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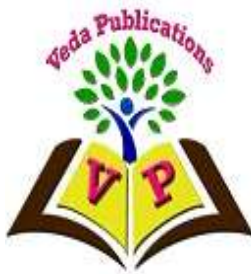
HISTORY OF SUBALTERN STUDIES

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ABSTRACT



The Subaltern Studies has its long history. From the beginning to the present time, the word 'subaltern' as a concept has undergone several changes. It has been conceptualized as indicating different levels of meanings with different themes and aspects. Empirically, subaltern implies peasants. Structurally, it represents the insurgent and marginalized while de-constructively, it personifies inferior groups of third world countries. It is a Eurocentric term. But it spreads all over the world. Now-a-days it is applied to every field of human studies. So students of literature should have a concept of subaltern studies.

Keywords: *Subaltern, Hegemonic, Historiography, Peasantry, Scholarship, Unreachability, Synonymized.*

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**INTRODUCTION**

The term *subaltern* which is derived from Latin 'sub' meaning 'of lower status' and 'alternus' implying every other, has been defined in *The Concise Oxford English Dictionary* as " (n.) an officer in the British army below the rank of captain, especially a second lieutenant; (adj.) of lower status" (COD). The term has gained wide currency and enormous popularity in social sciences through the work of the Italian Marxist leader, Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937), who used the term to refer to any group of 'inferior' rank based on ethnic class, gender or identity. He applied the term 'subaltern' to downtrodden Italians, specifically Southern Italian workers marginalized by the hegemonic politics of the Fascist party. Later, influenced by the new perspectives of Erik Stokes on the history of India and South Asia, Ranajit Guha published in the early 1980s the 'manifesto' to *Subaltern Studies 1* and his key monograph *The Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency* (1983).

A *subaltern*, according to the dictionary meaning of the word, is a person holding a subordinate position, originally a junior officer in the army. But the term subaltern is believed to have undergone semantic metamorphosis since its origin. It was the Italian Marxist, Antonio Gramsci(1891-1937) who first used the term 'subaltern' in connection with the proletariat in his *Prison Note Books*(1929-1935). In *Reading Subaltern Studies* (2002) David Ludden has beautifully documented the changing meanings of the term subaltern:

The word has a long past. In late medieval English, it applied to vassals and Peasants. By 1700, it denoted lower ranks in the military, suggesting peasant origins. By 1800, authors writing "from a subaltern perspective" published novels and histories about military campaigns in India and America; and G.R. Gleig (1796-1888), who wrote biographies of Robert Clive, Warren Hastings, and Thomas Munro mastered in this genre. The great war provoked popular accounts of subaltern life in published memoirs and diaries; and soon after the Russian Revolution, Antonio Gramsci(1891-

1937) began to weave ideas about subaltern identity into theories of class struggle. (Ludden 4-5)

The subaltern study is actually the revisionist historiography of peasant movements in post colonial India. Ranajit Guha formed 'The Subaltern Studies Group' in 1979-80 at the 'University of Sussex' in England. In 1982 the first edited volume of Subaltern Studies was published. In the late 1980s Guha moved to the Australian National University. Then the project started a new life. At this time a series of 12 edited volumes have been published by the group (Amin and Bhadra 1994). The group consisted of heterodox historians of South Asia, who were critical of the nature of the historiography prevalent at that time because of its elitist biases and "bourgeois-nationalist" and "colonial" mode of history writing. These forms of history distorted the historical portrayal of the subalterns or the "people" and neglected their role in the anti-colonial struggle.

According to Gramsci, any group of 'inferior' rank based on ethnic class, gender or identity extraction are known as subaltern. Gramsci applied the term 'subaltern' to the downtrodden Italian particularly Southern Italian peoples marginalized by the hegemonic politics of the Fascist party. Thereafter he had gone through the colonial societies and tried to understand the cultural hegemony of the colonial people. According to him,

"colonial domination always produces local subaltern elites that are solely elites in the colonial locus, but subaltern outside it."

