

Indian Society: Sociological Perspectives
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Introducing Subaltern Studies I

Subaltern Studies is a very important intervention in the study of Indian society. Strictly speaking it is not a sociological perspective. It was a historiographical intervention. Barring a few, almost all the scholars who contributed to Subaltern Studies were historians and political scientists. But as students of Sociology and Social Sciences, we need to have some familiarity with Subaltern studies.

Subaltern Studies is one of the very few important path-breaking theoretical and conceptual interventions, made into the study of Indian society. Suppose you look into the myriads of theoretical frameworks used to study Indian society in modern Social Sciences. In that case, Subaltern Studies is one of the original contributions by scholars, Indian scholars mostly.

Of course, they were based in many other places, but something that, originated about India and later became a very important framework to look into the kind of postcolonial context. So, on various counts, Subaltern Studies was a very important intervention, maybe lasting for around one and a half, two decades in its prime time before it started losing its steam. Let us discuss a couple of review essays on Subaltern Studies.

There are several essays that are written by scholars summarising the basic arguments or critically reviewing the basic trajectory of the growth and trajectory of Subaltern Studies. So, we will discuss one of them by Dipesh Chakrabarty followed by two classes that look

at the Subaltern Studies project in a very critical manner, mostly from the Marxian scholarship.

The Subaltern Studies series was founded by the scholar named Ranajit Guha, who was a professor at Sussex University. It emerged as an intervention from his side, which was made possible in his very important work titled *The Elementary Aspects of Peasant Resurgence in Colonial India*, which presented a very innovative intervention in historiography.

Just like there are multiple perspectives within Sociology, History also has it. Historiography is about the theoretical way in which one understands History. There are competing claims, there is Marxian historiography, Nationalist historiography, Cambridge historiography. It is a very vibrant field, just like any other vibrant Social Sciences. So, the book *Elementary Aspects of Peasants Insurgency in Colonial India* and the intervention of Ranajit Guha seemed to be a decisive moment. Later he published the first volume of Subaltern Studies, in which he had this introductory essay 'On some Aspects of historiography of Colonial India'. This is the title of the essay that, Guha wrote in the introductory chapter and it becomes a kind of a manifesto for Subaltern Studies.

Subaltern Studies was founded by Ranajit Guha and 6 or 7 of his students, and later it attracted other scholars from across the globe and also from India, Partha Chatterjee, Gyanendra Pandey and a host of other people. Later they were able to get on board sociologists and political scientists and then feminists and people who work in literature, on humanities and cultural studies, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Homi Bhabha and lot of people came on board. They were able to publish at least some 12 volumes of Subaltern Studies. The first one edited by Ranajit Guha came out in 1982 and almost I think till the 10th volume, they were all published by Oxford University Press and the second volume came in 83, 84, 85, 87, 89, 93, 94 and 93 onwards, Guha stepped down from the editorial position and then they shared the responsibility among the core people who were involved, including Partha Chatterjee, Gyanendra Pandey, David Arnold, David Hardyman, Shahid Amin, Dipesh Chakravarti, Gautam Bhadra, Gyan Prakash, Susie

Tharu, Pradeep Jaganathan and the final edited volume appeared in 2005 and edited by Shail Mayaram, M.S.S. Pandian and Ajay Skaria that is published by Permanent black and Ravi Dayal Publisher. And with that, that series of Subaltern Studies ended.

The reason why it ended and what were the criticisms? In 2000, by the time the 12th volume came out, the very character of Subaltern Studies had undergone significant transformation. It was appropriated more into culture studies, into postcolonial kind of theorisation, into more postmodern kind of theoretical frameworks than a kind of very visible Marxist orientation that it had in the beginning. Because Ranjit Guha had a very strong Marxian leanings, though he quarrel with some of the orthodox ways in which Marxist historiography presented in a society. So, that is something important.

Today's discussion is the essay titled Subaltern Studies and Postcolonial Historiography by Dipesh Chakrabarty. It was published in 2000. Another very useful essay that I came across is Subaltern Studies as Postcolonial Criticism by Gyan Prakash, published much before 1994.

So, both these essays provide you with a very interesting summary and basic arguments about the whole book. But I decided to go with the first one, an essay by Dipesh Chakrabarty. It is much more easily readable and accessible published by Duke University Press. And let us go through these essays.

