

# Subaltern Discourse and Contemporary Indian Literature

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## **Abstract:**

This study explores Subaltern discourse in contemporary Indian literature, particularly in Hindi literature, examining how it has evolved over time and how it reflects the social, political and cultural realities of Subalterns in India. Subaltern literature, which emerged as a form of resistance and identity assertion, has been a powerful tool in the fight against caste-based oppression and marginalization. The research delves deeply into the contributions of prominent Subaltern writers, such as the B.R. Ambedkar, and modern writers such as Daya Pawar, Omprakash Valmiki, and others. The study also examines the stylistic and thematic elements of Subaltern literature, emphasizing caste discrimination, social injustice, and calls for equality. Furthermore, the study analyzes the importance of language in Subaltern literature, focusing on the use of Hindi as a medium to voice the struggles and aspirations of Subalterns. By examining key strands, the study reveals how Subaltern literature has gradually transformed from a form of protest to a literary movement that seeks to redefine the social and cultural norms of mainstream society. The aim of this study is to provide an in-depth analysis of how Subaltern literature in Hindi challenges hegemonic ideologies, promotes social change, and plays a significant role in reshaping the narrative of Indian society through its honest and unflinching portrayal of Subaltern life. The paper also considers the influence of Subaltern literature on contemporary Hindi literature, its place within the literary canon, and its continued relevance in the ongoing struggle for social justice and equality in India.

**Keywords:** Contemporary India, Literature, Hindi, subaltern, discourse

## **Introduction:**

Subaltern discourse in Contemporary Indian literature represents a significant and transformative aspect of the Indian literary tradition, providing a powerful voice to one of the country's most marginalized communities. The term 'Subaltern' refers to people belonging to lower castes, historically referred to as 'untouchables,' and who have faced systemic exclusion, discrimination, and social injustice for centuries. The emergence of Subaltern literature in Hindi can be traced back to the early 20th century, when it began as a response to the deep-rooted caste-based oppression that had plagued Subalterns.

It provided writers with a means to narrate their life experiences and express their struggles for dignity, rights, and social justice. Subalterns are those communities that have been designated as Scheduled Castes in the Indian Constitution. Defining Subalterns, Kanwal Bharti states, "In reality, a Subaltern can be anyone who is socially and economically disadvantaged. To use the word Subaltern in any other sense is to distort the word itself. The one who is subjected to the rule of untouchability, who is forced to perform harsh and dirty work, who is denied education and independent occupation, and on whom the

untouchables impose a code of social disabilities, is a Subaltern, and only he." Subaltern literature is people's literature. It can be called mass literature. This is a literary form.

It is also a literature of action. It arises from the resentful struggle and rebellion against the feudal mentality over the role of human values. Its independent existence must be acknowledged. The concept of its social existence must be based on equality, freedom, and loyalty to universal brotherhood. This is the demand of Subaltern literature. Subaltern literature is fundamentally indicative. The sole voice of all definitions of Subaltern literature is social change, the source of inspiration for which is the thought of Dr. Baba Saheb Bhimrao Ambedkar. Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar is considered the messiah and guide of Subalterns. The literature being written following his path is Subaltern literature. The pain of Subaltern literature is not just one's own pain, but the pain of the entire society. Mahatma Jyotiba Phule said, "Only those who know the torture of slavery know it, and only those who know it can tell the complete truth." Truly, "only ashes know the experience of burning, and no one else."

### **Description:**

Subaltern literature is the literature of empathy and sympathy. Empathy can only be experienced by someone born into the Subaltern community, and empathy can arise in anyone. It's not necessary to be born into the Subaltern community. Sympathy can move anyone. But empathy can only be experienced by someone born into the Shudra caste. No one can be prevented from expressing their views in literature. Writers can write on any religion, caste, or country.

Reflecting on the Subaltern discourse in Premchand's fiction, Subhash Chandra writes that Premchand's skillful portrayal of social reality in his works is a model for Indian writers. Munshi Premchand depicted all sections of society in his works. Premchand's empathy, compassion, and compassion for Subalterns, along with their struggle for freedom from exploitation, injustice, and oppression, and for human dignity and identity, cannot be ignored. Premchand's novels, *Karmabhoomi*, *Rangbhoomi*, and *Godaan*, and his stories, *Mandir*, *Doodh Ka Daam*, *Gulli Danda*, *Mantra*, *Thakur Ka Kuan*, and *Sadrati*, express various aspects and portrayals of Subaltern life. Subaltern literature stands on the foundation of social action. Premchand depicts the rebellious face of Subalterns in *Godaan*. Pandit Matadin possesses the body and mind of Siliya Chamarin.

