

Indian Society: Sociological Perspectives

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Week-08

Lecture-40

Critique of Subaltern Studies II

Hello all, welcome to the final session on the critique of Subaltern Studies. So, in the last class we have dealt with the critics, critique of Subaltern Studies presented by Javed Alam in the immediate aftermath of the publishing of the first volume of Subaltern Studies in 1982. In 1983, Javed Alam's critique came soon after that, and we have looked at how Javed Alam made an elaboratory critique or conceptual critique of the idea of subaltern autonomy as well as the problem of what he calls a conceptual eclecticism in Subaltern Studies. So, in this session we will look at two more critique of Subaltern Studies. The first is by Sumit Sarkar, who was part of the founding team of Subaltern Studies . Later, he left the collective and wrote an article titled The Decline of Subalterns in Subaltern Studies.

This was published in 1997, it was earlier published as an article and later included in his book, Writing Social History. This is very important because it is an inside critique of Subaltern Studies. It is a critique that comes from a very important founding scholar of Subaltern Studies who was later descended from it. And he is also a historian.

Sumit Sarkar was a professor of history for a long time at the University of Delhi, and he made a very important scholarship on colonial India. One of his book titled as Modern India is a classic that I strongly recommend all of you to read to understand and to have a very comprehensive view of the social history of India during the colonial period until its India's attainment of freedom in 1947. So, we will look at this article in detail. The

title of this essay is “the Decline of Subaltern in Subaltern Studies”.

Basically, the crux of his critique has to deal with the trajectory that Subaltern Studies took. So, unlike Javed Alam he has no issue with this idea of subaltern autonomy alone. He agreed with it, that is why he was part of the collective, but he has an issue with the way that the Subaltern Studies collective has taken the direction it took in the subsequent years. So, we will just look at what are the major crux of Sumit Sarkar's critique, and then we will go into detail. The first critique which is very obvious from the title is, there is a decline of focus on the ‘subaltern’ in Subaltern Studies.

The later Subaltern Studies volume did not pay enough attention to the underprivileged, the idea of peasantry has completely disappeared, and the idea of the working class, Dalits and tribes has declined. And the focus has been more on the idea of community as a valorised category. Community is now ambiguous; a very heterogeneous category replaced this focus on the actual subalterns who are underprivileged, such as the peasantry, working class, the Dalits and tribes, which he calls the decline of subaltern in Subaltern Studies. And he also then also goes into the problem that caused by an increased attention by the western scholarship on Subaltern Studies.

First he talks or reminds the reader about the context of the formation of Subaltern Studies because this context is very important to go into the later critique by Sumit Sarkar. So, Sumit Sarkar reminds the reader that Subaltern Studies emerged as a critique, as a movement within Marxist historiography. It has simultaneously made critique of the mainstream national imperialist as well as the orthodox Marxist historiography, but its conceptual apparatus remained within the broad Marxist and socialist horizon. So, it reminds that Subaltern Studies is a movement within Marxism, but a greater attention, greater sense of the kind, what constitute difference in post-colonial context, How Marxism or the Marxist analysis should be sensitive to the kind of different structures of the global south. So, it is Marxism with a difference that is what Sumit Sarkar says. It was immediately inspired by the work of Antonio Gramsci, who was generally seen as making a very important contribution to the Marxist framework by focusing on

non-economical structures. In Marxism there is this broad division of the base and the superstructure. The base constitute by economic activities, production relations, modes of production and so on and the superstructure by which focus on culture, politics and so on.

Conventional Marxism seems to have only focused on the base, but Gramsci made a very decisive contribution by looking at how the superstructure, what is being hitherto called the superstructure has a very important influence on the base thereby preempts even the division of the base and superstructure. So, Gramsci's work has inspired a host of Marxist scholarship to look beyond economic reductionist understanding and look at not just dominance, but also hegemony. How the bourgeoisie elite or the bourgeoisie were able to manipulate or able to create a consent for capitalism among the working class,. That is what he called as hegemony. Hegemony is a combination of coercion as well as consent.

And he also provoked Marxist thinkers to look at not just the realm of political society, but also the realm of civil society where actual consent is been created . The domains of voluntary association, the space between the family and the state a whole lot of activities takes place. But Gramsci also asked us to look at the realm of civil society for example, the realm of schools, education for instance, how does the consent for a system, an exploitative system is generated in the domains of civil society. So, this move has certainly influenced the Subaltern Studies.

