

Indian Society: Sociological Perspectives
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Lecture-39
Critique of Subaltern Studies I

Welcome back to the class. As we have been having a detailed discussion about Subaltern Studies as a very important intervention in the debate about historiography of studying Indian experience and specifically that of colonialism. We looked at two essays, one by Dipesh Chakrabarty and another by Gyan Prakash, and today we are having two sessions where we look at the significant criticisms raised by other scholars against this whole project. While Subaltern Studies was seen as a very important and valuable intervention, it was also subjected to a lot of criticism, especially from the Marxist scholars. Basically on various grounds and we will look into all these criticisms in detail. Mr. Dayal Paleri, who is a PhD scholar at the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences engages these two in this particular section on the critique of Subaltern Studies. So, he will have two sessions looking into a series of scholars, mainly from the Marxian school, and he will explain what were the major ideological, theoretical and methodological criticisms raised by these scholars. So over to Dayal

In this session, we will be dealing with the critique of Subaltern Studies. Professor Santhosh has already talked extensively about Subaltern Studies as a distinct school of theory that emerged in the global south in the 1980s, and he has also presented the central tenets of Subaltern Studies and How it actually influenced a host of disciplinary movements across South Asia. Even though Subaltern Studies started as a distinct school or intervention in the discipline of history, he has already talked about how it has influenced a wide range of disciplines such as Anthropology, Literature, Political Science and so on. So today, we will be dealing with certain critiques that emerged against Subaltern Studies, by various scholars.

So before we go into details of the critique of Subaltern Studies I want you to have a look at the genealogy of Subaltern Studies. Subaltern Studies has 12 volumes. The first one was edited by Ranajit Guha, the founder of the Subaltern Studies, in 1982 and the last one came in the year 2005, edited by Shail Mayaram, M.

S.S. Pandian and Ajay Skaria. So between this almost a gap of 25 years there have been 12 volumes of Subaltern Studies which has been published and the first 4 volumes have been published by Ranajit Guha. So we will look at the contents of a few of the Subaltern Studies volumes in order to give a sense of the genealogy of Subaltern Studies because the critics of Subaltern Studies have more or less been focused on how Subaltern Studies has been transformed over the years. So let us look at the first sections, which have been edited by Ranajit Guha. So what you will see is that the themes of all these chapters has overarchingly focused on peasantry.

So there is this article on agrarian relations in Bengal by Partha Chatterjee, Shahid Amin's article on small peasantry, similarly there was an article on peasant revolt in Awadh by Gyan Pandey. So if you look at the second volume which published in the next year again edited by Ranajit Guha you can also see similar themes mostly focusing on peasant or tribal revolt in colonial India, agrarian change, agricultural workers, conditions of the working class, on peasantry. So, as Professor Santhosh has already talked about, peasantry was an important thematic analytical theme not just as a class, it is also an analytical purchase for the subaltern studies. So now let us look at the later volumes of the Subaltern Studies you have here, the seventh volume of Subaltern Studies, and if you look at the various chapters, you will see a decisive shift in the subjects of the various articles published. You can see an article on the Calcutta middle class, how community emerges as a very important term and how the state has dealt with and how the legal systems in the colonial era has come up as a very important theme and you also have the final volumes of Subaltern Studies published in 2003.

It is even titled as Muslim, Dalits and fabrication History you can see the idea of peasantry is completely absent it has evolved from that. You have on refiguring the fanatic which is primarily on the Mappila Muslims of Malabar, on representing the

Musalman, on caste, on Indian modernity there is something on gender study by Praveena Kodoth and yeah so what I wanted to show you through this is that there is a decisive shift in the themes that subaltern scholarship has engaged from its first volume in 1983 to the final volume in 2005 and this genealogy the shift is very central in understanding the certain critics of Subaltern Studies. So as we already discussed Subaltern Studies emerged as a very important school of thought within the global south. The knowledge paradigms in social science that are already being criticised is overwhelmingly dominated by the global north or the western academia in that context Subaltern Studies emerged as a very important and original school of thought in the global south and its influences has gone beyond history it has influenced sociological thinking it has influenced anthropological scholarship also on literature, on sexuality, studies on gender and so on and so forth. And and as we saw there is a growth from the conventional Marxist language or the Marxist paradigm that Subaltern Studies in the initial volume has been focused on to more diverse subjects of enquiry such as gender, on subjecthood, on power in a very non-Marxist sense, in a Foucauldian sense and so on. So this has been seen as a growth or even as a deviation by some critics that we will go in detail.

