broad areas- it maintains separation from any universalist history of capital, criticizes the idea of nation as a particular universal form, and interrogates the relation between power and knowledge. These differences gave a different intellectual impetus for the beginning of a new kind of subaltern theorization in history of South Asia. Historians of the subaltern group claim that ‘politics of the (subaltern) people’ was organized in colonial India in an ‘autonomous domain’ independent from the politics of the elite. Politics of the elite was organized by “vertical” mobilization based on parliamentary and constitutional orientation, whereas subaltern politics was mobilized ‘horizontally’ based on kinship and territoriality (ibid). They also claim that subaltern politics was more violent in nature compare to elite politics and the key force to mobilization was the notion of resistance to elite domination. This separation, however, between subaltern and elite domains had profound impacts on global historiography. Until 1970’s, Marxist historiography had a tendency to see peasant insurgences organized along the lines of religion, caste, kinship, and so on as movements principally based on “false consciousness”. These were what Hobsbawm had called ‘prepolitical’. As Hobsbawm (1978: 2) put it: “They are pre-political people who have not yet found, or only begun to find, specific language in which to express their aspirations about the world”. But Guha severely criticized this characterization of peasant consciousness as prepolitical and advocated for considering these collective actions against exploitation in colonial India

as aptly political (Dhanagare; 1993: 134). He also added that peasant insurgents correctly read their coteremporary political world and involved in the deployment of right dress code, behaviour, and speech that exhibit how their social superiors dominated them in everyday life (Chakraborty; 2002: 9). Thus, Guha and his group reconceptualized subalternity in the unique Indian context markedly different from its original Gramscian usage. Subalternity, for Guha, refers to a kind of relationship between the elite and the subaltern people in colonial India which was dialectically, hierarchically and contextually determined. He defines the subaltern classes as a residual category based on the “demographic difference” between the elites and rest of the population of India (Roy Choudhury; 2016). On the other hand, for Guha, elites are the indigenous as well as foreign dominant groups who controlled the rest of the society in India. Therefore, subaltern politics represents those moments of outburst that are manifested against the oppression and subjugation in everyday life by the elites or what Guha and Spivak (1988) called “resistance to the domination of the elites”. D. N. Dhanagare (1993: 140), however, very systematically summarized Indian subaltern approach led by Guha as a synthesis of four streams of contemporary Marxism: First, it has emphasized on the pure spontaneous action of subaltern people under hegemonic state as Gramscian Marxism proposed. Second, the idea of consciousness has been used the way Trotsky did. For example, party, planning, strategies and so on may be important but not the essential criterion to ‘necessary consciousness’. Third, the idea of indispensability of the material force and actors of history was well embraced by subaltern studies group as proposed by English Marxist historians Hobsbawm, Thompson and others. And lastly, they tended to model their arguments on the lines indicated by the Latin American movements, Paris uprising (youth protest) of 1968 and the like.

The journey for subaltern studies group has experienced dramatic changes as soon as Ranajit Guha retired from the editorial team in 1988. An anthology entitled *Selected Subaltern Studies*, forwarded by Edward Said and Gayatri Spivak’s “Deconstructing Historiography” which first appeared in *Subaltern Studies VI* (1986) served as the introduction, was published in the same year that gave this approach a formal entry into the higher echelon of Western academia (Chakraborty; 2002: 17 and Roy Chowdhury; 2016). Spivak (1994: 66-111) pointed out two profound criticisms against subaltern studies that had serious effect on the intellectual trajectories of the project- first, the question of gender was absent in the project, and second, it carries a theoretical orientation that encouraged, in Guha’s words, “to acknowledge the subaltern as the maker of his own destiny”. In her celebrated article “Can Subaltern Speak?”- a challenging reading of the conversation between Foucault and Deleuze- Spivak (1988: 271-313) warned to take any straightforward project of “letting the subaltern speak” (Chakraborty; 2002). Because, not only that they “cannot speak” by themselves but also when they do speak, definitely they speak in vernaculars (Chatterjee; 2011: 7). Irfan Habib (1986) questioned Guha’s idea of ‘autonomy’ of the subaltern consciousness as separate political process. He claimed that grass-root level protests by common people were prime source of ideas for Indian nationalist movement led by elite leaders. Another major challenge for this approach is the imprecise meaning of the very concept of ‘subalternity’. Even Guha (1982: 8) himself in a separate note admitted that it is not a homogenous concept in terms of its composition. The approach has also been confined itself primarily to the colonial period and focused only on those mass mobilizations that were insurgent in character (Dhanagare; 1993: 142). Hence, it was incapable to examine those protest movements by rural and Adivasi people which were not truly insurgent in character.

