Subaltern Studies: A Historical Perspective and Emergence In India.

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ABSTRACT

The emergence of the word, ‘subaltern’ can be traced out from its original meaning in army a person of a lower rank. This concept was used by western thinkers to look at the society from the different angle and perspective being that of the bottom to up of society. The society till then was understood from the elite class point of view but now it took lower or the other strata of society to understand the society. Marx and Gramsci can be regarded as main proponents of this perspective to understand the society. In this paper emergence of Subaltern word and Subaltern studies where the former was developed in by the Western thinkers whereas the latter one is credited to the Indian thinkers like Ranjit Guha and others. The Subaltern studies started with the simple concept of the ’Dalit’, in the Indian caste system. In the concluding part of the paper I have tried to bring out how the world wide scenarios like globalization how it has a profound impact on the Subaltern studies making it more complex and wider in aspects as the complexities and acculturation of cultures are taking place because of the shrinking of boundaries amongst countries because of growth in technology and globalization which I mentioned.

INTRODUCTION

Subaltern study has been a greatly influential academic movement. Its major target is to refocus history on the major and unique role of marginalized people in bringing about large scale

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transformations in society. The ferment created by subaltern studies in discipline as diverse as History, Anthropology, Literature to recognize the force of recent post colonialism. The criticism has brought about a radical rethinking of knowledge authored by western domination. The implications of subaltern studies for geography are especially apparent in the group's exploration of specialized categories of class, ancestry, and religion. Subaltern Studies had used some of Gramsci's ideas at a critical juncture in historical studies. By the late 1970s, a rapid decline in state centered historical research had already occurred and social history "from below" was flourishing. E.P.Thompson's 1963 book, "The making of the English Working Class", is often cited as an inspiration for the growing number of "bottom up" , studies of people whose history had been previously ignored. By 1979, women's history was popular enough in the U.S. to merit source books and guides to research.

A group of Indian scholars brought this term into much popularity and made it focal point of research, investigation, critical scholarship and publication through their Subaltern Studies. The Subaltern studies published nine volumes on South Asian history and society, particularly from “subaltern perspective” during 1982-1996, hence, from then onwards this term attracts the attention of many researchers and scholars especially of social scientists and theologians. Ranjeet Guha explains further the meaning of this term in his preface:

"The word 'subaltern'...stands for as given in the Concise Oxford Dictionary, that is, 'of inferior rank'. It will be used as a name for the general attitude of subordination in South Asian Society whether this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office or in any other way."

We need to understand this not only from social aspect but also from religious point of view; particularly it's relation to 'religion'. Recently the term 'subaltern' is generally used by scholars from 'Dalits' point of view, especially focusing their attention on oppressive structures of "caste" in Indian context. I agree with Ranjit Guha about the multi-dimensional reality of this term as “class, caste, age, gender and office" discrimination or categorization, but I am focusing my attention on one aspect of "caste" discrimination,
which divided people in India as “superior and inferior” or “touchable and untouchable” or “upper and lower castes”. This article mainly focuses on "caste dimension of subaltern people". Sathianathan Clark remarks that “The subordination and subjection that marks the life of Dalits in India bring them into the contours of a particularly contextual assembly of subalternity. Oliver Mendelshon and Marika Vieziany express similar opinion, "Untouchables (Dalits) have retained their identity as a subordinate people within Indian society, and by this we mean to identify a condition that is far more severe than merely being bottom of an inevitable hierarchy”.

In 1982, Eric Wolf published what can be called the first global history from below. In South Asia, the history of subaltern groups was thriving, though they were not called that then. In the seventies, two new journals featuring studies of South Asian peasants had begun publishing in the US and UK. Hundreds of titles on rural history had appeared. In 1976, Eric Stokes announced the "return of the peasant" to colonial history. The guides to sources promoted more local research and generation of ideas.

Subaltern studies began in 1982, when a collective of South Asian scholars in Britain, including Dipesh Chakrabarty and Partha Chatterjee, began publication of a book-length journal titled Subaltern Studies, edited by Ranajit Guha. Much of the collective's early work dealt with the politics of peasants who had been involved in the mass movements that ultimately led to India's independence. The journal's inauguration stemmed from a critique both of nationalist historians of India, who tended to focus on the local elites, and of orthodox Marxists, whose restriction of the concept of the working classes to industrial workers alone was, as the members of the subaltern studies collective argued, Euro-centric and badly suited to the varied economy of the Indian subcontinent. Subaltern studies' turn away from traditional methods of historical research was signaled by ongoing debates over the definition of the term subaltern. Although influenced by the Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci, who used it to refer primarily to industrial laborers, in the work of the collective the word subaltern came to describe any group that is wholly left out of the elite. In this light, the
collective’s focus also developed in relation to long-standing populist debates in South Asia, from the nationalist writings of N.G. Ranga and L. Natarajan to the variegated Marxism of scholars like A.R. Desai. The elite group got distinguished intentionally from the working class and a different perspective was developed to understand and study those who were different as well as not privileged like the elite class. The study of society from other angle apart from the elite’s point of view was emerging and it was the threshold of the subaltern studies, a mark of beginning of the apparently new thought process and study.

