

Indian Society: Sociological Perspectives
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Subaltern Studies as Postcolonial Criticism

Welcome back to the class, and we are into the 8th week of this lecture series. We are looking into Subaltern Studies as a very important theoretical and methodological intervention in the debate about historiography or the questions about studying Indian history. As I mentioned in the previous class, Subaltern Studies is not a strict sociological methodological framework. Rather it is a very important decisive intervention in the debates about historiography. They have much long-ranging influence on other social science disciplines, including sociology, anthropology, women studies, literature, etc. So, that is why it is pertinent for us to look at Subaltern Studies as a very important theoretical intervention contributed or developed mostly by Indian scholars and which also emerges as a very strong critique of the Eurocentric understandings of history, historiography and other things.

So, in the previous class, we had a very detailed look at Dipesh Chakrabarty's essay that summarises the Subaltern Studies intervention and tries to connect it with how it was a project closely connected with the post-coloniality and post-colonial interventions. In today's class we are looking at yet another essay written in 1994 by Gyan Prakash titled Subaltern Studies as Post-colonial Criticism. So, to note the ferment created by Subaltern Studies in disciplines as diverse as History, Anthropology and Literature is to recognise the force of recent post-colonial criticism.

Subaltern studies emerged in the 1980s as an important intellectual intervention, starting with Ranajit Guha's book on Peasant insurgency. Then they started the Subaltern studies edited volume, Ranajit Guha and 4 or 5 of his students and then it went up to 12 volumes. The last published volume was in 2005. Over these years, it actually emerged as a very formidable set of intellectual projects, and the ferment it created in other disciplines, in History, Anthropology and

Literature is to recognise the force of recent post-colonial criticism.

So, post-colonial criticism means how scholars try to revisit the implications and influences of colonialism on the knowledge production and its presentation. Because you now sitting in 2023, when you look at how what has been the way in which society underwent change during the colonial period or even in the post-colonial period, we realise that the colonial intervention heavily mediates our access to the colonial experience. The colonial project of modernity, colonialism as a governmental project, and colonialism as a project from the Europeans. So, you understand that without having a very incisive criticism of the whole colonial project you will not even have a better access to the various or multiple realities of of Indian colonial experience and as well as the post-colonial experience. So, there is increasing interest among the academic circle to look at this colonial experience and the colonial way of producing knowledge and then presenting it in articulating it to look at that critically and then to explore whether there are various other ways in which we can look at these things.

As nationalism reversed orientalist thought and attributed agency and history to the subjected nation, it staked a claim to the order of reason and progress instituted by colonialism. So, this is another very interesting point that Gyan Prakash talks about because after independence, nationalism emerged as a very important project. We mentioned in the previous class that nationalist historians wanted to argue that Indian people, in general, cutting across elites and subalterns, possess certain ideological inclinations and certain ideas about what is nationalist and that inspired all these people to come together. So, this nationalist claims it argued that the Indian people, both elite as well as subaltern also are capable of using reason and progress and the whole colonial, the whole independence struggle was a spectacle of reason and progress .

So, that is how it was presented. When Marxists turned the spotlight on colonial exploitation, their criticism was framed by a historicist scheme that universalised Europe's historical experience. So, scholars like Bipin Chandra, who had a very strong Marxist inclination, presented their historical intervention in the nationalist garb. When they presented it, they could not come out of the stagist developmental discourse that we discussed yesterday. That criticism was framed by a historicist scheme that universalised Europe's historical experience.

So, we mentioned that the Marxian framework or Marxian analysis of history always presented the question of development in a linear fashion as moving from different stages, and they presented the transformation of every society as intricately interconnected with the evolution of capital. So, a transition from traditional society to modern society is bound inherently with the emergence of capitalism because it also had this universe and a scheme that emerged from Europe's experience, which they believed is the experience for every other nation. Accusing colonialist, nationalist and Marxist interpretations of robbing the common people of their agency, it announced a new approach to restore history or to the subordinate. So, they are talking about subaltern studies. So, what the Subaltern Studies intervention made, as we discussed yesterday, was that it critiqued the Cambridge school, which reduced everything into colonial intervention and almost accused Indians for making use of the colonial opportunities and then presenting the freedom struggle. The Subaltern Studies also critiqued nationalist projects, it also critiqued Marxist projects because it criticised nationalist historiography because it saw that a host of oppositions, revolts, agitations undertaken by ordinary people.