Gramsci argued forcefully that all sorts of subaltern consciousness and insurgencies cannot liberate subalterns from the oppressions of ruling classes. They are always the subjects of activities of the ruling classes. Their only liberty lies in their permanent victory from the bondage of the society. This is a new ethical state. In this way the concept of subaltern autonomy has been propounded by Gramsci. He says there are two processes of the formation of the intellectuals. Every society creates intellectuals for political, social and economic developments,



Thus it is to be noted that the mass of the peasantry, although it performs an essential function in the world of production, does not elaborate its own "organic" intellectuals, nor does it 'assimilate' any stratum of traditional intellectuals, although it is from the peasantry that other social groups draw many of their intellectuals and a high proportion of traditional intellectuals are of peasant origin. (*Selections from the Prison Notebooks*.6)

Besides this there is another group of intellectuals who have already existed,

The most typical of these categories of intellectual is that of the ecclesiastics, who for a long time (for a whole phase of history, which is partly characterized by this very monopoly) held a monopoly of a number of important services: religious ideology, that is the philosophy and science of the age, together with schools, education, morality, justice, charity, good works etc. (*Selections from the Prison Notebooks*.7)

The concept of subaltern was originated as Eurocentric method of historical enquiry for studying the non western people of Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. But later on this subaltern studies had been transformed from a model of intellectual discourse into a method of "vigorous post-colonial critique". Now the term 'subaltern' is used in the fields of history, anthropology, sociology, human geography, literary criticism, musicology and art history. So now it is practiced in every field of social sciences and aesthetic/ imaginative literatures.

A group of Indian scholars formed subaltern studies group. They explored the political-actor role of the men and women who constitute the mass population, rather than the political roles of the social and economic elites, in the history of colonial India. Actually from 1970s, subaltern began to denote the colonized peoples of the Indian continent as a result of subaltern studies in colonial countries. In 1980s the scope of enquiry of Subaltern Studies was applied as an "intervention in South Asian

historiography". Their main goal was to retake history for the under classes, for the voices that had not been heard previous. They wrote against the "Cambridge School". The school was elite centered. The school focused on the colonial legacy only. But the Indian scholars brought a change. Their main focus was on the subaltern in terms of class, caste, gender, race, language and culture. They tried to prove the idea that there may have the political dominance but this should not be hegemonic.

Ranajit Guha was the primary leader of subaltern studies in India. He had written on peasant uprisings in India. He published the manifesto, 'Subaltern Studies i' in 1980. His key monograph, 'The Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency' was published in 1983. With this publication, the subaltern studies became a movement in historical research. They aimed to redeem 'suppressed voices' by challenging 'authoritative voices'. So, all the followers of the movement applied this approach to rediscover lost historical narratives on subaltern groups by unveiling the thick layers of hegemony embodied at multiple levels (Parakash 1994)

Guha developed the Gramscian thoughts with special reference to south Asian subaltern perspectives. He provided a comprehensive definition of subalterns as the overall Indian population (excluding elites). Ludden opines, Guha's subalterns are suppressed people due to several demographic factors including class, caste, culture, religion etc. He truly asserted that the insurgencies of subalterns against the mainstream defined the real subaltern.

There are twelve edited volumes of historical scholarship on subaltern studies. These are mainly on the history of colonial India. These books were published between 1982 and 2005. The first six volumes were edited by Guha and the remaining volumes were edited by other scholars associated with the project. But they were either mentored or influenced by Guha. These were borrowed and developed insights from structuralism, post-structuralism and most of all post-colonial theory.

Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak is another leading scholar of subaltern studies. In her intervention into



the Subaltern studies, Spivak draws on a number of theoretical analyses on Indian History – deconstruction, Marxism and feminism. She was highly critical against the current histories of India about colonial perspectives. In the essay, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', Spivak narrates the incident of Bhuvanewari Bhaduri as the core issue,

"A young woman of sixteen or seventeen, Bhuvanewari Bhaduri, hanged herself in her father's modest apartment in North Calcutta in 1926. The suicide was a puzzle since, as Bhuvanewari was menstruating at the time, it was clearly not a case of illicit pregnancy. Nearly a decade later, it was discovered that she was a member of the many groups involved in the armed struggle for Indian independence. She had finally been entrusted with a political assassination. Unable to confront the task and yet aware of the practical need for trust, she killed herself.

