

**Indian Society: Sociological Perspectives**

**Dr. Santhosh R**

**Department of Humanities and Social Sciences**

**Indian Institute of Technology, Madras**

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**Lecture-37**

**Introducing Subaltern Studies II**

So, welcome back to the session on subaltern studies. We are looking at this essay, Subaltern Studies and Historiography, by Dipesh Chakrabarty. We looked at how Subaltern Studies came as an important intervention in the context of the late 70s and 80s, where it made an intervention by critiquing the Cambridge school and the Indian Nationalist school. So, we were talking about how Guha argued in his work on peasant struggles, how the subalterns possess a kind of autonomy and their understanding or their ideology which were kind of branded as a pre-political, needs to be reexamined.

So, the lingering existence of feudal type relations in the Indian scene could be read as indeed does Guha at the beginning of his quote, as a mark of the incompleteness of the transition to capitalism. By this logic, the so-called semi-feudal relations and the peasants mentality could indeed be seen as leftovers from an earlier period, still active, but under world historical notice of extension. All India needed was to create more capitalist institutions, and the process of the conversion of the peasants into citizens and the proper political figure of the personhood would begin.

This indeed was Hobsbawm's logic. This is a typical Marxian logic, as I mentioned, they were into a false consciousness, they were pre-modern, they were not into the capitalist modernity as characteristic of the modern world and that is why Hobsbawm and others characterise the ideologies of the poor people, of the people who occupy the lower ranks as pre-political. However, Guha now takes issue with this characterisation. In rejecting the category of pre-political, however, Guha insists on the specific differences in the histories of power in the colonial India and the Europe. So, Guha argues that Indian society was characteristically

different from that of European society and the people who occupy the lower realm of Indian society are under a very specific political and cultural situation because other castes and other groups are dominating them and that has to be taken into account.

This gesture is radical because it fundamentally pluralises the history of power in global modernity and separates it from any universal history of capital. So, again, we know that a typical Marxian story of human progress is very linear, it does not look into the regional differences or cultural context because all cultural things are in the super structure which is a product of economic relations. So, they follow certain very standard phases as we know from primitive communism to slavery to feudalism to capitalism and then socialism and then to communism. This is what a crude Marxian understanding of social change is. So, Guha takes issue with that kind of characterisation and then that essentially pluralises the Marxian narrative.

So, Hobsbawm's material, Guha writes, is derived almost entirely from the European experience and his generalisations are reshaped in accordance with it. Now, what he says in India is if you see the colonial formation in India as a case of modernity in which as Guha argues in introducing Subaltern studies, the domain of the political is irreducibly split into two distinct logics which get braided together at all the time. The logic of the formal legal and secular framework of governance and that of relationships of direct domination and subordination derive their legitimation from a different set of institutional practices, including those of dharma, which is translated as religion. Then Guha's writings help to open up a very interesting problem with the global history of modernity.

So, Guha says that Indian society had these two intervening strands of relations. One is the kind of one introduced by the colonial modernity, new governance systems, secular in its character, new forms of hierarchy, new forms of nomenclature and other. The second one was the kind of relationships of direct domination and subordination that existed in India derived its legitimacy from religious and cultural resources, including dharma, punya, papa, all these things, and that tries to help to problematise the unique Indian experience of encountering with modernity. Ultimately, this is a problem of how to think about the history of power in an age when capital and the governing institutions of modernity increasingly develop a global reach because when

Marx wrote about capitalism, it was more limited in its scope. After all, he was talking about the European experience mostly. But in a later context, we see that the canvas is much broader; it is expanded to a much larger level.

Marx's discussion of capitalist discipline assumed that the rule of capital entailed the transition to capitalist relations of power. Michel Foucault's work shows that if we want to understand the key institutions of modernity that originated in West, the juridical model of sovereignty celebrated in modern Europe political thought has to be supplemented by notions of discipline, bio-power and governmentality. So, the very important fundamental ways in which ideas of power was complicated by Michel Foucault's intervention is something again important. As, as we mentioned, Gramsci and Foucault became very important intellectual influences during this particular time. So, a more restrictive Marxian notion of modernity and development was complicated much by Foucault's argument that the progress towards modernity has to be seen also as a progress through which the power was exercised in more indirect forms through governmentality, through bio-power and through different forms of control of sexuality and a host of other things.

So, that really broadened the whole thing. So, Guha claimed that the colonial modernity in India, this supplementation has to include an extra pair of terms: domination and subordination. So, that is the most important point that he talked about. The history of colonial India created a domain of political that was heteroglossic in its idioms, irreducibly plural in its structure, interlocking within itself strands of different types of relations that did not make up a logical whole. One such strand critical to the functioning of the authority in Indian institution was that of a direct domination and subordination of the subaltern by the elite. This is a very important argument. This subordination and domination was a characteristic feature, according to Guha, that is to be sufficiently theorised. Social domination and subordination of the subaltern by the elite was thus an everyday feature of Indian capitalism in itself. So, capitalism worked differently in different contexts, and in India, it also worked through the forms of domination and subordination. This was a capitalism of the colonial type.