The people who were already subordinated were not recognised by the elites, or the elites had a lot of discomfort in theorising and accepting the agitations of the ordinary people because their language, their modes of agitation did not fit into the definition of an agitation or consciousness or political agency of that of the elite sections. So, that is why it announced a new approach to restore the history of the subaltern. The term subaltern, drawn from Antonio Gramsci's writings, refers to subordination in terms of class, caste, gender, race, language and culture and was used to signify the centrality of dominant relationships in history. So, this subaltern is a very broad term, and you can look at it with respect to class questions; it encompasses questions of poverty, then caste, gender, race, language and culture. It is a very broadly and loosely defined section.

Guha suggested that Subaltern Studies should not ignore the dominant because the subalterns are always subjected to their activity. Its aim was to rectify the elitist bias characteristic of much research and academic work in South Asian studies. So, the whole point of entry or point of intervention of Subaltern Studies is that Guha argued that when you study the lives of subaltern people who are subjected to exploitation, take the example of factory workers, agricultural

labourers , when you study these people it also becomes necessary that you study the people who subject these people to exploitation because without them these people simply do not have their own existence. So, Guha suggested that Subaltern Studies would not ignore the dominant because subalterns are always subjected to their activity because of the subaltern's very existence, the way subaltern acted was heavily determined by the agendas or by the activities of this dominant group.

So, it becomes a study of not only the subaltern groups but also the dominant and dominating structures. The subaltern had acted in history on their own, independently of the elite. Their politics constituted an autonomous domain for it neither originated from the elite politics nor did its experience dependent on the latter. Now, this is the very important claim made by Guha or almost every other Subaltern Studies scholar. The subalterns, even though they were dominated, even though they were in an exploited situation, if you look into the history, especially if you look into the period of colonialism, you will come across several instances, hundreds of instances where the subalterns acted on their own, having their own agency, having their own subjectivity and having that is independent of the elite. Their politics constituted an autonomous domain for it neither originated from the elite politics nor did it exist dependent on the latter. So, this is a very important and radical claim that the people who were already subjected, subjugated, and who were already subordinated had articulated, displayed their own agency independent of those who oppressed them. This is a very important claim, and also, it is a very important trace, important challenge in terms of how do you prove that these people had their own independent existence. The Nationalist and Marxist narratives had sought to represent the subaltern's consciousness and activity according to the schemes that encoded elite dominance. Guha asserted that historiography had dealt with the peasant rebel merely as an empirical person or a class member but not as an entity whose will and reason constituted the praxis called rebellion. So, the discomfort that Subaltern Studies scholars had about the Marxist and nationalist narrative is that they tend to ignore the articulations from the subaltern sections.

For example, any sense of identity, collectivity, or sense of affinity based on caste, gender, or ethnicity was relegated to the dominant argument of Marxists and Nationalists. There are very interesting arguments about how the in the Moplah rebellion of 1921, the Moplah rebels

behaved in a very irrational manner according to some of the historical representations. So, each of these agitations was dismissed, or they were relegated, they were criticised, and they were overlooked by the elites because these agitations did not really fit into their description of how agitations must be rational and modern forms of agitation. Clearly, the project to restore the insurgency agency involved, as Rosalind O'Hanlon pointed out in a thoughtful review essay, the notion of the recovery of the subject. Thus, while reading records against their grain, these scholars have sought to uncover the subaltern's myths, cults, ideologies and revolts that colonial and nationalist elites sought to appropriate and that conventional historiography had laid waste by the deadly weapon of cause and effect.

