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Subaltern Historiography of Indian Working Classes - A Review on Recent Trends

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ABSTRACT

The Indian Freedom Movement (1857–1947) was a significant period which had a politically important impact on the Indian state's subsequent formation. The historiography of the movement was until recently much more monochromatic than the movement itself, highlighting the contributions of "great men." The Subaltern Studies Collective (1980s–present) rejected this approach, taking a broader and more productive approach to telling the story of the movement via the bottom-up contributions to Indian history. Surprisingly, ahowever, what became known as Subaltern Studies has downplayed the empirical role of the working class. One reason for this underemphasis is a specific and culturally essentialist mode of appropriating the work of E P Thompson, Carlo Ginzburg, and Hayden White, who are declared influences on Subaltern Studies. In the late 1970s, in the throes of the Emergency, the Subaltern Studies scholars looked to the formation of independent India to understand how democracy could have been so easily taken away. Not only was state formation in 1947 a defining factor in explaining this crisis of the Indian state, but an important factor was also how the many social movements that fought for an independent India played an important role in shaping postcolonial society. Disillusioned with Indian nationalism and its associated historiography, Subaltern Studies historians wanted to provide an alternate narrative to the great man narratives of Indian freedom in which Jawaharlal Nehru, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi and sometimes Muhammad Ali Jinnah or Subhas Chandra Bose loom disproportionately large. Subaltern Studies endeavoured to tell an alternative story, one of bottom-up contributions to Indian history and society. In order to do so, those in the Subaltern Studies mould seized on the work of E P Thompson, Hayden White, and Carlo Ginzburg, for theoretical as well as empirical inspiration.

Keywords: Crisis, Democracy, Empirical, Freedom, History, Impact, Society, Subaltern Studies

INTRODUCTION

Subaltern historiography, particularly in the context of Indian working classes, emerged as a reaction to traditional, elite-centric historical narratives. It focuses on the voices and experiences of marginalized groups, including workers, peasants, and other marginalized communities, who were often overlooked or misrepresented in mainstream historical accounts.

Recent trends in subaltern historiography include a greater emphasis on oral history, the use of diverse sources, and a broader understanding of agency and resistance within subaltern communities.

KEY ASPECTS OF SUBALTERN HISTORIOGRAPHY

Challenging Elitist Perspectives:
Subaltern historiography seeks to challenge the dominant narratives that focus on the elite and ignore the contributions of the working classes and other marginalized groups.

Focus on "History from Below":
It emphasizes the importance of studying history from the perspectives of those who have been marginalized or oppressed, giving voice to their experiences and perspectives.

Oral History and Diverse Sources:
Subaltern historiography utilizes oral histories, personal accounts, and diverse sources to reconstruct the experiences of marginalized communities, which are often not represented in traditional archival records.

Understanding Agency and Resistance:
It recognizes the agency and resistance of subaltern groups, challenging the notion that they were passive recipients of historical events.

Deconstructing Colonial and National Narratives:
Subaltern studies also critically examine colonial and national narratives, highlighting the ways in which these narratives have been used to marginalize or silence subaltern voices.

RECENT TRENDS AND DEVELOPMENTS

Increased Use of Oral History:
Researchers are increasingly using oral histories and personal accounts to gain a more nuanced understanding of the experiences of subaltern communities.

Interdisciplinary Approaches:
Subaltern studies are increasingly incorporating insights from sociology, anthropology, and other disciplines to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the social and political contexts in which marginalized groups operate.

Focus on Specific Groups:
Researchers are focusing on specific groups, such as women, Dalits, and marginalized religious communities, to understand their unique experiences and perspectives within the broader framework of subaltern history.

Re-evaluating Existing Narratives:
Subaltern studies are also re-evaluating existing narratives, challenging assumptions about Indian history and identity.

Global Perspectives:
The influence of subaltern studies has extended beyond India, with scholars in other parts of the world using similar approaches to study marginalized communities.

EXAMPLES OF SUBALTERN STUDIES IN INDIAN HISTORY

Peasant Movements:
Subaltern studies have examined the role of peasant movements in Indian history, highlighting the agency and resistance of peasants during colonial rule.

Working Class Movements:
The contributions of the working class in Indian history, including their struggles for rights and their role in the nationalist movement, have also been examined through a subaltern lens.

Tribal Movements:
Subaltern studies have explored the history of tribal movements in India, examining their struggles for land, autonomy, and self-determination.

The recovery of ancient Indian history on contemporary historiographic lines was one of the earliest and most fruitful outcomes of the British conquest and unification of India—one that accelerated that process. Yet, Indian historiography has historically been limited to nationalist, colonial, Muslim, and Hindu historiography. Yet, new historical writing tendencies have evolved due to greater historical study. The research, materials, critical techniques, and interpretations utilized by academics to create Indian history are referred to as the historiography of India.

Recent Indian Historiography includes Subaltern school, Local, Oral and Feminist histories.