And there has been multiple influences so while the early influences has been decisively one sense of orthodox Marxism the later influences has been varied it. People like Edward Said's scholarship, Michael Foucault, Gayatri Spivak all of these became very influential elements in the later Subaltern Studies scholarship. And as we saw Subaltern Studies has also had immense impact on a global scale as I have already mentioned Edward Said and Gayatri Spivak who are very towering figures in the global intelligentsia in the north has introduced Subaltern Studies to a broader audience, and it has also inspired similar movements from other parts of the global south such as the Latin American Subaltern Studies collective that is founded in 1992. It has also inspired a similar scholarship in places like Africa which also has similar post-colonial histories like the global South Asia. So, the Subaltern Studies have a varied global influence. So today, in this session, I will be dealing with three important critics of Subaltern Studies.

The first one is a scholar named Javed Alam who more or less identifies with a conventional Marxist intellectual paradigm in Indian context. He primarily taught at Himachal Pradesh University and later at the English and Foreign Language University, and was also a very important figure in Indian Political Science scholarship at one point in time. So he and his critique of Subaltern Studies came soon after the first volume was published. So it was an initial critique and it was published in the left leaning journal called the Social Scientist. So those who are interested should go and read it in detail and there is also a longer engagement that follows Javed Alam's article.

Some of the subaltern scholars associated with Subaltern Studies collective has also engaged with Javed Alam's critique in detail. So I strongly recommend you to go and read the debate in full. So the second critique that I am dealing with is by Sumit Sarkar, a historian, and it is very important because Sumit Sarkar was part of the founding collective of Subaltern Studies. But he left the Subaltern Studies after the early 1990s, and then he wrote a critique which actually elaborately detailed the reason why he left and also his criticisms, also his criticism or dissatisfaction with the way the Subaltern Studies has gone in the 1990s. He will go into detail about the trajectory of Subaltern Studies and the genealogy of the Subaltern Studies scholarship.

So we have Javed Alam who is a political scientist who criticized Subaltern Studies soon after the first volume came out and we have Sumit Sarkar who was part of the collective but became a dissenting voice and he is a historian himself who has made this criticism on a midway of Subaltern Studies evolution. And we have a third critic by Vivek Chibber who is a sociologist at New York University who has then presented a very book-length critique of Subaltern Studies five or eight years after the final volumes of Subaltern Studies came up even after Subaltern Studies stopped or the final volume came out it has been a lingering influence in the scholarship in various fields in South Asia. So Vivek Chibber presented a very book-length critique of subaltern studies from a broad Marxist paradigm. Even Javed Alam, Sumit Sarkar, and Vivek Chibber subscribe to different strands of Marxist scholarship.

So all these three critics broadly belong to the Marxist paradigms. As I said, this was a diverse sense of disciplines; three of them come from three different disciplines and also three different time periods pertaining to the Subaltern Studies scholarship. So that is why we will discuss these three as a representative of the Subaltern Studies critique. There are obviously other critics which I will mention in the course of time. The subjects and the objects of the criticism has also been different.

Some of them critique the foundational ideas of Subaltern Studies, while Sumit Sarkar was more interested in the deviations of this founding concept. Vivek Chibber, on the other hand, dealt with the larger consequences of Subaltern Studies on similar scholarship in post-colonial scholarship in general in different disciplines. So first we will go in detail about Javed Alam's work which is titled as Peasantry Politics and Historiography, Critique of New Trend in Relation to Marxism. So, from the title itself, it is very similar and familiar that Subaltern Studies is being seen as an intervention historiography within the Marxist paradigm. So it is as some of the Subaltern Studies themselves called that they presented themselves as Marxism with a difference, Marxism that is being more attentive to the idea of difference in post-colonial society.