. Another immediate schools of historiography is from the British school of Marxism primarily by historians like E. P. Thompson as well as other Marxist like Eric Hobsbawm to a limited level who has been writing history from below. Even the Marxist historians before Thompson have focused on history by looking at larger structural things and have also treated the peasantry or working class as mere objects of history or objects of the history of capitalism or larger structures.

But E. P. Thompson then adopted an approach of history from below where you look at the social history of the peasantry or the working class from their own subjective experiences,. And these two, the Gramscian and the Thompsonian movement within the

Marxist, inspire the Subaltern Studies. to recover the neglected aspect of popular or subaltern autonomy in action, consciousness and in culture primarily in the colonial period. And unlike Javed Alam, Sumit Sarkar argues that the earlier volumes of Subaltern Studies was an empirical substantiation of or demonstrated the empirical validity of this hypothesis of subaltern autonomy.

So, this is the difference that he has with Javed Alam. But then he says eventually what happened with the Subaltern Studies is that this distinction between elite and subaltern became essentialised and a stark distinction emerged between them. Then what he calls as a bifurcation of the worlds of the domination and autonomy. So, subaltern autonomy in the original sense, according to Sumit Sarkar, was not completely insensitive to the problem of domination or never seen as a stark distinction.

They were never seen as completely separate. Obviously the autonomy is very important category but they also were sensitive to how this autonomy is been influenced by the domain of the elite domain of power. Gyan Prakash who came into Subaltern Studies in the late 1980s or early 1990s who Sumit Sarkar says has no regard for this earlier foundational movement such as the history from below or the Gramscian project. He says such scholars has been added to the Subaltern Studies.

The idea of domination and autonomy has been completely separate. And he says if one has to see domination and autonomy in two separate spheres, then one has to see that domination is irresistible. If domination takes place as a separate activity which does not affect or influence the peasant consciousness at all then resistance is impossible. He also says that this lateness is essential to the categories of subaltern and autonomy. So, as you can see, this is very close to what Javed Alam says, but the difference is that Sumit Sarkar says this problem of essentialisation was not there in the initial scholarship but was a consequence of the later addition.

He says, what happens in the process is that the Subaltern Studies scholarship has completely missed out the dialectics. Dialectics is a very important methodological approach within Marxism, which looks at the relation between two opposing forces. So, in the conventional Marxist schema every mode of production is constituted by two

opposing forces. In the context of capitalism it is the bourgeoisie and the proletariat and there is a relation between them. So, history moves by the relation the dialectical relation between these two opposing forces.

But, in the Subaltern Studies schema, Sumit Sarkar says once these categories are being seen as separate essential categories, then there is no possibility of paying attention to the relation between them, which he calls a loss of dialectics between them, which is also very close to Javed Alam's critique. The other critique which is the larger critique that Sumit Sarkar says is as a consequence of all this there is a shift in the meaning of who constituted subaltern. He then went on to say that the later Subaltern Studies scholarship has completely laid out by the initial frame. So, there is a six point methodologic criteria that Guha draws directly from Gramsci which I am not going into details. You can see that in Sumit Sarkar's article is such that all these criteria have been violated in the later subaltern historiography. So, in the Gramscian schema, both the subaltern as well as the elite have the same origins in the same social formation. They are not completely separate.

So, you have to remember Javed Alam here that the subalterns are not already autonomous they are in search of autonomy. But in the later Subaltern Studies schema they have been treated as if subalterns or elites belong to different social formation. There is an attempt to look for subalterns in pre-colonial communities untouched by the power of the elite. So, there is a look search for subaltern. This is also very similar to what Javed Alam reminded us of. So, this is a consequence of the bifurcation of the category of elite and subaltern autonomy and domination.

As a consequence, Sumit Sarkar says, new conceptual binaries has been created instead of elite world. Now the dominant binary in subaltern studies by early 1990s is the binary between colonial cultural domination versus indigenous community and without no attention to internal tensions and conflicts. And and he specifically explores the works of Partha Chatterjee as an important figure in Subaltern Studies from the beginning to the later stage. Partha Chatterjee has looked, introduced several position such as derivative

discourse for example in his book *Nationalist Thought and Colonial World* and on his later book *Nation and its fragments*. So, these, instead of paying attention to subaltern themselves, ideas like derivative discourse or indigenous communities and fragments became the major theoretical presuppositions or obsessions of Subaltern Studies. So, this is what Sumit Sarkar says and he further says there is a shift in the central problem while the early subaltern scholarship looked at how the existing scholars or historiography failed to look at the contribution of subaltern people in the nation building. Now the focus is on the failure or the nation-building process, even by the elite or subaltern. So, there have a complete absence of subalterns in Subaltern Studies, and he says that by the late 1990s, Gandhi emerged as a principal focus of the Subaltern Studies collective.