Recent Trends In Indian historiography: History From Below
The traditional histories, which focused almost entirely on the political, social, and religious elites, prompted the creation of History from Below.

1. The great legacy of administrative and political historiography established by Ranke and his followers gave the conventional history of the great exploits of the upper elite an additional boost.

2. In resistance to this 'History from Above', the History from Below was an effort to write the history of the general public. It is a historiography concerned with the actions and views of those individuals and locations that earlier historians should have considered.

3. This historiographical tradition began to place a premium on the concerns of the underprivileged and working classes, women and underrepresented groups, 'faces in the crowd,' and those who had vanished into history. History from Below aims to make history writing more inclusive by examining the experiences of marginalized groups and individuals, exploring new sources, and reinterpreting old ones.

History and Society began in 1982 as a series of interventions in some debates specific to the writing of modern Indian history.

1 Ranajit Guha (b. 1923), a historian of India then teaching at the University of Sussex, was the inspiration behind it. Guha and eight younger scholars based in India, the United Kingdom, and Australia constituted the editorial collective of Subaltern Studies until 1988, when Guha retired from the team.

2 The series now has a global presence that goes well beyond India or South Asia as an area of academic specialization. The intellectual reach of Subaltern Studies now also exceeds that of the discipline of history. Postcolonial theorists of diverse disciplinary backgrounds have taken interest in the series. Much discussed, for instance, arethe ways in which contributorsto Subaltern Studies have participated in contemporary critiques of history and nationalism, and of orientalism and Eurocentrism in the construction of social science knowledge. At the same time, there have also been discussions of Subaltern Studies in many history and social science journals.

3 Selections from the series have been published in English, Spanish, Bengali, and Hindi and are in the process of being brought out in Tamil and Japanese.

4 A Latin American Subaltern Studies Association was established in North America in 1992.

5 It would not be unfair to say that the expression “subaltern studies,” once the name of a series of publications in Indian history, now stands as a general designation for a field of studies often seen as a close relative of postcolonialism.

Nationalism and colonialism thus emerged, unsurprisingly, as the two major areas of research and debate defining the field of modern Indian history in the 1960s and 1970s. At one extreme of this debate was the Cambridge historian Anil Seal, whose 1968 book The Emergence of Indian Nationalism pictured “nationalism” as the work of a tiny elite reared in the educational institutions the British set up in India. This elite, as Seal put it, both “competed and collaborated” with the British in their search for power and privilege. A few years later, this idea was pushed to an extreme in a book entitled Locality, Province, and Nation (1973) to which Seal, his colleague John Gallagher, and a posse of their doctoral students contributed. Their writings discounted the role of ideas and idealism in history and foregrounded an extremely narrow view of what constituted political and economic “interest” for historical actors. They argued that it was the penetration of the colonial state into the local structures of power in India—a move prompted by the financial self-interest of the raj rather than by any altruistic motives—that eventually, and by degrees, drew Indian elites into the colonial governmental process.

According to this argument, the involvement of Indians in colonial institutions set off a scramble among the indigenous elites who combined—opportunistically and around factions formed along “vertical” lines of patronage (in contradistinction to the so-called horizontal affiliations of class, that is)—to jockey for power and privilege within the limited opportunities for self-rule provided by the British. Such, the Cambridge historians claimed, was the real dynamic of that which outside observers or naive historians may have mistaken for an idealistic struggle for freedom. Nationalism and colonialism both came out in this history as straw and foil characters. The history of Indian nationalism, said Seal (1973, 2), “was the rivalry between Indian and Indian, its relationship with imperialism that of the mutual clinging of two unsteady men of straw.” At the other extreme of this debate was the Indian historian Bipan Chandra, a professor in the 1970s at the prestigious Jawaharlal Nehru University in Delhi. Chandra and his colleagues saw Indian history of the colonial period as an epic battle between the forces of nationalism and colonialism. Drawing on both Marx’s writings and Latin American theories of dependency and underdevelopment, Chandra (1979) argued that Subaltern Studies and Historiography colonialism was a regressive force that distorted all developments in India’s society and polity. Social, political, and economic ills of postindependence India—including those of mass poverty and religious and caste conflict— could be blamed on the political economy of colonialism.

However, Chandra saw nationalism in a different, contrasting light. He saw it as a regenerative force, as the antithesis of colonialism, something that united and produced an “Indian people” by mobilizing them for struggle against the British. Nationalist leaders such as Gandhi and Nehru were the authors of such an anti-imperial movement for unity of the nation. Chandra claimed that the conflict of interest and ideology between the colonizers and the “Indian people” was the most important conflict of British India. All other conflicts of class or caste were secondary to this principal contradiction and were to be treated as such in histories of nationalism. Yet as research progressed in the seventies,

there emerged an increasing series of difficulties with both of these narratives. It was clear that the Cambridge version of "nationalist politics without ideas or idealism" would never ring true to scholars in the subcontinent who had themselves experienced the desire for freedom from colonial rule.8 On the other hand, the nationalist historian's story of there having been a "moral war" between colonialism and nationalism wore increasingly thin as research by younger scholars in India and elsewhere brought new material to light.

