

**DC-1**

**SEM-2**

**Paper: Nationalism in India**

**Lesson: Subaltern Perspective**

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## Subaltern Perspective on Nationalism

### 1.1 : Introduction

Subaltern perspective brought new genre to the analysis of Indian nationalism. This school of thought adopted the "history from below" approach (like European Marxist scholars) for the analysis of Indian nationalism. It was the Antonio Gramsci who used the word 'subaltern' for the "subordinate class in terms of class, gender, race, language and culture." In the context of India, Ranjit Guha, in his book *Elementary Aspect of Peasants insurgency in Colonial India* highlighted the "autonomous domain" of peasant's struggle, which is independent from the elite. According to Guha, elitist historiographies were "unable to put the peasants' conditions and their insurgency in correct perspective as they could not go beyond limitations that were existed in colonial India." Elitist historiography had the view that Indian nationalism is the product of elite.

Guha questioned the interpretation of elitist historiography of Indian nationalism on two counts: first, elitist role in the construction of Indian consciousness and second, the making of India as a nation. Subaltern historiographies also question the Marxist school of thought for being tendency of merging into the "nationalist ideology of modernity and progress". Subaltern believed that Marxist school of thought ignored the "ideology of caste and religion" as a factor in Indian history. According to this subaltern school, by ignoring the ideology of caste and religion, somewhere Marxist also follow the same path as elitist believes so. Therefore, subaltern historiography tried to establish the voice and contribution of marginalized sections of Indian society by adopting the method of looking 'history from below'.

To explain further, elitist historiography either 'colonial' or "native bourgeois", both believed that are predominantly elite achievements. Colonialist scholars believed that their British rulers, administrators, policies, institutions and cultures created the India as a modern nation whereas, nationalist scholars had the view that the personalities of Indian elites, institutions, activities and their ideas, which developed to counter the colonial narratives, ultimately shaped the Indian nationalism. According to Ranjit Guha, these two elitist historiographies can be understood primarily as a function of "stimulus and response".

*Subaltern Studies group was formed in the beginning of 1980s. The principle aim was to correct the elitist bias, which used to be found in most of the academic works in South Asian Studies. Ranajit Guha, Gayatri Spivak, Partha Chatterjee, Shahid Amin, Sumit Sarkar, Gyanendra Pandey, David Arnold, David Hardiman was some of the scholars of this group.*

*"Can the Subaltern Speak", Gayatri Spivak agued....*

*"The Subaltern cannot speak. There is no virtue in global laundry lists with woman as a pious. Representation has not withered away."*

Guha argues that rather than guided by idealism or altruism, Indian nationalist tried to get the reward in "form of share of wealth, power and prestige created by and associated with the colonial rulers." For this, there were an interplay of "competition and collaboration" between colonial masters and native elites. Guha had the view that the whole natives' venture of Indian nationalism was guided by idealism in which "Indian elite led to the people from subjugation to freedom." In other words, if one sees the whole arguments of elitist interpretation of Indian nationalism then see that it highlighted the contribution made by the elites only either 'colonial' or 'native bourgeois'. This elitist historiography ignored the contribution made by the *people on their own*, which is independent from elite.

### 1.1. Subaltern Interpretations of Indian Nationalism

Subaltern school of thought highlighted the contribution made by *the people on their own* in making and development of the Indian nationalism. This school of thought believed that elitist historiography always saw mass upsurge either as a law and order problem or in response to the charisma of certain leader. It means elitist historiography ignored the contribution made by people on their own though in many movements like anti-Rowlett upsurge of 1919 or Quit India movement of 1942, people were actively participated without being guided by leaders. In other words, elitist historiography failed to explain the phenomenon that why mass mobilization took place during Quit India movement without leaders.

Here subaltern scholars argued that elitist historiography ignored the "*politics of the people*". According to Guha, throughout the colonial period along with the "domain of elite politics", another autonomous domain of subaltern classes and groups were also existed. In this autonomous domain, the principal actors were not the "dominant groups of the indigenous society or the colonial authorities but the subaltern classes and groups" who constitutes the masses of the "labouring population and the intermediate strata in town and country—that's the people." Guha also tried to differentiate between the politics of elite and the politics of people. According to him, mobilization in the domain of elite politics was achieved vertically whereas in domain of subaltern politics this achieved horizontally.