Bhuvanewari had known that her death would be diagnosed as the outcome of illegitimate passion. She had therefore waited for the onset of menstruation. While waiting, Bhuvanewari, the brahmacharini who was no doubt looking forward to good wifehood, perhaps rewrote the social text of sati-suicide in an interventional way. (One tentative explanation of her inexplicable act had been a possible melancholia brought on by her brother-in-law's repeated taunts that she was too old to be not-yet-a-wife.) She generalized the sanctioned motive for female suicide by raking immense trouble to displace (not merely deny) in the physiological inscription of her body, its imprisonment within legitimate passion by a single male. In the immediate context, her act became absurd, a case of delirium rather than sanity. The displacing gesture- waiting for menstruation – is first a reversal of interdict against a menstruating widow's right to immolate herself; the unclean widow must wait, publicly, until the cleansing bath of the fourth day, when she is

no longer menstruating, in order to claim her dubious privilege." (Spivak 310-11)

Spivak wrote a number of articles and essays on the subaltern studies. She also wrote on the first world and third world woman studies. She highlighted on the postcolonial subaltern studies in her different essays. Spivak spoke against the broad aspects of subaltern studies in 1992,

"...subaltern is not just a classy word for "oppressed", for [the] Other, for somebody who's not getting a piece of the pie.... In post-colonial terms, everything that has limited or no access to the cultural imperialism is subaltern- a space of difference. Now who would say that's just the oppressed? It's not subaltern.... Many people want to claim subalternity. They are the least interesting and the most dangerous. I mean just by being a discriminated against minority on the university campus; they don't need the word 'subaltern'.... They should see what the mechanics of the discrimination are. They're within the hegemonic discourse, wanting a piece of the pie, and not being allowed, so let them speak, use the hegemonic discourse. They should not call themselves subaltern. [Spivak 4]"

B. K. Das expresses his opinion,

"Gayatri Spivak has expanded the meaning of subaltern who laid the stress on gendered subaltern- that women who are doubly oppressed by colonialism and particularly in the third world countries."

Spivak in her essay, 'Discussion: An afterword on the New Subaltern' says,

"I had therefore spoken of 'the new subaltern' the somewhat monolithic woman as victim who is the constituted subject of justice under (the new-unrestricted) international capitalism."

Spivak in her 'Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography' (1985) argues that the contributors perceive their task as making a theory of



consciousness or culture rather than a theory of change.

“As if Mundas speak, and speak. They don't tell human beings, for they expect no redress, they tell the impotent gods. The hills remain distant, dry grassy fields, in the lee of the forest myrobalan groves shake in the wind, clumps of stone here and there, tufts of grass in between stones, some where the bell rings around the necks of cows, somewhere the lapwing calls.”(Devi 111)

The notion of Subaltern Studies has been complicated by Spivak. She criticized all the established conventions of subaltern and subalternity. She wanted to establish her own theory of subalternity which has been challenged the voice of subalterns. Spivak always wanted to change the Gramscian concept of subaltern autonomy. She says with force that subalterns are always subalterns. There is no chance of their elevation. All the related matters, such as- unapproachability, un-accessibility, unreachability keep them subalterns. The voice of the subalterns cannot reach to the ears of the elite people. In a word, the subalterns cannot speak (Spivak 104) or can never be heard (Mogio 2000).