Subaltern Studies began writing on Indian History and Society in 1982 as a series of interventions in the debates specific to the writing of modern Indian history. Ranajit Guha A historian from India, then teaching at the University of Sussex was the inspiration behind it. The intellectual reach of Subaltern Studies has now exceeded that of the discipline of history.

It was a historical intervention, and it became a very important framework, got expanded into other disciplines. And also this theoretical framework was adopted by other social scientists to use in their respective countries. Postcolonial theorists of diverse disciplinary backgrounds have taken an interest in the series. Much discussed for

instance, are how contributors of Subaltern Studies have principally participated in contemporary criticism of the history of Nationalism, Orientalism and Eurocentricism in the construction of Social Science knowledge. Selections from the series have been published in English, Spanish, Bengali and Hindi and are being brought out in Tamil and Japanese.

So, it is a very powerful intervention. Now, Dipesh Chakrabarty is asking the question, how did a project which began as a specific and focused intervention in the academic discipline of Indian history come to be associated with postcolonialism, an area of study whose principle home has been the literature departments? Maybe in the latter part of Subaltern Studies, it was taken over or heavily influenced by the postcolonial scholars, mostly the literature scholars, scholars like Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and others who were the scholars of cultural studies. They started using this framework very extensively. This essay is motivated by a question that focuses on the discipline of history.

In what ways can one read the original historiographic agenda of Subaltern Studies as not simply yet another version of Marxian, Marxist radical history but as possessing a necessarily postcolonial outlook? So, he argues that the Subaltern Studies cannot be reduced to a Marxian, a conventional Marxian framework. Still, it had a postcolonial intent from the very beginning. I concentrate on the discipline of history for two reasons. The relationship between the new field of postcolonial writing and historiography has not yet received the attention it deserves. The connection between postcolonial writing and historiography has not been given sufficient attention to answer critics who say Subaltern Studies was once good Marxist history in the same way that the English tradition of history from below was. That it lost its way when it came in contact with Said's Orientalism, Spivak's deconstructionism or Bhabha's analysis of colonial discourse. So, this point I think we will discuss more in detail when we take up this kind of criticism. When you look into the major criticisms against Subaltern Studies that emerged from the Marxian scholars Sumit Sarkar, Chibber and others who were extremely critical of the latter turn of Subaltern Studies from a kind of Marxian framework into a more postcolonial, postmodern framework. So, in this section, this Subaltern Studies and

debates in modern Indian history, he locates the emergence of Subaltern Studies as a theoretical intervention in the historiography of studying Indian society.

So, the basic story in a nutshell is that when Subaltern Studies emerged as an intervention, the major theoretical historiographical school that existed was the Cambridge school from scholars from Britain, who enormously overemphasize the role of the empire, the role of Britain in creating Indian national feelings and then reduced everything to the Indian elites who use the colonial enterprise for their selfish motive. The nationalist historians, mostly combined with, Marxian scholars presented a kind of nationalist historiography, a nationalist argument saying that Indian people who fought for independence were all inspired by a sense of nationalism and that had nothing much to do with intellectual or ideological influence from the colonialism. Guha finds both these arguments problematic and then he makes his very important and decisive intervention finding fault with both the Cambridge school as well as the nationalist school. This particular section is where the Subaltern Studies and debates in modern Indian history trace that argument. So, let us go through them quickly. I begin by sketching some of the principle debates in modern Indian history with early Subaltern Studies intervened.

Dipesh Chakrabarty talks about in the early phase, this area of scholarship bore all signs of an ongoing struggle between tendencies affiliated with imperialist biases in history and nationalist desire on the part of the historians to, in India, decolonise the past. Marxism was understandably mobilised in aid of the nationalist project of intellectual decolonisation. So, the Marxian framework was used by the nationalist scholars to build up a narrative about the nationalist historiography that they wanted to present. So, he talks about a series of works, A. R. Desai, Bipin Chandra, then D. A. Low and others and many similar articles published by Bernard Cohn, now collected in his book, an anthropologist among historians, so others and debates around David Morris's assessment and others. So, now the whole question is, did the imperialist British deserve the credit after all for making India a developing modern or united country? Were the Hindu-Muslim conflicts that resulted in the formation of two states of Pakistan and India

a consequence of the divide-and-rule policies of British, or were they reflections of divisions internal to South Asian society? The whole point is once India became independent then there was increased interest among scholars to make sense of what had gone past, the whole colonial experience, the whole anti-colonial struggle and the larger transformation that was happening in Indian society. This particular paragraph elaborates on the Cambridge school specifically by Anil Seal, the book *The Emergence of Indian nationalism*, pictured nationalism as the work of tiny elite reared in the education institutions the British set up in India.