Another differentiation was that elite politics is much more inclined towards legalistic or constitutionalist in orientation, subaltern mobilization relatively more violent. The reliance of former was on British parliamentary institution and semi-feudal political institutions of the pre-colonial period whereas the reliance of subaltern politics was on the "organization of kingship and territoriality or on class associations depending upon the level of consciousness of the people involved." The former was, on the whole, more cautious and controlled, the latter more spontaneous. Popular mobilization in the colonial period was realized in its most comprehensive form in peasant uprisings, which is also source of large number of mobilization of working people and petty bourgeoisie in the urban areas. On the ideological basis, the subaltern politics represent socially diverse composition and their politics of

#### Who are Subalterns?

##### *Subaltern refer to---*

*'of inferior rank'. The term adopted by Antonio Gramsci to refer to those groups in society who are subject to the hegemony of the ruling classes. In general Subaltern classes include peasants, workers, and other groups who "have been denied access to 'hegemonic' power.*

clearly distinguished it from the elite politics. The people resistance to "elite domination" represents the core of the politics of "subalternity."

The politics of the people derived from the conditions of exploitation to which the subaltern classes were subjected in varying degrees and their experience of "exploitation and labour endowed this politics with many idioms, norms and values which put it in category apart from elite politics." However, there used to be certain changes occurred in the domain of subaltern politics once it came in to touch with the politics of elite though despite this, the domain of subalternity remained distinguishable from the politics of elite. In fact, there was the co-existence of both domains of politics. Even the *politics of people's* resistance was there *due to the failure of the Indian bourgeoisie to speak for the nation*. There were vast areas in the life and consciousness of the people which were never integrated into their hegemony.

This dichotomy needed to be taken care of for the better understanding of Indian history. However, time to time, effort were made by indigenous elite to integrated the subaltern classes in to their politics, so there was no clear cut divide between the politics of elite and the politics of people. Hence, one can say that though the independent domain of the politics of subalternity existed, however, time to time it came in to the influence of elite politics provided keeping their self identity intact. Subaltern knew that why they are part of any movement. In other words, they knew what they are doing and why they are doing. It means their decision to participate in any movement was 'conscious decision' even though nature of their movement was sometime spontaneous and violent.



## Difference between Politics of elite and the politics of people

- mobilization in the domain of elite politics was achieved vertically.
- elite politics is much more inclined towards legalistic or constitutionalist in orientation.
- The reliance of elite politics was on British parliamentary institution and semi-feudal political institutions of the pre-colonial period.
- Elite Politics on the whole, more cautious and controlled,.
- Whereas in domain of subaltern politics this achieved horizontally.
- subaltern mobilization relatively more violent.
- Whereas the reliance of subaltern politics was on the "organization of kingship and territoriality or on class associations depending upon the level of consciousness of the people involved.
- Subaltern politics are more spontaneous. Popular mobilization in the colonial period was realized in its most comprehensive form in peasant uprisings, which is also source of large number of mobilization of working people and petty bourgeoisie in the urban areas.

Guha in his book titled '*Elementary Aspects of Peasants Insurgency in Colonial India*' discussed the various aspects of peasant's insurrection in colonial India. He pointed out that in colonial India peasants uprising had a "separate and autonomous grammar of mobilization" against the landlords, the money lenders and the colonial government officials. Guha insisted that unlike the European Peasant's revolt, which used to be characterized by Hobsbawm as "pre-political" due to affiliation of these revolts with kinship, religion and caste, in India peasant's revolt had the political character. In this context, Ranajit Guha had examined for instance, over hundred known cases of peasant rebellions in British India between 1783 and 1900. According Guha, "these revolts always involved the deployment by the peasants of codes of dress, speech, and behaviour which tended to invert the codes through which their social superiors dominated them in everyday life. Inversion of the symbols of authority was almost inevitably the first act of rebellion by insurgent peasants." In a way, Guha tried to highlight that peasants too had progressive consciousness. In other words, subaltern groups had the awareness of what they are doing and for what. They have their independent domain which was independent from others. For example, if subaltern are taking part in any movement or revolt then they are aware about their act-what they are doing. That is why Ranajit Guha opposed many prevailing academic historiography writing by citing their weakness that they have not acknowledged the contribution made by subaltern groups. To quote him, "*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."*