So, now we are coming back to one of these fundamental questions. See, Subalterns are the people by definition did not have access to literature, education, they were the most exploited people. So, when you for a for a conventional historian, the most important resource for you to understand the past are the recorded material. It could be there in archives, written in papers or various other forms of inscription. So, written materials are the most important way to retrieve the past. And mainly in the colonial period, the colonial government had a very systematic way of recording, record keeping, and documentation. So, we have enormous information in Indian archives and foreign countries; in Dutch, you have archives; in Portugal, you have archives; in Britain, you have an enormous amount of archival material on Indian society. So, the whole question is, now, how do we get access to these people who acted on the ground because they have not left anything on record, they have not recorded anything. The people, the peasants who revolted in various things, the labourers who revolted, the Moplah, people who participated in the Moplah rebellion who revolted or the people who participated in customs like Sati, these people, none of them have left any records of their own. They have always been represented; their actions were recorded, and they were always represented by the people who belong to the upper section, the people, the government officials, the bureaucrats, the observers, the people who are part of this dominating system.

So, the fundamental question for Subaltern Studies is, how do you retrieve the subject? how do you recover the life of the subjects who did not have a chance to represent themselves, but how do you reach there by going through the material that are presented by the people who are part

of a dominating structure. So, while the reading records against their grain, these scholars are sought to uncover the subaltern's myths because many of these groups had their own mythologies their own stories which were dismissed by their superiors as superstitions and blind beliefs and other things and cults and ideologies and revolts that colonial and nationalist elites sought to appropriate and that conventional historiography had laid waste by the deadly weapon of cause and effect. So, in Guha's account, the subaltern emerges with forms of sociality and political community at odds with the nation and the class, defying the models of rationality and social action that conventional historiography uses. So, when you look into the actual way in which many of the subaltern groups behaved, there are so many examples. If you read the first two or three volumes of Subaltern Studies, you come across quite a lot of very specific studies, whether it is Gyanendra Pandey or Ranajit Guha himself or a host of other people, they have very elaborate accounts about how the subalterns behaved, or they acted in specific accounts on specific instances, whether it is a host of incidents like Chauri Chavra incident, the jute workers agitation in Calcutta or even this Moplah Rebellion, there are so many instances where the subaltern acted in ways that were not seen as rational or logical by the upper class people. So, which did not fit into the modalities of nation and the class, defying the models of rationality and social action that conventional historiography uses.

Guha argues persuasively that such models are elitist in so far as they deny the subaltern autonomous consciousness and that they are drawn from colonial and liberal nationalist project of appropriating the subaltern. So, this particular way of appropriating subaltern by overlooking their own acts of articulating their own self, identity, Guha argues is a part of the nationalist project also heavily influenced by the Marxian. Although some scholars have rejected the positivistic retrieval of the subaltern, the notion of the subaltern's radical heterogeneity with though not autonomy from the dominant remains crucial.

So, the whole question is, can you get past the mediation of the oppressive group and then get direct access to the people? Can you have unmediated access to the subalterns themselves? Can you say that this is what the subalterns are, what they said, or what they wanted? Is that a positivist argument that this is the objective reality about subalterns? Is it possible? It is a very fundamental question. Can you hear the subaltern speak? The Gayatri Chakravorty's Spivak's

very influential essay can the subaltern speak? It comes from such a question because there are no subalterns who have articulated their own sense, they were always represented by others. How do you navigate through the materials that claim to represent these people? You have no way to understand the ideas and the thinking process of the people who attacked the Chauri Chaura police station. You have no way to understand the jute worker's mind in Calcutta or in other place, or in the people who engage in communal clashes or the people who engage in the Moplah rebellion. Nothing is written of their own. They were always represented, recorded, explained, justified, and theorised by colonial administrators or Indian elites. So, although some scholars have rejected the positivistic retrieval of subalterns, the notion of subalterns radical heterogeneity within, though not autonomy from the dominant, remains crucial. So, the claim that they have certain radical heterogeneities there and may not have complete autonomy from the dominant, so that part remained crucial.