So, this was the crux of the Cambridge school which reduced Indian nationalism to the Indian elites who were the beneficiaries of a British education system and then modernity. So, they argued that it was the penetration of the colonial state into the local structures of power in India, a move prompted by financial self-interest of the Raj rather than by any altruistic motives that eventually and by degree drew Indian elites into colonial governmental processes. According to this argument, the involvement of Indians in the colonial institutions set off a scramble among the indigenous elites who combined opportunistically and around factions formed along vertical lines of patronage to jockey for power and privilege within the limited opportunities of self-rule provided by the British. So, such Cambridge historians claimed it was the rural, real dynamics of that which outside observer or native historians may have mistaken for an idealist struggle for freedom, They reduced the Indian freedom struggle. For example, what motivated Indians to go en masse for this freedom struggle. The Cambridge historians belittled by saying that they were all kind of a residue of the colonial Raj and a tiny number of Indian elites were interested and impressed by the, or they made use of the opportunity provided by the Raj and then they were the one who was behind it.. And on the other extreme of this debate was the Indian historian Bipin Chandra from JNU and a host of these national scholars who argued that cutting across class and caste in India, there were a genuine sense of a yearning for freedom and that was something intrinsic to Indian nationalism. Chandra saw nationalism in contrasting lines. He saw it as a regenerative force, the antithesis to colonialism, something that united and produced an "Indian people" by mobilising them for struggle against the British,

When research progressed in the 70s, there emerged an increasing series of difficulties with both these narratives. So, these were the two competing historiographical accounts. On the one hand you have Cambridge historiography, on the other hand you have a nationalist historiography making use of the Marxian framework. Now, later when this was in progress, there emerged an increasing series of difficulties with both these narratives. It was clear that the Cambridge version of nationalist politics without ideas or idealism would never ring true to scholars in the subcontinent who had themselves experienced the desire for freedom from colonial rule.

So, the Cambridge historiography was dismissed by Indian scholars, saying it was a very eurocentric, ethnocentric dismissal of Indian experience. But on the other hand, there having been a moral war between colonialism and nationalism was increasingly thin as research by younger scholars in India and elsewhere brought new material to life. So, what was the kind of a crisis that a nationalist historiography was facing?. Nationalist historiography saw that there was a kind of increase in the schism between the elites and the downtrodden people in India. There were differences in the ways in which these people understood freedom or understood nationalism and then engage with that. New information on the mobilisation of the poor, peasants, tribals and workers by the elite nationalist leaders in the course of the Gandhian mass movement in the 1920s and 30s for example, suggested a strongly reactionary side to the principal nationalist party, the Indian National Congress.

This whole way in which how the people reacted to Indian National Congress and agenda of Ahimsa and the principles of Mahatma Gandhi, threw up quite a lot of uncomfortable scenarios. For example, I hope about this Chauri Chaura incident where the people turned violent, and Gandhiji had to go on fast in protest. There was so much dissonance within the nationalist group. Let us look into how the subaltern studies made entry into this particular point. Subaltern studies intervened in this situation.

Intellectually it began on the very terrain it was to conduct. Historiography has had its

roots in the colonial education system. It started as a criticism of the two contending schools of history, the Cambridge school and the Nationalist historians. Guha argues that both the Cambridge historians and the nationalist historians represented an elitist view of Indian nationalism,