So Javed Alam's critique is also premised on the idea that Subaltern Studies is a descending voice within Marxist tradition. So that is the broader premise of his critique; Javed Alam takes an issue with one of the central theoretical concepts of Subaltern Studies, which is the idea of subaltern autonomy. So as you might know that there are some key concepts that is very central to Subaltern Studies. One is the idea of the elite, and then there is an idea of the subaltern. one of the key arguments that Subaltern Studies put forward is that the elite and the subalterns occupy domains of production and, therefore, domains of power or politics.

This came as a critique of other forms of historiography, which did not make this bifurcation or the distinction of elite and subaltern as two domains of power or production. There is this colonial historiography or the mainstream nationalist historiography, which was overarchingly focused on how the broader process of colonialism was influencing both the elite and the subaltern in India and how the

anti-colonial movement or the national movement comprised of both the elite and subaltern. So they were not very aware or very much interested in the distinction between the elite and the subaltern in the Indian context. They did not make such an analytical distinction between them. On the other hand, you have Marxist historians who were interested in analytical separation between the Bourgeois or the Bourgeois elite in the Indian context and the working class and the peasantry in the Indian context, but even then, they did not treat them as occupying two distinct domains of power.

They found that there is a power relation between the elite and subaltern and even though the Marxist did not use the term subaltern they used working class or peasantry. They were insisting that both the peasantry and the working class were continuously influenced by the ideas that coming from both the national elite as well as the colonial elite. So they were also not interested in such a conceptual bifurcation between the elite and the subaltern. It is in that context where Subaltern Studies emerged. They also said the peasantry in India during the colonial period was not interested in the colonial project as well as in the anti-colonial project by the Indian elites because they occupied a different or an autonomous sphere of politics their consciousness the subjectivity was different from the concern their interest was different and the neither the Marxist nor the nationalist historiography did not record treat this peasant as an autonomous subject. They were never made the subjects of history but made passive objects of the larger projects such as colonialism, capitalism, or nationalism. So they were only treated as passive subjects of these larger projects. They were never treated as active subjects. They were active subjects of their own history, so this is the central thesis of the general idea of Subaltern Studies. Therefore the subaltern autonomy then occupies a central place in in subaltern historiography. With this central idea, Javed Alam has an issue, so he will go and elaborate that this central idea of subaltern autonomy is a flawed concept. It is not empirically valid. This is is the core of Javed Alam's history.

So he went on to quote or reproduce a presupposition of Subaltern Studies. He says, the Subaltern Studies presupposes that between the world of politics on the one hand and the economic process of capitalist transformation on the other on the world of production and

politics, there is a mental space within which the social forms of existence and the consciousness on the people are all their own. A strong and enduring on their own and, therefore, free of manipulations by the dominant group. So, both in the domain of production and in the domain of politics, the subaltern occupies an autonomous space. They are not being manipulated by the elite, neither by the colonial nor the national elite, so this is a central thing. This in turn extended as a critique of the orthodox Marxist or imperialist or nationalist historiography so Javed Alam present this is as a presupposition of Subaltern Studies and then he went on to interrogate this idea of autonomy. He says, "what is the empirical roots of this conception of subaltern autonomy" and he looks at each chapters of the first volume, remember that Javed Alam's volume published soon after the first volume so he is only being interrogating the chapters available to the first volume. We have had a quick look at the first volume mostly about various present uprising in colonial India. He says the Subaltern Studies treat this sporadic present uprising as empirical basis of the subaltern autonomy. Javed Alam went on to say that such sporadic resistance is common to all societies, it is common to archaic, pre modern or modern societies whenever there is an issue of exploitation or oppression. He says, but to infer from the fact that such sporadic upsurges that is autonomous from the elite domain of politics or the broader national domain of politics is a highly questionable presupposition. He went on to say that there is a discrepancy or there is a tension between the idea of subaltern autonomy and the empirical basis that or empirical cases that is being presented by the first volume of Subaltern Studies and then Javed Alam went on to say that if you have to look at some present politics or present uprising alam then went on to present a detailed alternative history of some of the cases that is being presented or he uses the material that is being presented by the Subaltern Studies themselves but draws a different conclusion from it I am not going to the details of it but I will just present the argument and he says if you look at the particular cases, the peasant militancy is neither completely subordinate to the national elite interest or the colonial elite interest nor completely autonomous. There is a dialectical relation between them. So that is what Javed Alam presents an alternative you cannot treat peasantry as completely autonomous from the national or colonial elite or the broader structural changes happening through the process of colonialism or capitalism.