Reading critically some key texts of Marx, Guha argued that modern colonialism was

quintessentially the historical condition in which an expansive and increasingly global capital came to dominate non-western societies without affecting or requiring any thoroughgoing democratic transformation or social relationship of power and authority. So, he argued that unlike a total transformation in the social structure that happened in Europe with the advent of capitalism, which thoroughly revolutionised those societies, the entry of capitalism in India was more circumspect; it was more limited and more restricted in its interference. It did not overthrow the existing social structure. Rather, it tried to negotiate through them. So, the existing systems that perpetuated subordination and domination continued to exist and, it and it negotiated to the realm of modernity. As Guha puts it, colonialism could continue as a relation of power in the subcontinent only on the condition that the colonising bourgeoisie should fail to leave up to its own universalising project because colonialism also had a universalising project, but the bourgeoisie was seen as failing to leave up to that. So, these are the main arguments here. The cultural history of power in Indian modernity could not, therefore, be produced by a simple application of the analysis of nationalism available to the western masses. So, that was the main, , intervention made by Guha in that context.

### Subaltern Studies and Reorientation of History.

We are trying to look at what were the ramifications of this. Guha's two formulations that both nationalism and colonialism were involved in instituting in India a rule of capital in which bourgeoisie ideologies exercised dominance without hegemony and that the resulting forms of power in India could not be termed as pre-political had several implications for historiography. So, these were the two most important fundamental arguments. His argument about the dominance without hegemony, how it provided a dominance but not hegemony. Hegemony would indicate a kind of absolute control over certain things, but it was more kind of a dominance because it relied on the existing forms of domination and subordination.

First of all, Guha's critic of the category of pre-political challenged historicism by rejecting all stagist theories of history,. So, stagist theories of history as we know the argument that every society undergoes different stages to reach where it is today,. Whether it is hunting, gathering, tribal, primitive, slavery, feudal, then capitalist and the present day may be late capitalist or

neoliberal capitalist. So, the tendency to argue that every society must go through these specific stages is something inherent in the Marxian historiography or, for that matter, almost every major theory of social change of western origin and that came under heavy criticism by Guha here. As I have discussed, the terms pre-political's validity from the categorisation, categorising certain kinds of power relationships as pre-modern, feudal and so on, Guha's discussion of power in colonial India resists such a clear distinction between modern and pre-modern.

Relations in India that looked feudal when seen through the stagist view of history were contemporaneous with all that looked modern to the same point of view. From Guha's point of view, the former could not be looked at through the geological or evolutionist metaphor of survival or remnant without such historicism being elitist in its interpretation of the past. So, this was a fundamental argument that the conventional stagist explanation or evolutionary stagist explanation was systematically questioned. So, there is no doubt that the Indian political elite internalised and used the language of political modernity, but this democratic tendency existed alongside and interlaced with undemocratic relations of domination and subordination. This coexistence of two domains of politics said Guha was the index of an important historical truth that is the failure of the bourgeoisie to speak for the nation because the bourgeoisie was not able to come out of their traditional settings and bondages because they were also part of this larger systems of domination.

Guha emphasises that there was, in fact, no unitary nation to speak for, So, again this is a very important, argument. A critical stance towards official or statist nationalism and its attendant historiography marked subaltern studies from the beginning,. The very argument of the nationalist historians saying that every section of Indian society, irrespective of whether they are poor or rich, cherished an idea of a nation which was very romantic, which looked very inspiring, was debunked by these scholars.

Guha's question about history in which the subaltern was the maker of his own destiny brought into focus the question of the relationship between text and power. Historical archives were usually collections of documents and texts of various kinds. Historians, peasants and other subaltern social groups have long emphasised the fact that peasants do not leave their own

documents. , so, another very important area of influence of subaltern studies was the role in the historical documentation because subalterns are mostly unlettered people, They do not leave diaries, they do not record things, they are mostly illiterate, they are mostly unlettered.

Someone else actually documents the activities of these people, And those who document the activities of people would invariably belong to the structures of domination, whether it is upper caste people or whether it is government officials, whether it is district collectors or British officials. So, these are the people who are writing and depicting the actions and thought processes of the people; so, the whole question of how we get direct access to subalterns continues to be a very important question. So, he talks about a French scholar, Eugen Weber, who provides a second formulation of this approach. The illiterate are not, in fact, inarticulate. They do express themselves in several ways. Sociologists, ethnologists, geographers and, most recently, demographic historians have shown us new and different means of interpreting evidence. So, this is also the time when this whole historians moved away from the standard way of doing history from the archives and went into oral histories and narratives and then study of studies the methods that were mostly used by sociologists and then anthropologists. Thomas Thompson and others stated that peasants do not speak directly in archival documents, which are usually produced by the ruling class.