So, who is Gandhi? Gandhi is not a subaltern himself in the original sense of the term subaltern. He is a Baniya who is a mainstream national leader, who is the symbol of the mainstream anti-colonial national movement who was a central figure in the in the colonial and social and political contestations in colonial India and he became the central focus of the Subaltern Studies. So, that is a paradox that Sumit Sarkar highlights and he then says the latest Subaltern Studies, the recent works even incorporated figures like Ashis Nandy so those who are familiar with Ashis Nandy would know that he can be characterised as a scholar who comes from a critical traditionalist position who will then has who present every comprehensive critique of everything that is identified with the project of modernity be secularism capitalism or nationalism in itself. So, Ashis Nandy would say that the modern project of secularism is a synonym with domination and for modes of coexistence we should look at pre-colonial traditions such as religious pluralism that is untouched by the modern project of secularism. He says Ashis Nandy cannot be called as an anti-capitalist alone he cannot be called as an anti-colonialist but he is more of an anti-modernist so he has a problem with everything modern. So, people like Ashis Nandy became acceptable to Subaltern Studies and and that is a kind of convergence or the deviation that Subaltern Studies took in Sumit Sarkar's position.

Subaltern Studies from being a descending voice within Marxism has become an anti-modernist project in itself now that is where people like Ashis Nandy has been welcomed or being made alliances with Subaltern Studies scholarship and he says there

are two fun misrecognitions that needs to be looked at on the later trajectory of Subaltern Studies. He says the latest Subaltern Studies has fallen back to conventional forms of historiography he refers to Partha Chatterjee's book Nationalist Thought and Colonial Derivative where Chatterjee essentially argues that the Indian nationalist thinking such as that of from Tagore to Nehru who we think as as the most important figures who has carved out an intellectual source for asserting our nationalhood, those figures even while see as nationalist thinker were essentially drawing their thinking from colonial sources. So the mainstream nationalist thought of the Indian elite was nothing but a derivative of the colonial world and colonial framework and Gandhi has been treated separately that is a different debate. So, he says such historiography were such elite become the central point is a conventional form of historiography that existed in India even before the birth of Subaltern Studies. Subaltern Studies has fallen back to conventional sources of intellectual histories.

So there is a complete decline of not just the subjects of Subaltern Studies but also its methodological novelty and now Sumit Sarkar says, the idea of subaltern has become more broader ,Earlier it was very specific to peasantry or underprivileged, tribes now it has become everything that has been subjected to western cultural colonial domination. So everything in India can be called as subaltern in that sense . Even middle class in that sense minorities, even all kinds of communities has been defined as subalterns because subaltern now has been treated in opposition to western colonial cultural domination.

Sarkar then points out a second problem that after the certain movements within the western scholarship especially came after orientalism in 1978 which became very prominent in the 1980s that there is a certain rethinking or reflection within the western scholarship that you need to look at the colonial complicity of European scholarship. So they became more open to the scholarly move that comes from the global south and Subaltern Studies by virtue of being in the same time period became more attractive to the western academia .That is why people like Edward Said himself wrote introduction to Subaltern Studies and people like Gayatri Spivak then became part of the collective in 1980s and introduced a post structuralist turn within the Subaltern Studies. Foucauldian ideas of power became the central tenants by replacing a Gramscian idea of subaltern

autonomy . So this is a consequence of the western academia's reflexivity on their own colonial complicity.

So that created an inflated reputation so Subaltern Studies became an attractive school of thought in the western scholarship not because of its inherent merit but because of the circumstantial attraction for such you know original thinking, such original movement within the global south. So this Western attraction has actually reinforced this idea of the subaltern as a subject of Western colonial cultural domination. So what happened? Subaltern Studies from being a move from problematised historiography in India has now grown or deviated to a move or scholarship that problematised western colonial cultural domination itself . So this is seen in a positive light by many scholars but to Sumit Sarkar this actually created a decline on focus of the actual subaltern within Subaltern Studies itself. So Sumit Sarkar then says it has political consequences as well.