Or you have to see them as completely passive subjects he agrees with the subaltern studies that the peasantry are not or completely passive he agrees with that but he does not agree with the claim that they are completely autonomous he says there is element of both in it. so He says in the peasant consciousness in the mental space of the peasantry or in the peasant subjectivity it's a very contradictory subjects it has elements of both it has elements of subordination as well as elements of autonomy. Javed Alam went on to present another problematic of this idea of subaltern autonomy he says, in the scheme of subaltern studies they are not very concerned with the direction of the peasant uprising takes they are only concerned or they are only concerned with the question is that whether the sporadic action or the militancy of the peasantry is autonomous or not. The historical direction is not very important. Javed Alam asks this counter question, so what do you score or characterise a peasant uprising that takes a communal form? and there are a number of examples in the colonial India there is lot of and and and if you look at if you look at one of many of the scholarship by some of the subaltern scholars like Gyanendra Pandey himself who talked about how colonialism or colonialist actually fueled the construction of a rigid Hindu and Muslim identities which in turn fueled a lot of communal violence in India. There is a clear connection with what happening on a broader elite sphere such as colonial policies and the subjects of the Indian mass, be the peasantry or the working class. Javed Alam asked what if the peasant uprising takes a communal color are the Subaltern Studies will still call them as a subaltern uprising? so that question is not being clearly answered in the subaltern studies schema. He argues that the subaltern studies are not very clearly concerned about the historical direction that the peasant uprising takes and and he says that's why there is a need for more conceptual positions on the idea of subaltern autonomy when in what cases can you call a subaltern or a Peasant uprising as autonomous in what cases you cannot call it are all this Peasant uprising as already always autonomous so this is the question Javed Alam asked and and he says whenever can you call a Peasant uprising as autonomous whenever it takes a deviant form from the bourgeoisie national elite suppose he says it is simply synonymous with a situation of asymmetry between the limited calculations of the elites of the bourgeois nationalist leadership and the radical stirring of the exploit in the press class so whenever there is a discrepancy with the bourgeois national leadership want or the

peasant act can you call it as autonomous whatever be the historical direction of the peasant uprising so this is a central so one of the counter question that Javed Alam asked. He also asked can you call a subaltern uprising or a peasant uprising autonomous if that move does not materially advance their own interest ? He also then argues a subaltern studies is not very interested in the question of whether a sporadic action or a militancy of the peasantry actually advance the material interest of the peasantry themselves. He says went on to present different counterfactual examples and says that there are instances when the the bourgeoisie elites try to demobilise some of the Peasant uprising successfully. If they were completely autonomous from the influences of the bourgeois national elite there should not be any cases where the national elite was successfully demobilised. If peasant consciousness is already always autonomous how do you explain such instances of demobilisation of the peasant interest or peasant dissatisfaction by the national elite? Then Javed Alam also argues that in the subaltern studies schema subaltern autonomy is exclusively located in a pre capitalist consciousness in that sense subaltern historiography is very close to the classical colonial Anthropology, which was always in a search for an original primitive unconquered exotic subject. Anthropology was decisively considered as a colonial discipline. It was primarily used in the Indian context and other contexts. Anthropology was a discipline that primarily used by the colonialist to enumerate to classify Indian society into primitive and non primitive. The classical anthropologists did a lot of studies, fieldwork and enumerative studies, and they were always in search of primitive tribes. Anthropology in colonial India was primarily a study of the tribes, and very critical scholarship has been available on that. They classified Indians into the degree of primitiveness so they were always in search of the exotic, the real Indians or indigenous communities in that sense. Javed Alam then went on to argue that there are similarities with such drive in search life for finding the unconquered autonomous or indigenous with the drive of the Subaltern Studies. He find a very strange overlap between the colonial Anthropology and Subaltern Studies in 1980s and then he asked a very pertinent question that were the subaltern were really autonomous ? who are the Indian Bourgeoise? the Indian national leaders, the elite of the Indian national movement really failed to speak for the nation and he then says no actually in the 1920s since the arrival of Gandhi in the national movement the peasantry