Guha also uses a diversity of disciplines in breaking the logic of peasant consciousness at the time of rebellion. But he thinks of the category of consciousness differently. Guha's critique of the term pre-colonial legitimately barred this path of thinking. Guha thought of consciousness and, therefore, the peasant subjecthood as imminent in the peasant insurgency. He did not understand the present that the consciousness is articulated separately, or he was against the tendency of looking into the ideology and the practice as two different entities. Elementary aspects is a study of the practice of insurgent peasants in colonial India and not of a reified category called consciousness. So, he argued that they are intermeshed in each other. Guha makes no claim that the insurgent consciousness he discussed is indeed conscious that it existed inside the heads of the peasants. He does not equate consciousness with the subject's view of himself.

He examines rebel practices to decipher the particular relationship between elites and subalterns and between subalterns themselves that are acted out in these practices and then attempts to derive from these relationships the elementary structures as it were of consciousness inherent in those relationships. So, he is talking about how as researchers we have a possibility to decipher the consciousness through the actions of these people, because you cannot expect of deciphering an independently existing isolated set of ideas as the consciousness of these people. So, all these are arguments about the methodological innovations in Subaltern Studies. Guha, therefore, emphasised the need for historians to develop a conscious strategy for reading the archives not simply for the biases of the elites but for the textual properties of these documents to get at the various ways in which elites made elite mode of thought represented the refractory figure of the subaltern and their practices. So, it is a very important set of interventions in the methodology of historiography,

The archival method that was so far till then was understood in a more mechanical manner was kind of more problematised. So, subaltern studies since 1988, multiple circuits as I mentioned in the beginning it went in so many different directions. So, in this last section, he talks about the influence of Edward Said, who wrote a foreword to the volume describing Guha's statement regarding the aim of subaltern studies. Gayatri Spivak's essay *Deconstructing Historiography* published earlier in the sixth volume under Guha's editorship in 1986 served as the introduction to this section.

This essay by Spivak and a review essay by Rosalind O'Hanlon, published at the same time, made two important criticisms of the subaltern studies that seriously impacted later intellectual projects. Spivak and O'Hanlon pointed to the absence of gender questions in Subaltern Studies. So, later, a host of such studies came into the picture. They pointed out in the effect that subaltern studies historiography operated with an idea of the subject to make the subaltern the marker of his own destiny that had now wrestled at all with the critique of the very idea of the subject itself that poststructuralist thinkers had mounted. Spivak's famous essay *Can Subaltern Speak? A critical and challenging reading of the conversation between Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze* forcefully raises these and related questions by mounting deconstructive and philosophical objections to any straightforward program of letting the subaltern speak.

How it all went into more complicated things, and this section about how other scholars, including Ranajit Guha and Partha Chatterjee and contributions made by Susie Tharu and others on contemporary feminist theory in India how it brought in a different direction and Partha Chatterjee's 1986 book *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World*, creatively applied Saidian and postcolonial perspective to the study of known western nationalisms and others. And then Gyanendra Pandey's book on the construction of Criminalism in Colonial North India and his essay *Indifference of the Fragments*, Chatterjee's 1994 book, *The Nation and Its Fragments*. Amin's, so it is all about how it all went into different kinds of directions. So, in conclusion, this expansion beyond the realms of Indian history has earned the series both praise and criticism.

Much of the controversy follows roughly the contours of the global and ongoing debate between Marxist on the one hand and the postmodernist on the other. Like Marxists elsewhere, Indian Marxists charge that the postmodernist valorisation of fragments in Subaltern historiography hurts the cause of the unity of the oppressed. That is a typical Marxian frame argument. Many of the Marxist opponents of Subaltern Studies believe that such unity is aided by social analysis that helps bring different publics of the oppressed together by finding global and totalising causes behind their oppression. The debate is complicated further in India by the rise of the political power of Hindu fundamentalist parties and organisations.

He talks about the criticism by Ashis Nandi and Partha Chatterjee and T.N. Madan against secularism and how that was seen as a colonial imposition. So, all these things is what this essay talks about. As I mentioned, it is an essay that looks into the relationship between colonialism, postcoloniality, and historiography, and it provides you with a summary of these very important intellectual exercises. We will have one more session on Subaltern Studies, and after that, we will have two sessions that look into the criticisms, especially from the Marxian school, against Subaltern Studies.