Hence, the debate regarding the nature of peasants' revolt as **pre-political or political** was very much part of the subaltern studies. Many elitist history writing missed the significant gestures of various peasants uprising by criticising them for not having specific political content. Instead, Cambridge historian like Anil Seal argued that peasants' uprising was traditional of its kind as they used sticks and stones which was the only way of protesting against distress. However, Guha argued that at the beginning of every peasant uprising which one can see that, how rebels tried to destroy all symbols of the social prestige and power of the ruling classes. Such acts are nothing but political and modern through which subaltern groups were intended to abolish their "subalternity". Guha also raised this issue that though 'native elite' claimed that they are ushering India to out of some kind of pre-political stage into a world-historical phase of "modernity" which fitted with the modern concept like democracy, citizen's right, market economy and rule of law etc however, at the same time "undemocratic relations of domination and subordination" also existed. So, according to Guha, there was co-existence of two domains of politics where there was "failure of the bourgeoisie to speak for the nation". In fact, peasants or subaltern are makers of their destiny.

*In this autonomous domain, the principal actors were not the "dominant groups of the indigenous society or the colonial authorities but the subaltern classes and groups" who constitutes the masses of the "labouring population and the intermediate strata in town and country—that's the people"*

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The whole emphasis of Subaltern historiography was on the 'autonomous domain' of subaltern class. Guha categorically affirmed that the people who were participated in different movements tried to improve their condition. At the same time, they wanted to draw the attention of elite class. Guha argued that rebellions participated in any revolt only when their pleadings of various kinds had failed. Either workers of factory or Adivasi of the hills or the peasants of the plains revolted only when their condition becomes intolerable. Hence, the point which Guha tried to affirm here is that, subaltern's decision to participate in any revolt is their conscious decision, which is independent from elite. In other words, rebellions are not merely spectator in any kinds of movement; in fact, they have their own independent decision to participate actively.

## **1.2. Concluding Remarks**

In a way, subaltern historiography tried to develop new kind of history writing based on the European Marxist style. By emphasizing the role of subaltern group 'independent from elite', they tried to highlight the contribution made by subaltern group in various kinds of revolt. It also brought the importance of subaltern group that there were not mere spectator in any revolt. In fact, they were conscious actor. Subaltern knew what they were doing and why they were doing. However, subaltern historiography could not provide systematic study and

considered to be part of sub-history/local history though it filling up gap within history writing by unfolded many pages of Indian history by ferreting out many local records.

## Summary

- Subaltern school of thought tried to develop alternate interpretation of Indian nationalism.
- They have used the "history from below" approach in line with European Marxist.
- Subaltern historiography emphasis the "autonomous domain" of subaltern groups by highlighting the contribution made by them.
- They brought in to the notice that the "politics of the people" is independent from the 'politics of the elite'. In a way, they tried to highlight the "conscious decision" of the subaltern group.
- The people who were participated in different movements tried to improve their condition. They wanted to draw the attention of elite class.
- Rebellions participated in any revolt only when their pleadings of various kinds had failed.
- They attacked on the symbol of repression only.

## Exercises

- Discuss the Subaltern view of Indian nationalism?
- How subaltern historiography is different from elitist historiography?
- What are the main arguments of Subaltern school of thought?

## Glossary

- Subaltern: Initially the word *Subaltern* was used by the British army to denote a subordinate officer. Later group of Indian scholars led by Ranajit Guha established subaltern group in order to understand the situation of South Asia, in particular in the colonial and postcolonial era.
- Politics of people: It means apart from politics of elite, there is autonomous domain of subaltern people and the autonomous domain of subaltern group is independent from the elite politics.



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