were overarchingly rallied behind Gandhi and they were made part of the elite national project even though there were issues and Gandhi or the mainstream national movement did not or were not very representative of the peasant interest as such. It is an empirical fact that the national movement than the colonial movement has transformed from exclusive elite movement of the Indian National Congress to a mass led movement in the 1920s. There is a civil disobedient movement or the non-cooperation movement or the Quit India movement, all were classical example of how mass it was in character not just in leadership. There was a strong peasant support to this to whatever Gandhi was advocating because Gandhi was also very much involved in various peasant movements of the time. Javed Alam says empirically this idea that Indian Bourgeoisie failed to speak for the nation is factually incorrect and then Javed Alam went on to construct a different paradigm to understand the relation that Indian peasantry had with the Indian Bourgeoisie or colonial elite. He says it is rather than the subaltern being already always autonomous what the actual mechanism at place was an alliance of the Bourgeoisie landlord interest. This is a very significant conceptual schema that Javed Alam pose as an alternative to the idea of subaltern autonomy. He says the idea of peasantry cannot be seen as a uniform homogeneous category there was huge landlords within peasantry there are people who want huge number of land and who has come from a dominant upper caste communities and there are small peasantry who are predominantly in the middle or the lower caste or even there are agriculture or agrarian workers who are being part of it. But, when in the scheme of Subaltern Studies when they classify the whole of the population as elite and subaltern they misses this internal differences within the peasantry or within what they constitute as subaltern and then Javed Alam says not everyone in the subaltern have the same or similar material interest and he says there are landlords within the subalterns and the small peasantry or the rest of the peasantry and he says whenever the Bourgeoisie failed to have dominance or hegemony over the large class of the subalterns or the peasantry they made an alliance with the peasant landlords what he calls the Bourgeoisie landlord alliance. Whenever the Bourgeoisie failed to speak for the whole, speak for the peasantry or the subaltern, whenever the Bourgeoisie interests were not resonant with the peasants interest the Bourgeoisie is then made alliances. Strategic alliances with the landlords and in that sense it was only the

landlords who are autonomous not the whole subaltern. It was landlords only the landlords within the peasantry were autonomous who were able to advance the material interest. Javed Alam argues that Subaltern Studies completely misses the strategic alliance between the Bourgeoisie and landlords and this is an alternative scheme that he presents. He went on to further argues that this autonomy of the landlords is also not a permanent condition it's also conditional to the structures or the forces of the capitalism how the Bourgeoisie expand himself. Even the landlord autonomy is not a permanent or a given condition; it is conditional to the imperative of the form that capitalism takes place in the Indian context or in the colonial context. Then he says in the instance of lacking hegemony, Bourgeoisie role is always a case of infirm capitalism riding on what is feudal. So the feudal structure in which the peasantry is an important class continues only when the Bourgeoisie decides only when they want it. They will have an alliances with the landlords interest and that's when the landlord continues within the broader context of colonial capitalism there are a lot of examples that we know, how the colonial Bourgeoisie has made decisive compromises with the landlords for example if you are familiar with the case of Malabar rebellion is an instance when the colonial Bourgeoisie has made a tactical alliances with upper caste landlords and therefore the peasant uprising was against both the colonial state against the colonial Bourgeoisie as well as the native landlords. You have to see the whole of the peasantry as undifferentiated categories that is what Javed Alam says and what Subaltern Studies are actually missing and, he says, in the original Gramscian schema, we know that Subaltern Studies take that 'subaltern' predominantly from Gramsci, Antonio Gramsci an Italian Marxist and they're indebted to Gramsci as the intellectual predecessor of Subaltern Studies, but in the original Gramscian schema subaltern resistance is sporadic. But they're always subjected to the activity of the ruling groups their autonomy is not already given. The subaltern autonomy is attained only when they are permanently transcend the existing socio-economic relations of power, so in the Gramscian sense subalterns or peasantry are not already always autonomous. Their resistance is to attain that sense of autonomy but on the other hand in the Subaltern Studies there is a reversal of the idea of autonomy because autonomy is already been conceptualised as present or given or inherited condition. They are not very interested in looking at subaltern consciousness as

