

## **The Formation of the Subaltern Consciousness: A Bisexual Foetus**

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‘Subaltern Studies’ is concerned with seeking a way out of what is characterised as ‘the elitism of modern Indian historiography’. The elite historiography presents a narrow and partial view of Indian politics. The result is the unhistorical historiography of the politics of the people, relegated to the margin.

The term ‘Subaltern’ is used to denote the entire people that are subordinate in terms of class, caste, age, gender, and office, or in any other way. The binary relationship / dichotomy between elite/subaltern should not be equated with the familiar categories of class and class struggle. That is not a substitute. The elite/subaltern dichotomy has some significance in the context of a Colonial/Post-Colonial society, to study the historical processes. There is no categorical rigidity in the application of Subaltern principles/concepts. But these concepts are put into exploration and explanation. Classes act as a human connection between being and becoming in history’. (SS V - 205)

In order to understand what happens in history and how it happens, one needs an understanding about class and the reality of class consciousness. These two become inseparable. What is a political atrophy? It is the condition of losing strength politically. The Indian masses at the time of power transformation were placed in the overall historical course of Capitalist transition.

During the time of the power transmission, the dominant classes did not have a unipolar vision to bring about any coherent social transformation. Independence which came out with the ending of Imperialism lacked integration because of the local economy. Partition is a result of the unanswered questions related to the agrarian problems.

The dominant classes did not have any organic link with the society and they were not able to create any consciousness to create class sphere morality and ideologically on a national

scale. Actually these dominant classes had no feeling of community, national bond and no political organisation for the task of social transformation. Since they had wealth and source, since they had positioned themselves in the centre, they operated from the core of the society and economy. They placed themselves in a strategic control and found their way through the corridors of colonial politics and claimed that they were the upholders of nationalism and independence. They had a peculiar position in the colonial history and this position was characterised by a combination of loyalty and opposition for the foreign rule. This combination resulted in the scrambling of power and they occupied the central position in the national considerations.

The Subaltern insurgency is fragmented because of various causes. One among them is the failure of elite leadership to identify itself with the mind and energy of the Subaltern. The meaning of autonomous domain of Subaltern movements and their consciousness can be explained in the following way. Both in form and in content, there is a greater amount of radicalism which has the capacity to go into the very roots of things, which was beyond the comprehension of elite politics.

The elites, cautioned by the Subaltern radicalism, often collided with colonial power to weaken and suppress them. The elite had no mind to transform the society. The counter thrust by the Subaltern was thwarted by the elite. Hence, the attempt of Subaltern Studies to understand 'the historic failure of the nation to come into its own'.

One has to understand the insufficient 'classness' among the masses with reference to the history of nationalism in 'colonial Indian and the mass dimensions of the freedom struggle. What is the theory of lineage? Can we say that the Partition riots are communal in nature? We can take this aspect more seriously: it may be the result of elite politics and political dogmas that had been exercised over the people for a long period. The Marxist view that revolutionary conditions mature when existing socio-political structures become a fetter on further economic development is familiar. Expanding production forces, in this view, comes into contradiction with the prevailing production relations as they obtain in the alignment and antagonism of classes. The bourgeois in history always appear in forms in which its active and passive roles are furred. This is important in understanding the analytical uses of the elite/subaltern dichotomy.

What is the active role of the bourgeois?

It consists of the thrust towards a new mode of production to suit the corporate interests of bourgeois class exploitation and the links this has an advance in social production. It further includes how the Subaltern is willing to fight against the ruling power. It also indicates the bourgeois is slightly sliding towards the popular masses. The active element of a bourgeois revolution is not restricted to its own power goals but flows into the continuum of its own negation.

What is the passive role of the bourgeois?

The passive element is in the tendency of the bourgeois to come to a compromise with pre-capitalist classes. “Transformation’ in Gramsci’s words, is one of the ‘historical forms of ‘passive’ revolution’.

The autonomy, spontaneity and consciousness of the Subaltern are formed in a multifarious way. The forms of protest vary because of the differences in the directions and the goals. Some differences are clear; some are apparent rather than real. The differences may be formal; significant and substantial. This distinction of the differences is very important in order to judge the relevance of elite / Subaltern analysis especially in the understanding of nationalism and freedom struggle. It also clears the nature of the Subaltern protests and insurgencies.