Once the focus has been shifted there is an actual absence, ignorance or actual invisibilisation of actual histories of the left and the anticaste movement which were actually the subaltern movements in India and he says in 1980s or 1990s new social movements among the Subaltern Studies emerged, subaltern communities emerged in India which actually advances the cause of civil liberties and individuals. You know if you are familiar there is the Dalit panther movement inspired from Ambedkarite thought and there is a lot of civil liberties movement coming from the left in the 1990s in the immediate aftermath of the emergency and so on. There is the move the other the assertion of the other backward castes for greater constitutional rights in the early 1990s. All these have been happening but Subaltern Studies has been continuously silent on this because Subaltern Studies because of their positioning as a movement against western cultural domination they became increasingly critical of the whole of the enlightenment project itself. Therefore they could not actually pay enough attention to the movements that were coming within the subaltern communities and who were actually advancing the idea of feminist ideas, individuals because since they actually drew their inspiration from enlightenment traditions the Subaltern Studies were not being attentive because of this shift in the framework, shift in the emphasis and they were all delegitimised as western

enlightenment projects. Sumit Sarkar then also says that the class location of the Subaltern Studies scholars. None of them hails from so-called subaltern communities, and he also says this idea of this binary combination or the separation of material advancement and spiritual autonomy as two separate spheres of Subaltern Studies has a strange overlap with the the kind of scholarship that promotes the Hindu nationalist idea .

Hindu nationalism treat spiritual and materials as two separate sphere . Subaltern Studies has a strange overlap with such Hindu nationalist concerns.

He then went on to say that this decisive shift of critical register from colonial and capitalist to that of the Western enlightenment itself has created a vague nostalgia about Indigenous identities; communities in Subaltern Studies then become a search for authentic Indigenous communities in that whole of the non-west. So, this is the shift that Sumit Sarkar is talking about. He gives an example that Partha Chatterjee in his book nationalist thought and the colonial world, offers a criticism of Nehruvian planning bureaucratic nationalism as an example of how the Indian national thought is a derivative of the colonial world, but then when the neoliberal turn happened in India in 1990s there is an abandoning of planning and that has been seen as against subaltern interest giving more and more space for capitalist interest, but then and this also happened as a pressure of the western pressure like the world bank and IMF and such economic institutions and then Partha Chatterjee has no take on this.

Sumit Sarkar says when you posit everything of the nationalist thought or the Indian nationalist project against interest of subaltern what happens is that whenever such institutions like planning board which actually served the subaltern interest to a great extent is been abandoned by western project, Subaltern Studies has no take or they are completely silent about it. So, Sumit Sarkar says this is a paradox of Subaltern Studies or the shift in Subaltern Studies.

Finally, we will also discuss another important critique of Subaltern Studies that is a book length critique of Subaltern Studies titled Post-colonial Theory and the Spectre of Capital by Vivek Chibber So, as I already mentioned this was published in 2013 and Indian

edition has come out later which is available in the market as well as in the internet. Many of the critique that Vivek Chibber builds upon the existing critique against Subaltern Studies by people like Sumit Sarkar and Javed Alam and so on. So, I will just highlight one of the distinctive critique that Vivek Chibber presents against Subaltern Studies.

He says basically one of the main idea of Subaltern Studies is that the Indian state during the colonial time as well as during the post-colonial time is a state without hegemony. So, the idea of Subaltern Studies is that the majority of Indian masses who are peasantry have not given their consent for the Indian national project, be it colonial time or being in the democratic process. Vivek Chibber says this comes from a flawed historiography of the European sense. The idea of European capitalism and Indian capitalism distinction between is constitutive of Subaltern Studies, and Vivek Chibber says that bifurcation between Western or European capitalism and Indian capitalism comes from the flawed understanding of the historiography of Europe. He details in his chapters, he says that this difference between European and Western and Indian capitalists is largely fictional.

So, the basic idea that Subaltern Studies present is that capitalism in the West was successful in building consent across classes and thereby institutionalising a liberal democratic framework successfully, it is an example of the hegemony of the bourgeoisie, but in the Indian context, the bourgeoisie lacked hegemony. They were not able to institutionalise their hegemony because they lacked consent from the domain of the subaltern, which is the largest domain in the Indian scenario. So, that is what Guha called the dominance without hegemony, and this happens because of the form of the nature of capitalism in Indian context itself. So, this is the crux of the Subaltern Studies. The idea is that capitalism in India failed to universalise its features .