Both these frameworks failed to understand how the masses experienced, visualised, internalised and expressed nationalism. They wrote a history of nationalism as a story of an achievement by the elite class whether Indian or British. For their own merits, they could not explain the contributions made by people on their own that are independent of elites to the making and development of this nationalism. Indian freedom struggle had a long history of violent uprisings against the British. Almost every location of India saw violent uprisings of tribals, farmers, different kingdoms, different geographical people in different geographies taking up arms against British rule. Now, how do you understand that most of these revolts were not violent? They did not subscribe to the Gandhian idea of nonviolence and they did not express nationalism in the true sense devoid of all caste or class or ethnic affiliations. They were all a mix of everything. It will be clear from the statement of Guha's that the Subaltern Studies were part of an attempt to align historical the history from below. Conventionally history is seen as the story of the big people, the empires, emperors, the kings, the people who built huge nations. But these Marxian scholars argued that a history from below, a history of the ordinary people, how they contributed into that or how material factors affected or were important in the contributions of these ordinary people. So, that was a major intellectual movement from Britain by including scholars like Hobbesbawm and others to create this history from below. This was also the time which was heavily influenced by Antonio Gramsci's theoretical intervention, where he used terms Subaltern and he used the term hegemony basically to theoretically explain how this sphere of culture is something important and how people can be governed not only through brute force but also through very clear interventions in the realm of ideas. He talks about consent and coercive intervention. Gramsci emerged as a very important theoretical figure in this whole thing. As Guha puts it once in the course of introducing Subaltern Studies volume , we are indeed opposed much of the prevailing academic practice in historiography for its failure to acknowledge

the Subaltern as the maker of his own history.

This criticism is at the very heart of our project. So, the basic project of Subaltern Studies was to show how the Subaltern people are the people at the bottom of the hierarchy of a society. They had their agency, own political consciousness, and were also actively participating. So, things cannot be reduced to a handful of western-educated or modern educated elites, rather the ordinary people, the tribals, the farmers, the workers, the Dalits, the Adivasis, they all had different kinds of autonomy, They all had their kind of agency. Guha's theorisation of the project signalled certain key differences that would increasingly distinguish the Subaltern Studies project from the English Marxian historiography. With hindsight, he talks about three major differences between history from below and Subaltern Studies.

One is a relative separation of the history of power from any universalist history of capital. The Marxian historiography is essentially a historiography modeled after Marxian analysis of the economic system. It presents the modern history as the history which is very closely connected with the history of capital. The transition from the feudal society to the modern society and into a late capitalist era. So, this is what the Marxian historiography looks into. I hope you remember the mode of production debate in the Marxian school that we discussed a couple of weeks ago. Marxian school would try to understand what is the role of capital?, and what kind of an economic transaction happened in India during the feudal and semi-feudal and industrial mode of production?. Was there Asiatic mode of production? All these debates were very much important. But on the contrary, Subaltern studies were not concerned with or they did not want to tie every aspect of social change to the transformation of the capital.

Second one is also something very close to Subaltern studies is that it inherently had a criticism of the nation form, nation state as the natural way of organising people. An interrogation of the relationship between power and knowledge. Hence the archive itself and the history as a form of knowledge. A very important intervention by Edward Said and then Antonio Gramsci brought out this very intricate relationship through which

power and knowledge constitute each other, That is why the archive itself became a very contested one. Because archives represent the views of the powerful, views of the people who wrote about incidents and then who had the ability to record things. So, the archive itself is seen as not a neutral place that offers you insights and information. But the archive has to be critically analysed as to how a particular kind of reality is presented. Especially by the people who had the power to categorise, catalogue, describe explain and then theorise things that happen in front of them. A very important set of arguments. So, using people and Subaltern classes synonymously and defining them as the demographic difference between the total Indian population and dominant indigenous, foreign elites claimed that there was in colonial India an autonomous domain of the politics of the people. Guha argues that there was in colonial India an autonomous domain of politics of the people that was organised differently than the domain of the people politics of the elite. Elite politics involved vertical mobilisation, a greater reliance on Indian adaptation of British parliamentary institutions and tended to be relatively more legalistic and constitutional in orientation. So, Guha argues that the mobilisation that was used by Indian elites was vertical and they used the possibilities offered by the modern British Raj. The administrative interventions and other things were kind of vertical in its character. It was a more secular. They tried to cut across the social categories and then tried to create categories that cut across social categories. On the other hand, in the domain of Subaltern politics mobilisation for political intervention depended on horizontal affiliations such as traditional organisations of kinship and territoriality or the class consciousness depending on the level of consciousness of the people involved. So, the Subaltern mobilisation, according to Guha organised based on pre-existing forms of collectivities. Because in India traditionally non-modern forms of collectivities are based on kinship, ethnic group, ethnicity, caste and a certain kind of that are given to you by birth, the ethnic, the kinship, the caste and the linguistic things, tribal affiliations, these were all seen as pre-modern by Marxist scholars.