New information on the mobilization of the poor (peasants, tribals, and workers) by elite nationalist leaders in the course of the Gandhian mass movements in the 1920s and 1930s, for example, suggested a strongly reactionary side to the principal nationalist party, the Indian National Congress. Gyanendra Pandey at Oxford, David Hardiman and David Arnold at Sussex (all of them later to become members of the Subaltern Studies collective), Majid Siddiqi and Kapil Kumar in Delhi, Histesranjan Sanyal in Calcutta, Brian Stoddart, Stephen Henningham, and Max Harcourt in Australia, and others elsewhere documented the way nationalist leaders would suppress with a heavy hand peasants' or workers' tendency to exceed the self-imposed limits of the nationalist political agenda by protesting the oppression meted out to them not only by the British but by the indigenous ruling groups as well.9 From the point of view of a younger generation of historians whom Guha, following Salman Rushdie, has called the "midnight's children," neither the Cambridge thesis propounding a skeptical view of Indian nationalism nor the nationalist-Marxist thesis glossing over real conflicts of ideas and interests between the elite nationalists and their socially subordinate followers—or assimilating to a nationalist historiographical agenda—was an adequate response to the problems of postcolonial history writing in India.

The persistence of religious and caste conflict in post independence India, the war between India and China in 1962 which made official nationalism sound hollow and eventually gave rise to a fascination with Maoism among the urban educated youth in India, the outbreak of a violent Maoist political movement in India(known as the Naxalite movement) which drew many members of the urban youth into the countryside in the late 1960s and early 1970s—all these and many other factors combined to alienate younger historians from the shibboleths of nationalist historiography. All this historiographical discontent, however, was still floundering in the old liberal and positivist paradigms inherited from English traditions of history writing even as it was searching for a path toward decolonizing the field of Indian history. Subaltern Studies as Paradigm Shift, 1982–1987 Subaltern Studies intervened in this situation. Intellectually, it began on the very terrain it was to contest: historiography that had its roots in the colonial education system. It started as a critique of two contending schools of history: the Cambridge school and that of the nationalist historians. Both of these approaches, declared Guha in a statement that inaugurated the series Subaltern Studies, were elitist.

They wrote up the history of nationalism as the story of an achievement by the elite classes, whether Indian or British. For all their merits, they could not explain "the contributions made by people on their own, that is, independent of the elite to the making and development of this nationalism" (Guha 1982, 3; Guha's emphasis). It will be clear from this statement of Guha's that Subaltern Studies was part of an attempt to align historical reasoning with larger movements for democracy in India. It looked for an anti-elitist approach to history writing, and in this it had much in common with the "history from below" approaches pioneered in English historiography by Christopher Hill, E. P. Thompson, E. J. Hobsbawm, and others. Both Subaltern Studies and the "history from below" school were Marxist in inspiration; both owed a certain intellectual debt to the Italian communist Antonio Gramsci in trying to move away from deterministic, Stalinist readings of Marx. The word "subaltern" itself—and, of course, the well-known concept of "hegemony" so critical to the theoretical project of subaltern studies—go back to the writings of Gramsci. As in the histories written by Thompson, Hobsbawm, Hill, and others, Subaltern Studies was also concerned about "rescuing from the condescension of posterity "the pasts of the socially subordinate groups in India. The declared aim of Subaltern Studies was to produce historical analyses in which the subaltern groups were viewed as the subjects of history.

As Guha (1984, vii) put it once in the course of introducing a volume of Subaltern Studies: "We are indeed opposed to much of the prevailing academic practice in historiography . . . for its failure to acknowledge the subaltern as the maker of his own destiny. This critique lies at the very heart of our project." But at the same time Guha's theorization of the project signaled certain key differences that would increasingly distinguish the project of Subaltern Studies from that of English Marxist historiography.

With hindsight, it could be said that there were broadly three areas in which Subaltern Studies differed from the "history from below" approach of Hobsbawm or Thompson (allowing for differences between these two eminent historians of England and Europe). Subaltern historiography necessarily entailed (a) a relative separation of the history of power from any universalist histories of capital, (b) a critique of the nation-form, and (c) an interrogation of the relationship between power and knowledge (hence of the archive itself and of history as a form of knowledge). In these differences, I would argue, lay the beginnings of a new way of theorizing the intellectual agenda for postcolonial histories.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, subaltern historiography provides a valuable framework for understanding the history of marginalized communities in India, offering a more nuanced and inclusive perspective than traditional, elite-centric accounts. Recent trends in subaltern studies continue to challenge and expand our understanding of Indian history, highlighting the agency and resistance of subaltern groups in shaping the social and political landscape of the country.

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