Spivak created a debate among the philosophers with her theory of subalternity. A debate is going on among the contemporary theorists and scholars. For the first time, Robert Young excavates a methodology which favours the voice of subalterns under suitable socio-political scenario in 'postcolonialism: A very short Introduction (2003)'. Ching Ying's literary terms- 'self-naming', 'self-invention' and 'new symbolism' in 'Love and Ethics of Subaltern Subjectivity in James Joyce (2014) give power to the subalterns to speak. (Sabah 220)

It is very difficult to highlight the subaltern through the pen of the so-called elite people. Devi stayed with the subaltern people to know them by heart. She said,

“Tribals and the mainstream have always been parallel ... The mainstream simply does

not understand the parallel ... They can't keep their land; there is no education for them, no health facilities ... they are denied everything ... That is why I started writing about the tribal movements and the tribal world ... I repay them their honour.”(Devi 19)

Now who are subaltern people? This is a great question. This question has been long debated in subaltern studies. Many theorists and scholars define it from different angles. Lexically, the English word subaltern came from the Latin word, *sub-alternus* which implies an under-other (Dharmaraj 2014). In that way, the word subaltern refers to the inferiority of someone or something. We find the meaning of the word, subaltern both as a noun and as an adjective. As a noun, a subaltern is “a lower rank British officer” while as an adjective, subaltern stands for lower rank people in all aspects. The word subaltern has been synonymized in different studies as- downtrodden, marginalized, subordinated and oppressed.

Now a days Subaltern Studies is not only awakening of some intellectuals for the voiceless section of the society, but the gradual and continuous political, economic and social circumstances. In “Relevance and Irrelevance of Subaltern Studies” Vinay Bahal says very aptly,

Subaltern Studies represented a response to a genuine need for a new methodology, epistemology and paradigms, in order to overcome a crisis of understanding produced by the inability of old categories to account for the world. The old categories, conceived by the modernisationists and the radicals alike in the decades after the Second World War to understand the structure of the globe, were called into question in the face of the crisis of 'progress' and increased impoverishment of the 'third world'. Mass migration of the poor countries to the industrialized world due to demand of cheap labour has confounded borders and boundaries. It created a flow of cultures which atonce homogenizing in most parts of



the world. The infusion and confusion of cultures created a vast identity crisis among the new diasporas. These new global circumstances needed new interpretations and new methodologies to understand people's lives and experiences. (Bahal 365)

So, we may conclude in this way that the society does not mean the elite people only. More than 80% people of the society are subaltern people. They are deployed by the elite people of the society. When the society changes, the tortures only changes its forms and shapes, but it is continued all the while. They have no deeds, they have no voice. This voiceless section are motionless and direction less section in the society.

This marginalized section of the society has been suffered from the very beginning. In the ancient India, the Brahmins are in the topmost section of the society, then comes the Khatriya, Baishya and Shudra. The subaltern people have been tortured from the ancient periods in sitting places, drinking places, education section and where not.

At the first phase, the historians and theorist of India, England, and USA were against the practice of subaltern studies. But now-a-days subaltern studies have greatly been practiced and spread by the eminent scholars- Ganendra Pandey, Devid Hardiman, Ranajit Guha, Shahid Amin, Partha Chatterjee, Dipesh Chakraborty, Goutam Bhadra Gayatri Chakraborty etc. They wanted to the history from the perspective of the peasant under class. They revolutionized the information of the colonial administrators and expressed the main system of the society in their writings. They proved that only government deeds and documents were not the original History. They focused on the voiceless section of the society who cannot speak properly in all the ages. They gave voice to the marginal section of the society and tried to establish the new Historiography.

From the ancient periods the higher section of the society possessed the field of art and architectures. There was no place of the marginal hero or heroines in the literary creations. Writers are mostly from the elite society. They had no courage to

speak about the lower classes in their writings. At first subaltern writers wrote the new historiography and focused on the under section of the society.

COCLUSION

The subaltern studies took its root also in the field of literatures. The practice had been started in India. Then it had been spread all over the world. Eminent Bengali novelist, Manik Bandopadhyay, Satinath Bhaduri, Adwaitamalla Barman, Kamal Kumar Majumdar, Amiya Bhushan Majumdar wrote on the distressed section of the society. They wrote against the traditional politics, society and development of the people. A group of Bengali writers such as- Mahasweta Devi, Debesh Roy, Abhijit Sen, Gunamya Manna, Subodh Ghosh, Abdul Jabbar etc highlighted the marginal section in their writings for changing the history, social ethics and developmental process of the society.

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