**MARXISM AND SUBALTERN STUDIES**

Marxism has a major contribution that it brought the critique of capitalism and colonialism. It turned the spotlight on colonial exploitation. The criticism was framed on historical scheme that universalized the European historical experience, whereas the emergent postcolonial critique seeks to undo the European centrism. It does so with acute realization that its own critical apparatus does not enjoy a panoptic distance from colonial history but exists as an after math. In recent years, subaltern studies have often been seen as a post-Marxist movement because many of its scholars selectively combine Marxist theory with a variety of other influences. The relationships between cultural Marxism and subaltern studies were particularly close during the 1980s, with the group’s focus on material analyses of Subaltern political movements. As such, subaltern studies theories developed in relation to transformations in British Marxism, wherein academics such as E. P. Thompson and Eric Wolf increasingly began to focus on ordinary people as the agents of history in Europe.

However, at that time, the rifts between subaltern studies and orthodox Marxism were also most apparent. Early-subaltern studies research placed particular emphasis on the self-contained autonomy of peasants, whereas some orthodox Marxists portrayed peasants as a byproduct of the particular history of capitalism in South Asia rather than a vibrant political group. Subaltern theorists also critiqued orthodox Marxist views on historical progress, including the assertion that every nation must pass through a transition from feudalism to capitalism. While Marxist declined to accept peasants
as a separate entity apart from the capitalistic system, the subaltern study craved for the recognition of the peasant and working class with an identity apart from being a part of the capitalist system.

The formation of subaltern studies as an intervention in the south Asian historiography occurred in the wake of the growing crisis in the 1970s'. The domination of the nation state cobbled together through compromises and coercion during the nationalist struggle against British rule became precarious as its program of capitalist modernity sharpened social and political inequalities and conflict. Faced with the outbreak of powerful movements of different ideological hues that challenged its claim to represent people, the state resorted increasingly to repression to preserve its dominance. But repression was not the only means adopted. The state combined coercive measures with the powers of patronage and money on the one hand and the appeal of populist slogans and programs on the other to make a fresh bid for its legitimacy. These measures pioneered by Indira Gandhi government secured the dominance of the state but corroded the authority of its institutions. This led to a different discourse that in the 1980's prompted for the discipline of subaltern studies.

**SUBALTERN STUDIES IN INDIA**

The trend of 'Subaltern studies' prevailed in India, in the last twenty years of the 20th century. This new trend gave a way to new challenges by crossing the traditional writing of history. It provided a new direction, new amplitude and helped to begin a new chapter. Indian point of view of Subaltern history is similar to the trend of writing in England, which became famous as 'History from Below'. The 'Centre of South Asian Cultural studies' was established with the assumption that without knowing the work of downtrodden people. It is not possible to obtain the true sight of the contemporary history. Ranjeet Guha played a vital role in the establishment of this institute. He discussed about this viewpoint of history with some of the Indian scholars. The historians, who experienced the need to study the new point of view regarding the revolt movement during the British rule in India, had came together and deliberately started new experiments in the field of history. In 1982, a collection of articles edited by Guha "Subaltern studies" was published.
This first issue of Subaltern studies can be called a concrete invention of the new trend of thoughts. The philosophical base (foundation) of Guha's 'Subaltern studies' is found in the writing of Gramsci. Later on, eight issues of 'Subaltern studies' were published. Through these issues he gave an outline of common people's history. He also wrote "Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India". In this book he wrote about the main parts of peasant's revolt. "A farmer is the creator of his own history", says Guha.

Shahid Amin, a close associate of Guha, has important contribution in the writing of 'Subaltern studies'. He was the founder; editor and worked as teacher in history in Delhi University. He has analyzed the effect of Mahatma Gandhi on the minds of the farmers who participated in noncooperation movement. He has tried to know the intension of different elements of society related to "Chouri-Chowra" incident. He wrote an article 'Making the Nation Habitable', and a book, 'Remembering the Mussalmans.' He has expressed his thoughts about the dangers and bad effects on history writing from the point of view of any religious group. In the trend of 'Subaltern studies' Sumit Sarkar also has contributed a lot. He is known as a brilliant historian. He studied Marxism and his important writings consist of the history of common people in national movement, History of Neglected group, Leadership of Mahatma Gandhi in National movement and the dominant nature of foreign colonial government. In 1977 he discussed with Ranjeet Guha and turned towards this new trend. He wrote book like: Swadeshi Movement in Bengal (1973), Popular Movements and Middle Class Leadership in the late Colonial India, Perspectives and problems of History from Below (1985), Writing Social History, Modern India 1885-1947 (1983, 1985). He wrote articles as, Limits of Nationalism, Decline of the Subaltern in Subaltern studies, Beyond Nationalist frame Sumit Sarkar is closer to the concept of 'History from Below' by Edward Thomson. In the introduction to his book, 'Popular Movements and Middle Class Leadership', he says - 'History from Below' being by concentrating on local and regional developments, encompassing various groups in then word popular-tribal, Peasant, artisan, labour protests and in the middle class a class which started
asserting some kind of regional or national leadership and which had a totally different composition from Princes and Zamindars. Sumit Sarkar has expressed meditative thoughts about Subaltern studies. He says 'Subaltern studies with its critique of all verities of elite, whether colonist, nationalist or even Marxist has its focus on lower class initiatives its pioneering efforts do represent a major breakthrough in our history writing'. He does not neglect the leadership of organic group of middle class as insignificant. Regarding this he says - "In the anti-imperialist struggle there are two levels - relatively elite and more popular level...it is through the complex interaction of these levels that there emerged ultimately the pattern continuity through change that I consider dominant for this period. Apart from it, this article 'A Historical Perspective of Subaltern Studies with Its Recent Trends' says that while giving emphasis on the psychology and work of deprived group in society, their social history is neglected.