It failed to universalise democracy; it failed to universalise the dominance or the hegemony of the bourgeoisie. So, this is the central thesis that Subaltern Studies presented which is being critiqued by Vivek Chibber. Vivek Chibber says the Subaltern Studies scholars misrecognised what are the universalising tendencies of capitalism. He

says democracy is not an intrinsic universalising factor of capitalism. So, Subaltern Studies equate the success of democracy with the success of the universalisation of capitalism.

Vivek Chibber says it is not. He says capitalism universalises only a particular reproductive relation based on market dependency. And he says India is as market dependent as let us say Los Angeles or Nairobi or London is. So, capitalism in India is successful. India is as capitalist as the western world, but you know the reproduction of peasantry is not a marker of the absence of universalising tendencies of the nets of capitalism. So, Vivek Chibber accuses the Subaltern Studies of having a misunderstanding or a misrecognition of the nature of capitalism in India itself. He says Subaltern Studies attribute the bourgeoisie to a democratic mission that, in fact, rejected and fought against.

He says that the the core reason why democracy survives in India is not because the capitalist wants it but because democracy in India is protected and preserved by the so-called subaltern. So, if you look at a later book by Javed Alam titled Who Wants Democracy? He has a book based on data from the CSDS survey. He actually makes his point in Indian democracy as a concept as an institution as a value that is cherished and preserved not by the elite but by the subaltern. So, it is a misattribution of the Subaltern Studies to say that in India, democracy is a system is primarily a system attributed to capitalism. So, if you look at the success of India's democracy that itself is a rejection of the Subaltern Studies.

This is because the mass of the Indian population who are the subalterns did not have faith in the elite project such as democracy. On the other hand, in India, democracy is a subaltern project as much as is an elite project. Chibber also says the Subaltern Studies underestimate capitalism's ability not only to tolerate heterogeneity but to actively promote it. So, one of the reason why Subaltern Studies says capitalism in India is a failed project because it failed to have a hegemony is because peasantry continued to be an important class under Indian capitalism. And Javed Alam and Vivek Chibber say it is not a deviation from the feature of capitalism. Capitalism is incapable of accommodating

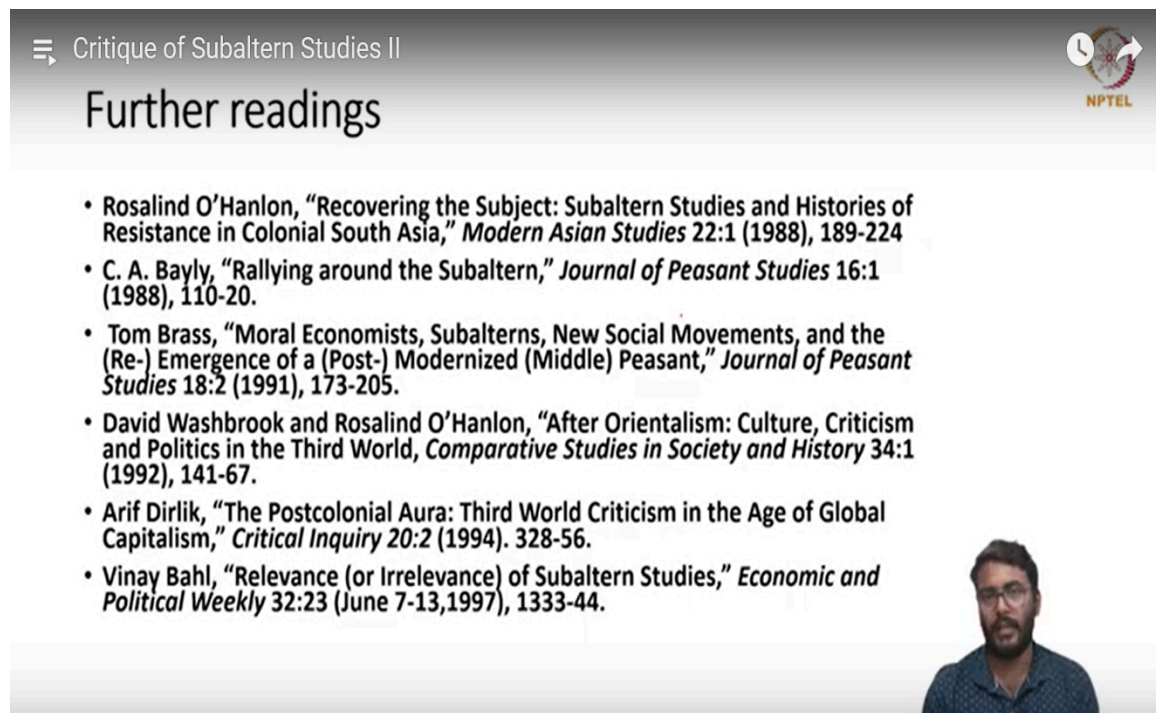
such a different class in itself, and he says Subaltern Studies have a very narrow idea of capitalism.

