

## **Subaltern Studies: Key Concepts and Postcolonial Nature.**

Subaltern studies are one of the many subdisciplines of Postcolonial studies. A “subaltern” is referred to as a subordinate person who was under colonial governance irrespective of any specific class, caste, or gender. This term was first coined by Ranajit Guha, and the studies of a Subaltern are thus called Subaltern studies. Emerging from a series of scholarly articles, the study was focused on South Asia but soon it got spread to many other nations too. This study collectively focuses on the undocumented histories of the underclass society which got marginalized by colonialism. It also aims at deconstructing/ re-writing the historiography of Indian nationalism which then did not have the voices of the voiceless (contributions of the Subaltern). The Subaltern scholars/group collectively is a diversified community that often changes from time to time. However, this essay tries to shed light upon the key concepts of the Subaltern studies concerning South Asia. Also, the paper tries to answer the question: how did Subaltern studies become postcolonial?

The history of Indian nationalism is composed of the heroic actions and achievements of the elite classes, symbolizing nationalism as something that was achieved by the elite class. In this process of glorifying the elite, the historiography left out the unsung contributions of numerous Subaltern societies. Thus one of the concepts of Subaltern studies is to document the unnoticed and deliver proper historiography for nationalism by considering all the efforts of all classes in the making of it. “They wrote up the history of nationalism as the story of an achievement by the elite classes, whether Indian or British/ 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” (Chakrabarty, 14).

Other than that, the Subaltern studies wanted to change the perspective of how history has drawn up the image of a Subaltern. Just like others communities, the Subaltern is also comprised of humans who contribute to society as a whole in many ways. They are a part of Indian history; the Indian sub-continent, without them the development and making of nationalism would feel like an impossible mission. Thus, rather than viewing them as objects of history, and homogeneous the subaltern studies were "to produce historical analyses in which the Subaltern groups were viewed as the subjects of history” (Chakrabarty, 15). They wanted to challenge the history which pointed Subaltern to be “a deviation from the ideal”. Subaltern is present both “outside and inside the domains of colonial governance and nationalist politics”. Even though most of the Subalterns did not directly participate in any of the colonial activities and processes, some were active participants. However, the bourgeois way of writing the history does not represent the pure Subaltern for which Gayatri Spivak argues “Why was it necessary now to clothe the Subaltern in the costume of the sovereign subject and put him on stage as the maker of history?” She also argues that this bourgeois centered history represents a Subaltern who cannot speak (Chatterjee, 83). This argument was further addressed by Chakrabarty, who writes “The human in our anticolonial mode of thinking was a figure of sovereignty. We wanted to make the peasant or the Subaltern the subject of his or her history, period. And we thought of this subject in the image of the autonomous rights-bearing person with the same access to representation in national and other histories as others from more privileged backgrounds enjoyed. A straightforward plea for social justice underlay our position/ the Subaltern classes as claiming their humanity through revolutionary upheavals/ becoming human was for us a matter of becoming a subject.” (Chakrabarty, 4).

Chakrabarty says the Subaltern studies wanted the historiographies to embody three main concepts “(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.” (Chakrabarty, 15) These arguments laid a standpoint for Subaltern studies against history.

Ranajit Guha’s claims on nationalist historians conjoining the political realm with the formal institution and governmental processes. “In all writings of this kind [i.e., elitist historiography] the parameters of Indian politics are assumed to be or enunciated as those of the institutions introduced by the British for the government of the country.... [Elitist historians] can do no more than equate politics with the aggregation of activities and ideas of those who were directly involved in operating these institutions, that is, the colonial rulers and their elites—the dominant groups in native society.” (Chakrabarty, 15)

The Subaltern studies wanted to oppose one teleological concept of progression in history as there are some political implications in the social theory and historiography. The European historians often referred to the Subaltern as peasants and their consciousness as peasant consciousness which they consider as pre-modern, pre-political, and uncivilized in the light of “peasant revolts organized along the axes of kinship, religion, caste, etc., as movements exhibiting a “backward” consciousness”” (Chakrabarty, 16) However, the Subaltern studies wanted to point out this wrong notion and reject it also while arguing that the peasant consciousness which was considered as backward is “contemporaneous with colonialism and had an equal and important participation in the political realm.” (Betik).

Another key concept of the Subaltern studies intervention is to map out the oppression against the Subaltern. The systems which have been silencing the Subaltern from all directions will be traced

and identified. These traces of interrogation systems of the “worldling” is “a primary concern of subaltern studies work, especially in how these systems of worlding appear in the historical archive and narrative.” (Betik)

The Subaltern studies that emerged from the works of Ranajit Guha didn't have any postcolonial agenda to argue for. Guha proposed his study; his research agendas were to understand and study power, and modernity. However, that was not the same agenda followed by the successor Subalterns such as Partha Chatterjee, Dipesh Chakrabarty, and Gyan Prakash. Unlike Guha, they upheld a postcolonial agenda and strict proposals for the historical blunders. Guha stated the central concern of Subaltern studies was to separate the politics between the elite and the subaltern alongside, the analysis of power as “subordination of the Subaltern by the elite.” “Guha mentioned overdetermination and quoted from Lacan's essay/ only to assimilate it into his fixed dichotomies. He drew on the idea to argue that power in colonial India was a fusion of the ideologies of “pre-colonial India” and “modern England.” Guha presented “pre-colonial India” and “modern England” as two separate monoliths that suddenly collided in the mid-eighteenth century...” (Roosa, 137) However, the succeeding Subalterns began their studies as an intervention of Indian nationalist historiography. As mentioned in the essay as key concepts earlier, the studies went into topics such as peasantry politics, peasantry consciousness, and peasant elite relationship. They addressed the voiceless Subalterns and took an agenda against the elite-centered history which purposefully omitted the struggles and contributions of the Subalterns. From there the nature of Subaltern studies changed from nationalism related to postcolonialism related. “Chakrabarty, when writing his retrospective account of Subaltern Studies, delicately sidestepped the vulgarities of Guha's analysis. After the postcolonial turn, expressions such as “true social being” and the “historic failure of the nation to come into its own” (as if the nation had some pre-determined

authentic identity to realize) became prime targets of criticism. They were evidence of essentialism, positivism, teleology, and historicism/ it is intriguing that the Subalternists-turned-postcolonialists, while strongly condemning others for such sins, have ventured nothing more than gentle chidings of Guha.” (Roosa, 138).

In conclusion, the Subaltern studies/ the studies of the Subaltern are necessary to complete the history of South Asia. The elite-centered history which always considered and calculated the contributions of the elite class is not the true nationalist history of the subcontinent. Thus, the key concepts and notions of the Subaltern studies that focus closely on the history of Subalterns irrespective of their place in the political domain would significantly deliver to the re-writing of the historiography of Indian nationalism. As mentioned in the essay, the Subaltern studies scholars have changed the approach and their agendas in their studies as new scholars come into the group. From nationalist agenda to postcolonial agenda, the Subaltern studies’ intentions and progression have changed a lot. However, regardless of the changing notions and social standpoints, the Subaltern studies are the true constructor of the historiography of the Indian Subaltern.

## References.

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