The History written till now is one-sided, partial and not showing true picture of low level group in society. A group of people is deprived of proper position. A great man or intellectual group cannot create history. True history is not of superior group but it is shaped from the group of common people. The credit of a victory in the battle (war) is not only that of the king or the leader of soldiers but also of the soldiers fighting on the battle field and food suppliers have lion’s share in it. If caves, buildings, forts are created in the period of a king, its credit should not go to the king only but to the mason, water man, artists, labors and lower strata of society.

All the events and incidents should be recorded in history like this. But till now, they are considered 'common' and not recorded in history. This work brings together all the historians through the new trend of writing 'Subaltern studies', so that the recipients of success should get justice and in the same way true history will be written.

The establishment of subaltern studies was aimed to promote the studies and discussion of subalterns themes in south Asian studies. The term 'subaltern' drawn from Antonio Gramasci's writing refers to subordination in terms of class, caste, gender, race, language and culture and was used to signify the centrality of the
dominant relationships in history. Guha suggested that while subaltern studies would not ignore the dominant because the subalterns are always subject to their activity, its aim was to rectify the elitist bias characteristic of much research and academic work in south Asian studies. The elites had exercised dominance not hegemony in Gramasci’s essence, over the subalterns.

Although the focus on subordination has remained central to subaltern studies, the concept of subaltern has witnessed shifts and various uses. Individual contributors to the volumes have also differed, not surprisingly in their orientation. Yet what has remained consistent in the effort is to rethink history from the perspective of the subaltern.

Conclusion:

As discussed above with context of the new perspective to view society apart from the past time trend of viewing society, trying to understand society from the elite point of view and correlating the lower strata from it. But with the early eighties of the twentieth century the society was tried to understand from the lower strata point of view as referred to for example, ‘Dalit’, in India or the labour class. As the time passed on, the subaltern studies became more complicated pertaining to the complexities of the Indian society which is very dynamic in caste, creed, culture, language and class to name a few were started to be considered as means of discrimination. Those not having equal share of wealth and respect came in the study area of subaltern studies and were considered as the subaltern. As the globalization concept captured the world scenario both in economic and cultural sense but one can easily see that as compared to the globalization of capital the universalizing of capital has not taken place. The universalizing of capital means the capital being universalized in all the three world countries with distribution comparatively equal among the various strata in the country itself. This led as the major reason of the differences and led to the full fledged subaltern studies in the recent times.

Subaltern studies which started as a ‘Dalit’ based study with the passage of time got more aspects involved with it giving wider scope to the study. With the complexities, certain world activities and with the increasing involvement of many contemporary
thinkers this study got elaborated with a urge of all minority section be it in form of number, culture, deprivation, physically challenged, income etc. with caste being the most common and prominent basis to sort out subaltern groups or I can say the various thinkers keeping these bases and defended these groups to be counted as a subaltern group. These groups were further used to understand the society from their point of view which was totally different from the elite class point of view. The major contribution of this Subaltern studies is that it separated the subaltern or the other group from the elite class whereas in previous times it was taken that the society can be understood by elite class point of view with the lower strata of society having no individual recognition but only as a subordinate to the elite class totally dependent on it. The subaltern subject matter got elaborated which I have tried to show by giving the basic reason of globalization that has affected all the countries whether it is a developed country like America, a developing country like India and China or a underdeveloped country like Africa, Afghanistan etc. Globalization has its footings in all the countries somehow or the other but the universalisation of capital is still in only selected developed economies of the world. This has instead of abridging the gap between the two prominent classes the Bourgeois and the Proletariat as used by Marx to quote has increased because of which Subaltern studies finds its relevance further from where it had started.

To conclude one can say that subaltern study is deemed to become more complex with the passage of time as with the advent of technologies the complexities of the society is sure to increase providing more means of discrimination and thus giving further scope to the Subaltern studies.

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