And further finally, Vivek Chibber says Subaltern Studies have a certain obscure understanding of capitalism. What, in fact, it does is a process of resurrecting orientalism. So, orientalism as you might be familiar is an idea presented by Edward Said which seen the West and non-west as distinctive categories. The occidental world is necessarily superior to that of the oriental world, the culture, the institutions, and so on, So it presupposes an essential difference between the orient and the occident or the West and the non-west and Vivek Chibber accuses Subaltern Studies of in turn resurrecting this distinctive, constitutive difference between the West and the non-west or the occident and the orient. Therefore, he accuses them of resurrecting Orientalism, and he says it is very similar to what Sumit Sarkar says because Vivek Chibber also agrees with Sumit Sarkar that Subaltern Studies has shifted from its original emphasis on peasantry in India to that of the binary between the West and the non-west. The binary between the elite and subaltern within the Indian context has shifted to the binary between the West and the non-west. And the whole of the non-west assumes the position of the subaltern. He says Subaltern Studies in doing that insist that the Eastern agents operate with an entirely different political psychology or autonomous mental space from that Western agent. So Vivek Chibber then went on to argue that the working class or the peasantry in the West as well as the East has similar political psychology, which is primarily focused on expanding their own respective material interest. I am not going into detail, which is also very similar to what Sumit Sarkar says Subaltern Studies because of the shift in the framework from a conventional or a different Marxist to that of a larger non-western post-colonial thing has went on to valorize the indigenous , valorize the non-west as an exotic subject opposed to which is as a resisting autonomous subject against the western cultural domination.


This is what he calls a form of resurrecting Orientalism. So if you are interested there is a very interesting public debate between Vivek Chibber and Partha Chatterjee, one of the most important representative figures of Subaltern Studies and there is an hour-long

debate between Partha Chatterjee and Vivek Chibber is available on YouTube which can actually summarise his book and the kind of response the defence the Subaltern Studies has made. So, if you are interested, there is a much wider array of critics that comes also from non-western, let's say, feminists and others from Dalit standpoints against Subaltern Studies.

Given below are some of the important readings you can look at, and I think this gives a broad overview of the critique of Subaltern Studies.




The image shows a video player interface. At the top left, there is a hamburger menu icon followed by the text "Critique of Subaltern Studies II". At the top right, there is an NPTEL logo. The main title of the video is "Further readings". Below the title, there is a list of six academic references. In the bottom right corner of the video frame, there is a small portrait of a man with glasses and a beard, wearing a blue patterned shirt.

☰ Critique of Subaltern Studies II 

Further readings

- Rosalind O'Hanlon, "Recovering the Subject: Subaltern Studies and Histories of Resistance in Colonial South Asia," *Modern Asian Studies* 22:1 (1988), 189-224
- C. A. Bayly, "Rallying around the Subaltern," *Journal of Peasant Studies* 16:1 (1988), 110-20.
- Tom Brass, "Moral Economists, Subalterns, New Social Movements, and the (Re-) Emergence of a (Post-) Modernized (Middle) Peasant," *Journal of Peasant Studies* 18:2 (1991), 173-205.
- David Washbrook and Rosalind O'Hanlon, "After Orientalism: Culture, Criticism and Politics in the Third World," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 34:1 (1992), 141-67.
- Arif Dirlik, "The Postcolonial Aura: Third World Criticism in the Age of Global Capitalism," *Critical Inquiry* 20:2 (1994). 328-56.
- Vinay Bahl, "Relevance (or Irrelevance) of Subaltern Studies," *Economic and Political Weekly* 32:23 (June 7-13,1997), 1333-44.



So this is what I presented here in the last two sessions primarily from Marxist critique because Subaltern Studies presented itself as a descending voice within Marxist school, but as I said, there is a vast array of critical scholarship that emerged in the later phase. So these are some of the readings you can go into. Thank you.