He accepts her. At first, he says he will treat her like his wife, but when Siliya gives four paise worth of grain to the lady of the house in exchange for two paise worth of color he bought for Holi, Matadin makes the lady of the house put the grain back in the heap and says to Siliya, "Who are you to give from my grain?" Then Siliya realizes her true status: that she is nothing more than Matadin's servant. Siliya, winking the grain, asks with hurt pride, "Don't I have any authority over your things?" Matadin glares, "No, you have no authority. She works, she eats. So you can eat or plunder as you wish." In the modern era, with the Indian renaissance, the plight of the lower castes attracted the attention of reformers. In this context, on the one hand, to remove untouchability and caste-based inequality, great personalities like Raja Rammohan Roy, Dayanand Saraswati, Bal Gangadhar Tilak and Mahatma Gandhi made efforts for social reform, while on the other hand; great personalities from the Subaltern community like Jyotiba Phule, Periyar, Narayan Guru and Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar raised the essence of change. Saints like Namdev, Kabir and Ravidas have expressed the suffering of Subalterns in very poignant words. Satirizing the caste system, Kabir Das asks-'How much are you Brahmins, how much are we interest? How much are we blood, how much are you milk?' These saints dreamed of establishing an egalitarian

society. Other medieval saints who did not come from the Subaltern community also expressed their commitment to liberating Subalterns from exploitation.

Contemporary Indian subaltern literature focuses on the experiences of marginalized groups—Dalits, Adivasis, women and working classes—challenging mainstream narratives. It emphasizes authentic, first-person storytelling, resisting oppression through literature. Key themes include caste-based discrimination, economic exploitation, gender inequality, and regional identity, with writers like Mahasweta Devi setting the foundation for contemporary voices exploring these areas.

### **Aspects of Contemporary Subaltern Literature:**

**Dalit Literature:** Represents narratives of resistance against caste oppression, with authors like Daya Pawar and Laxman Mane documenting, with raw authenticity, their daily struggles and quest for identity.

**Tribal/Adivasi Voices:** Focuses on the exploitation of tribal communities and their struggle to maintain their cultural identity against modernization, featuring authors like Gopinath Mohanty and Mahasweta Devi.

**Marginalized Women:** Addresses double marginalization (based on gender and caste/class), with writers highlighting issues of patriarchy, sexuality, and silent endurance.

**Regional and Queer Voices:** Literature from the North East India, regional languages adds to the diverse range of marginalized experiences, redefining the traditional Indian narrative.

### **Key Trends:**

**Writing from the Margin:** A move towards first-person narration where the subaltern tells their own story, rather than having it told by an outsider.

**Revisiting Myth:** The Contemporary writer often retells and recollects or rediscover stories from the Mahabharata and Ramayana from the perspective of subaltern characters.

**Inter sectional:** Works frequently explore the intersection of caste, gender, and economic status in sustaining the subaltern condition.

Thus, Subaltern writers do not trace the tradition of Subaltern fiction to Premchand. In this regard, it can be said that while it is true that grasping the embers of reality with tongs and touching them in the hand are different experiences, there has nevertheless been a long tradition of non-Subaltern writers raising the issues of Subalterns in Hindi fiction. Although their primary focus has not been Subaltern writing, their contribution to this tradition cannot be denied.

### **Conclusion**

It is an irony of modern Indian society that despite the promotion of democratic ideas and values, equality, and brotherhood, ills like caste discrimination and untouchability remain an inevitable part of our Indian society. Subaltern writers began creating literature to eradicate this untouchability and to assert their status in society. Dr. Ambedkar's dream was that greater attention should be paid to education despite financial constraints. He is a source of inspiration for today's Subaltern writers. Om Prakash Valmiki has made a significant contribution to bringing Hindi Subaltern literature to the pinnacle of prosperity. This is why Valmiki holds a high position in Hindi Subaltern literature. Overall, it can be said that the modern period is a golden age for Subaltern literature, in which Subalterns are at the forefront. The desire for change in Subaltern society is the ultimate goal of Subaltern literature.

## Source/ References:

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