It is true however that scholars locate this heterogeneity in discourses woven into the fabric of dominant structures and manifesting itself in the very operation of power. So, how these . heterogeneity, how their ideas were represented is also the story of power. How the power of the dominating structures like bureaucrats and then British government officials or the scholars or the experts, how they used their power in the form of knowledge to present certain . depictions, certain . explanations, certain . theorisations of these people's actions. In other words, subaltern and subalternity do not disappear into discourse but appear in its interstices, subordinated by structures over which they exert pressure. So that is a whole argument that the subaltern's positivist retrieval or recovery is not possible because they simply are not there.

But at the same time, Guha argued that by the very ingenious use of these materials, the way in which they were represented, the colonial records, you get certain glimpses, flashes about how the subaltern behaved or how the subaltern expressed themselves. Such -re-examinations of South Asian history do not invoke real subaltern prior to discourse in framing their criticism. Placing subalterns in the labyrinth of discourse, they cannot claim unmediated access to their reality. So, these subalterns, were always created through the discourse made by the colonial enterprise because they were already part of a discourse. Now, can you have direct access to the subalterns without the mediation of the discourse because they are already always a part of a

discourse?

They were part of a discourse because they were already recorded; their actions were recorded and commented upon, and it was theorised by the people in power. For example, if there is a communal riot takes place between two different caste groups one caste is identified as Hindu, the other caste is identified as Muslim and if a violent clash happens because of various reasons, it was presented in the British records as a communal clash. So, the British discourse would present this clash between two lower caste people as a communal clash as the religion being the sole reason for it. The cause for such a clash could be multiple; religious identity could be one, contestations and competition for materials could be different, there could be a host of other reasons, and there could be a host of other factors that might have given birth to such a clash.

Placing subalterns in the labyrinth of discourse, they cannot claim an unmediated access to their reality. The actual subaltern and subalternity emerge between the folds of this discourse in its silences and blindness and its over-determined pronouncement. So, the way you understand these people requires you to think very critically about the discourse that is created. Because the discourse you no longer look at it as an objective depiction of fact and by 1980s, 90s as I mentioned the works of Foucault, works of Edward Said and works of Antonio Gramsci had become very influential.

So, they knew that how knowledge is produced, how archives work, how records are maintained, how reports are written in the colonial period. They understood it as a discourse, the colonial discourse about the way in which they understand Indian society. The claim or the challenge is how to critically evaluate the discourse and then try to understand the people who are depicted in that discourse. Subalternity thus emerges in the paradoxes of the functioning of power and the dominant discourse as it represents and domesticates peasant agency as a spontaneous and pre-political response to colonial violence. No longer does it appear outside the elite discourse as a separate domain, embodied in a figure endowed with a will that the dominant suppresses and over power but do not constitute. Instead, it refers to that impossible thought, figure or action without which the dominant discourse cannot exist and which is acknowledged

in its subterfuges and stereotypes. So, this is a paragraph about Ranajit Guha's own arguments about this peasant insurgency. He examines over 100 peasant insurgencies and then argues that any attempt to recover the subject must undergo a complex negotiation with the dominant discourses that are presented. The Subaltern Studies relocation of subalternity in the operation of dominant discourse leads it necessarily to the critique of the modern West. For if the marginalisation of the other source of knowledge and agency occurred in the function of colonialism and its derivative nationalism, then the weapon of criticism must turn against Europe and the modes of knowledge it instituted.

It is in this context that there emerges certain convergence between Subaltern Studies and postcolonial critique originating in the literary and cultural studies. So, here Gyan Prakash takes his whole argument back to the another implications of Subaltern Studies because Subaltern Studies, while they wanted to understand Indian society more closely by trying to understand how the subalterns actually lived, it also entailed a larger criticism of the historical dominance that the west had not only over the polity and economy of India or colonies at large but on the knowledge production itself. Western domination over India was not only a domination over the economic or political domains of the country but also over the production of knowledge. Modern social sciences, whether History or Economics or Sociology or Anthropology they were all originated in the West, and they were imported to India and then presented as very capable frameworks to understand that.