They are not seen as modern enough. They were not seen as insufficiently political, But the Subaltern studies scholars vouch for the authenticity of that. They tended to be more violent than elite politics. Central to Subaltern mobilisation was a notion of resistance to

elite domination. The peasant uprising in colonial India, he argued, reflected this separate and autonomous grammar of mobilisation. In its most comprehensive form, even in the case of resistance and protest by urban workers, the figure of mobilisation was one that derived directly from peasant insurgency.

Guha's work, *Elementary Forms of Peasant Insurgency*, is such kind of an intervention. Guha's separation of elites and Subaltern domains of the political had some radical implications for social theory and historiography. The standard tendency in global Marxist historiography until the 70s was to look at peasant revolt organised along the axis of kinship, religion, caste, etc as movements exhibiting backward consciousness, Hobbesbawm and his work on social banditry and primitive rebellion had been called pre-political, very important term. I hope you remember that typical of a Marxian framework.

For Marx, the reality was your class position, your connection with the means of production and that defines your social existence. For Marx, religion was a false consciousness or any other kind of social system was a false consciousness because, according to Marx, all these things are temporary, all these things will disappear and your identity, existence will be defined solely on the base of your relations to the means of production,. So, that is why this pre-modern affiliations like kinship and then caste and tribal affiliations were typically defined in the Marxian historiography as pre-political. They are not yet come to the political world, they are not yet politically conscious, they are in a pre-political world. And this was seen as a consciousness that had not quite come to terms with the institutional logic of modernity or capitalism. So, this was a very important assumption to which the Subaltern Studies people took issue with. Guha was prepared to suggest that the nature of collective action against exploitation in colonial India was such that it effectively stretched the imaginary boundaries of the category of political far beyond the territories assigned to in it by European political thought. Guha basically took issue with this characterisation of this kind of a politics as pre-political and then argued that the very position of their subalternity, defines their character of politics in this particular way and to call it

pre-political would be off the mark. To ignore the problems that the peasant's participation in the modern political sphere could be caused as a Eurocentric Marxian would lead, according to Guha, only to elitist histories. So, these were the major criticisms or major issues that Guha and his students took with the Marxian historiography.

Guha insisted that instead of beginning an anachronism in modernising global world, i.e. The peasant was not a backward consciousness, a mentality left over by the past, baffled by the modern political and economic situations and yet resistant to them. So, Guha suggested that the insurgent peasant in colonial India read his contemporary world correctly. So, it is a way in which we try to make sense of how the subalterns reacted during their particular time not to attach tax to them, not to label them as pre-political, not to label them as people with false consciousness, but try to understand why they behaved the way they behaved. So, in all these arguments he examined for example, over a 100 known cases of peasant rebellion in India between 1783 and 1900, Guha showed that these revolts always involved deployment by the peasants of code of dress, speech and behavior which enabled to invert the code through which their social superiors dominated them in their everyday life.

So, Guha is bringing in their situation as subaltern who were dominated by another sections of Indian population to the fore. When you talk about the peasants especially the small scale peasants and the landless labourers and the Dalits and or Adivasis, you are treating them as people who are dominated by another section of society, and that is what defines their subalternity. I have emphasised the word political in this quote from Guha to create tension between the Marxist lineage of Subaltern Studies and more challenging questions it raised from the very beginning about the nature of power. The tension between a familiar narrative and of capital and a more radical understanding of it can be seen in the elementary aspect itself. There are times when Guha tends to read the domination and subordination in terms of an opposition between the feudal and the capitalist mode of production.

Because as I mentioned Guha was a Marxian scholar but later wanted to go into more sophisticated analysis. So, there is a respectable tendency of in Marxist or liberal scholarship to read undemocratic relationship or personalised systems of authority and practices of deification as survival of a pre-capitalist era as not quite modern. So, this was again a tendency of of Marxian scholarship and which some kind of an evidence you can also see in Guha's own writing. So, I think we have come halfway through this essay. We will take a short break and then the remaining part I will explain it in the next class.