The concept of core and periphery is ideologically formed and framed through state function. A middle class is marked by reformation and revival. The origin and development of nationalism were marked by the inherent crisis one notices in the reformative process of the middle class. Indian nationalism wanted to bring about a passive revolution on the basis of the Industrial revolution with the help of the middle class people. This revolution tended to be based on the Western model.

But the suffering of the working people had to bear the cross of the Capitalist transition in history. The suffering did not lead them to any kind of unification but it certainly led them to the perpetual and the accentuated duality of core and periphery. The unity of the Subaltern opposition was fragmented by the spaces provided by the core and periphery. “Everywhere, it

seems, the elite heavens could not be reconciled to the earth of the multitude ready for revolution. These two domains were bound by different necessities” (218)

(In Gramsci’s words) “Knowledge of the subaltern classes relates to real men, formed in specific historical relations, with specific feelings, outlooks, fragmentary conceptions of the world, etc., which were the result of ‘spontaneous combinations of a given situation of material production with the ‘fortuitous’ agglomeration with it of disparate social elements”. (220)

The insufficiency of ‘classness’ being a characteristic, Subaltern groups several studies emphasise the state community and ‘community consciousness’ in interpreting a collective action. The same could be used in interpreting communalism.

Partition is a result of the disparities between the major communities. These disparities were more pronounced in the fields of higher education, professions and government employment. The exploitative incursion of trade and money-lending, which were mainly handled by the Hindus, had a severe impact on the Muslim peasantry.

According to Partha Chaterjee, the formation of the Colonial State was done without a clear civil society. The institutions and administrative procedures were fashioned to rule over a population organised as communities. These communities were brought under elite politics. The hostility and alliance at the grass root moved towards communal lines. Communal politics was a handiwork of the Colonial power and its elite recipients. Subaltern autonomy and consciousness demonstrate variable reactions and result as the Subaltern encounters different historical experiences.

Religion plays an important role in Subaltern protests against an order that perpetuates oppression and distress. The breakdown of authority has a magico-religious character. Sumit Sarkar focuses on the relevance of the religious dimension to an understanding of four crucial features of popular movements:

- i) the role of rumour
- ii) ethical norms and ritual obligations
- iii) the mood of renunciation and sacrifice

- iv) the persistence of faith

Subaltern consciousness seeks its own vision of a 'paradise lost' in the sense of community. The autonomy of Subaltern consciousness is opposed to elite nationalism.

What is Subaltern negation?

Answer can be found in Guha's analysis of peasant insurgency. Marx: 'the expropriation of the expropriations'. Religion and ritual are two essential elements in the very being and consciousness bent on destroying the enemy. The duality of collective solidarity and creative bondage. Communities and their institutions are transformed into apparatus of hegemony, characterised by exploitation'. Historical transition is always connected with the questions about autonomy and spontaneity are not absolute; they are relative.

The Subaltern Studies proposes two things:

- i) the moment(s) of change be pluralised and plotted as confrontations rather than transition. (thereby related to histories of domination and exploitation).
- ii) Such changes are signaled or marked by a functional change in sign systems.

The most important functional change is from the religious to the militant.

Subaltern Studies concentrates on such functional changes: from crime to insurgency. A functional change in sign system is a violent event." (331) this functional change is very often perceived as "gradual" or "failed" "reversing itself" the change itself can only be operated by the force of crisis.

According to Spivak, the actual practice of the Subaltern Studies group is closer to deconstruction. A theory of change as the site of the displacement of function between sign-systems is a theory of reading in the strongest possible sense. The site of displacement of the function of signs is the name of reading as active transaction between past and future.

The work of Subaltern Studies group presupposes that the society (which is their object of study) is a 'continuous sign - chain'. This object is continuously disrupted. The continuous

sign – chain is very often interrupted and broken and relinked. This kind of argument does not put consciousness over the society but it is constituted in the social and it is set on a semiotic chain.

Thus consciousness is an instrument of study and it participates in the nature of the object of study. “To see consciousness thus is to place the historian in a position of irreducible compromise.” (332) this is used as criticism in Spivak. The presuppositions of the Subaltern Studies group are not consonant with a desire to find a consciousness (of the Subaltern) in a positive and pure state.