And they were all Eurocentric and ethnocentric to a large extent. The Subaltern Studies also became a part of a larger critique of postcolonial studies, and these postcolonial studies mostly emerged from cultural studies and literature English literature. So, there was a major alignment between these two. Because of how Indian society was depicted, the whole colonial archives were a very specific manifestation of power relations, How a particular incident was recorded by British bureaucrats, how it was codified, how it was compiled into a report how it was commented upon how and later how the British or colonial scholars theorised all these things are part of a larger colonial project which was very intricately connected with the questions of power and domination. The dominance of Europe as history not only subalternises non-western societies but also serves the aim of their nation-state. The inescapable conclusion from such

analysis is that history authorised by the European imperialism and the Indian nation state functions as a discipline empowering certain forms of knowledge while disempowering others. So, here, this discipline has to be understood in the Foucauldian sense. So, the dominance of Europe also and which was also imitated or replicated in the form of nation-state functions as a discipline which is capable of disciplining other alternative forms of knowledge empowering certain forms of knowledge while disempowering others.

This raises larger questions about epistemology, theoretical orientation, methodology, how certain forms of knowledge are seen as official, how certain forms of knowledge are seen as objective, real, and authentic while certain other forms of knowledge were seen as not having any of these features. It is important to note that Europe or the West in Subaltern Studies refers to an imaginary powerful entity created by a historical process that authorised it as the home of reason, progress and modernity. We are all familiar with the story of how enlightenment was connected with Europe and how Europe was seen as the founding head of all modern enlightenment and rationality and other things. To undo the authority of such an entity distributed and universalised by imperialism and nationalism requires, in Chakrabarti's words, the provincialisation of Europe. So, Dipesh Chakrabarti's very influential essay on provincialising Europe to look at to it more critically, look at the the historic configuration of Europe.

It requires a much larger project. But the recognition that the third-world historian is condemned to knowing Europe as the original form of modernity, whereas the European historian does not share a comparable predicament with regard to the parts of the majority of humankind, serves as the condition for a deconstructive rethinking of history. So, how do you provincialise Europe? How do you significantly undermine this Eurocentricism? Or how do you intellectually and politically undermine the authority of Europe? There are no specific answers. Gyan Prakash says that in the sense of nativism, we will use only the concepts that emerge from within. They are all unsustainable.

They are all unsustainable. They are all not relevant, and also the political and economic dominance of Europe in particular and maybe the West, in general, remains almost uncontested

even now. They continue to be the founding head. They continue to be the most important place of knowledge production. They have the best of the universities. Every other world looks upon them for guidance and for academic quality and other things.

So, in such a situation, what is left or what a possibility is to subject this history itself into deconstructive thinking and deconstruction are a very important methodological tool popularised by Derrida. So, there is a turn in that into deconstruction with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and others. So, Subaltern Studies have arrived at its critique by engaging both Marxism and Poststructuralism. But the nature of these engagements is complex. If the influence of Gramscian Marxism is palpable in the concept of Subaltern and the treatment of such things as hegemony and dominance, Marxism is also subjected to the poststructuralist critique of European humanism.

So, it is a concluding part where Gyan Prakash looks at the historical evolution of Subaltern Studies and how various ideologies were indurated and remoulded and then selectively engaged by the Subaltern Studies group. Representing a negotiation between South Asian historiography and the discipline of History centered in the west, its insights can be neither limited to South Asia nor globalised. Trafficking between the two and originating as an ambivalent colonial aftermath, Subaltern Studies demand that its own translation also occurs between these lines. In South Asia, it occupies a very unique place because it was colonised, and the experience of this colonial situation cannot be globalised. It is applicable elsewhere because of the specificities of this region and the specific historical experiment of South Asian colonialism. At the same time, it has much more relevance beyond that because the colonial enterprise worked almost a similar way in other places in terms of its engagement between knowledge and power.

So, historiography and the discipline of History centred in the West in its insights can be neither limited to South Asia nor globalised. So, trafficking between the two and originating as an ambivalent colonial aftermath, Subaltern Studies demands that its own translation also occurs between these two lines. So this is a summary or a review essay by Gyan Prakash, secondly, he talked about the theoretical assumptions and methodological orientations of Subaltern Studies. So, now we will have two sessions, two classes to look at the criticisms that are raised against

Subaltern Studies. Let us that in the coming class. Thank you.