contradictory consciousness or having both elements of autonomy and subjugation. They completely have a sanitised idea of subaltern autonomy or consciousness and conceptualise it as already always given. Javed Alam points out this is, as not a logically, faithful and correct interpretation of Gramscian idea of subaltern autonomy. Finally Javed Alam also present there is a problem of conceptual eclecticism in Subaltern Studies meaning the Subaltern Studies has drawn various conceptual categories and then there is a problem of incoherence because they completely reject the conventional class categories of the Marxian schema such as upper class or the ruling class and put the idea of elite versus the subaltern. Secondly they also instead of using idea of modes of productive relations, subaltern scholarship is introduced an idea of modes of power so they talk about within a broader social system there are different modes of power coexistence for example there are modes of colonial power there is a modes of feudal power and there is modes of communal power so there are different kinds of power that coexist power in the center, a communal power, there are feudal power and there is bourgeoisie power in the capitalist system. But there is no analytical schema that distinguish or talks about the internal relations within these modes of power so modes of power is being used in a very descriptive term as we talk about modes of dress or modes of transportation and so on. There is no analytical framework that that tells you much more about how are these different modes of power interact each other or what is the internal relation between the modes of power. This is the problem of a conceptual eclecticism in Subaltern Studies that Javed Alam arises. He particularly points out Partha Chatterjee's work as an example of such conceptual eclecticism and that's what he names Partha Chatterjee's specific articles as an example of this problem of conceptual eclecticism. Finally this problem of conceptual eclecticism also leads to another problem that is Subaltern Studies has a very static idea of power instead of a relational idea of power, this also is related to the initial point of subaltern autonomy. When you conceptualises two domains of power the elite and the subaltern you treat them as very essential categories you don't understand the difference or the relations how interaction between these two domains takes place or what are the internal differences between both these categories or or how do they relate to each other?. You don't see elite in relation to subaltern or you dont see subaltern in relation to elite but you see them

autonomous so that produce a very static idea of power however Javed Alam concludes that with notwithstanding all this criticism the problem of this empirical basis of the subaltern autonomy or the problem of conceptual eclecticism that Subaltern Studies shows. Despite of all these Subaltern Studies is in a very important intervention in within the broad Marxist historiography but it he treats it as a complete deviation from the dominant form of Marxism that is rooted in the Lenin-Mao tradition of agrarian question and Javed Alam says, what is more or less similar to an another non-conventional academic Marxism such as the Frankfurt School. If you are familiar with the origin of Frankfurt School that emerged in Germany in 1930s or 1920s as a descender of the Marxism that the Soviet Union propagated. He compares these school of academic Marxism whose empirical basis is questionable. This is broadly what Javed Alam says. You have to understand that Javed Alam's critiques come from a more or less an orthodox , the butel of subaltern studies or defense because Subaltern Studies emerge as a intervention within Marxism as a descender within, so Javed Alam's intervention can be seen as a defense of the orthodox idea of Marxist historiography against Subaltern Studies.

Let us stop here. In the next session we will discuss two other important critics of Subaltern Studies, Thank you.