Cognitive Failure:

The theory of Cognitive Failure comes as a close second to the Theory of Change. Elite historiography by Cognitive failures the Subaltern Studies group has brought out this into focus. (“The Subaltern as the signature of Sanskritization”.) This Cognitive failure; this sanctioned ignorance is inseparable from domination. (Said, *Orientalism*)

Within the boundaries of this theory of cognitive failure they (Subaltern Studies) have to examine the production of ‘evidence’, which is the corner stone of the edifice of historic of truth. They have to anatomise the mechanics of the construction of the self consolidating the Other – the insurgent and insurgency.

In the case of the Subaltern, they are considering consciousness (however negative) and culture (however determining) are in the care of the elite, they are considering culture and manipulation. – The Subaltern is also operating in the theatre of ‘cognition’.

‘Alienation’, according to the Subaltern studies group, means a failure of self-cognition. It is used only in this by the members of this group. The definition of deconstruction as defined by Derrida follows:

Operating necessarily from the inside, borrowing all the strategic and economic resources of subversion from the old structure, borrowing them structurally, that is to say without being able to isolate their elements and atoms, the enterprise of deconstruction always in a certain way falls prey to its own work”- (Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 24)

Alienation is reducible in any act of consciousness. 'Unless the subject separates from itself to grasp the object, there is no cognition, no thinking and no judgement.

The greatest gift of deconstruction, according to Spivak, is that it questions the authority of the investigating subject without paralysing him, persistently transforming conditions of impossibility into possibility.

#### The Problems of Subaltern Consciousness

To investigate, to discover and establish a Subaltern Consciousness is a positivistic project. It will lead to firm ground, to 'something' than can be disclosed. This is more significant because consciousness is the ground that makes all disclosures possible.

'Consciousness' is thus entertained as an invisible self-proximate signified or ground. Consciousness is consciousness in general, but a historicized political species there of Subaltern consciousness. (The Subaltern becomes aware of the fact that he is historicised and politicised) People on the whole become Hegemonic Narratives.

The Subaltern occupies a peculiar historical stage. Though a historical specificity is bestowed to consciousness, there is always a counter pointing suggestion in the words of the Subaltern Studies group that Subaltern Consciousness,

1. is subject to the cathexis (the mentality of the elite).
2. is never fully recoverable.
3. is always asked (not in straight level) from its received signifiers.
4. it is evaded even as it is disclosed.
5. it is irreducibly discursive.

The Subaltern Consciousness is 'negative consciousness'. But it is conceived as a historical stage peculiar to the Subaltern. This kind of argument is inevitably historicised. But this can be generalised as the group's methodological presupposition. There is another view to this 'negative consciousness' the view sees it as the consciousness not of the being of the Subaltern, but that of the oppressors.

The power of the Other produces an image of the self and the Subaltern provides the model for a general theory of Consciousness. The Subaltern cannot appear without the thought of the 'elite'.

When the Metaphysics of consciousness is deconstructed, a fact is reiterated that it is only the texts of counter insurgency or elite deconstruction give us the news of the consciousness of the Subaltern. Subaltern Consciousness is counterpointed by situating it in the place of a difference rather than an identity.

The Subaltern Subject – effect

“A subject – effect can be briefly plotted as follows: that which seems to operate as a subject may part of an immense discontinuous network (text) of strands that may be termed politics, ideology, economics, history, sexuality, language and so on. (Each of these strands, if they are isolated, can also be seen as woven of many strands.) Different knotting and configurations of these strands, determined by heterogeneous determinations which are themselves dependent upon myriad circumstances, produce the effect of an operating subject. Yet the continuist and homogenist deliberative consciousness symptomatically requires a continuous and homogenous cause for this effect and this posits a sovereign and determining subject. This latter is, then, the effect of an effect, and its positing a metalepsis, or the substitution of an effect for a cause. Thus do the texts of 'counter-insurgency locate, in the following description, a 'will' as the sovereign cause when it is no more than an effect of the Subaltern subject effect, itself produced by the particular conjunctures cuddled forth by the crisis meticulously described in various 'Subaltern Studies' (341)

The Subaltern Studies warrants a retrieval of the Subaltern consciousness as the attempt to undo a massive historiographic metalepsis and 'situate' the effect of the subject as Subaltern. Subaltern Consciousness as emergent collective consciousness is one of the main themes of the Subaltern Studies.



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