All these criticisms against the entire theoretical project, however, were well received and a new pragmatic shift took place in 1987-89 through a discursive turn from “subaltern politics” to the study of fragmentary and incomplete consciousness based on the theorization of power and domination propounded by

Foucault, Derrida and Said (Roy Chowdhury; 2016). Dipesh Chakraborty (2002) marks this transition as a necessary “postcolonial turn” toward subjectivity, representation and discourse. Recently, subconsciousness of different other marginalized groups like lower caste people, women, minorities are being studied by scholars like Partha Chatterjee, Gyanendra Pandey, Shahid Amin, and others. The creation of the Latin American Subaltern Studies Group in 1992 indicates the global image Subaltern Studies has achieved (Chatterjee; 2010). Partha Chatterjee (2012) has recently made a pragmatic statement that Subaltern Studies should be treated as the product of its own time and this new time needs new project. For this, he proposed an ethnographic turn in subaltern studies that might open up a new horizon and set future agenda. Identity formation of different ethnic/Adivasi communities, migrated communities (e.g. Chakma people migrated from present Bangladesh), ecologically marginalized groups, religious minority and their socio-cultural and political expressions in contemporary Indian society and polity also present a vast spectrum for it.

REFERENCES:

1. Chakraborty, Dipesh. 1998. “Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History: Who Speaks for ‘Indian’ Pasts?”. In *Subaltern Studies Reader: 1986-1995*, edited by Ranajit Guha. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
2. Chakraborty, Dipesh. 2022. *Habitations of Modernity: Essays in the Wake of Subaltern Studies*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
3. Chandra, Bipan. 1969. *The Rise and Growth of Economic Nationalism in India: Economic Policies of Indian National Leadership, 1880-1905*. Delhi: People’s Publishing House.
4. Chatterjee, Partha. 2010. “A Brief History of Subaltern Studies”. In *Empire and Nation: Selected Essays*, edited by Partha Chatterjee. 289-301. New York: Columbia University Press.
5. Chatterjee, Partha. 2011. *Lineages of Political Society: Studies in Postcolonial Democracy*. Ranikhet: Permanent Black.
6. Chatterjee, Partha. 2012. “After Subaltern Studies”. *Economic and Political Weekly*. (47) (35): 44-49.
7. Dhanagare, D. N. 1993. *Themes and Perspectives in Indian Sociology*. Jaipur: Rawat Publication.
8. Gramsci, Antonio. 1972. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. New York: International.
9. Guha, Ranajit. 1982. “On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India”. In *Subaltern Studies I: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, edited by Ranajit Guha. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
10. Guha, Ranajit. 1984. “On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India”. In *Subaltern Studies III: Writings on Indian History and Society*, edited by Ranajit Guha. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
11. Guha, Ranajit & Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. 1988. *Selected Subaltern Studies*. New York: Oxford University Press.
12. Habib, Irfan. 1986. *Interpreting Indian History*. Shillong: NEHU Publication.
13. Hobsbawm, Eric. 1972. *Primitive Rebels*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
14. Kundu, A & Yadav, N. (2024). *Sociology of India*. New Delhi: Atlantic.
15. Ludden, David, ed. 2002. *Reading Subaltern Studies*. London: Anthem Press.
16. Roy Chowdhury, Arnab. 2016. “Subaltern Studies”. In *The Encyclopedia of Postcolonial Studies*, edited by Sangeeta Ray et. al. Blackwell Reference Online.

Retrieved from: https://www.researchgate.net/publication/373449844_Subaltern Accessed on: 14/5/2019

17. Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. 1988. "Can Subaltern Speak?" in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, edited by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, 271-313. London: Macmillan.