

The Genealogy of the Subaltern Representation beyond Theory

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Abstract

The term subaltern is often understood in the light of history. Subaltern is an old term that designated the workingclass people but subaltern as a theory came into light with the introduction of collective project by a group of South Asian scholars. It is a trend of writing history that emerged in India around 1980s. Subaltern study is about the history of ignored history; history of socio-cultural development and the history of nation as well as about the process of globalization. Subaltern Study concerns the participation of the masses that were subsided and marginalized from a larger discourse and often misrepresented in general discussion due to socio-economic and ideological grounds. Otherwise stated, it is about the history of silenced and neglect. In South Asian context, it is more often seen as a benefaction of colonialism, while in western context it designates affairs of social and cultural hierarchy. The term deals with oblivious absence of the people and the undermining of their consciousness, aspirations and cultural values from the larger structure of history writing. The paper explores the historical representations of Subaltern mass and tries to comprehend the process by which the subalterns are being produced at the first place.

Keywords: Subaltern, Representation, Postcolonial, History, Identity etc.

Introduction

In tracing the historical meaning of the subaltern, the word has a long past. It denoted peasants during late medieval England and later towards the end of 1700s it referred to lower ranks in the military. On the onset of 1800s writers began to publish diaries and memoirs about the everyday life. It was the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci, who in his *Prison Notebooks* (1929-35) used the word in a radical manner that substituted the term class; “is a British word for someone of inferior rank, and combines the Latin terms for “under” (sub) and “other” (alter)” (Abram 306). Gramsci gave subaltern identity a face of theory of class struggle. However, Ranajit Guha used the term to denote who are not elite. In other words, subaltern study deals with the matter of elite versus subaltern by foregrounding the colonial text for discourse textual analysis. In the late 1970s, subaltern themes and discussions by a group of English and Indian historians published volumes of essays called *Subaltern Studies: Writing on South Asian History and Society*. The first four volumes were edited by Ranajit Guha and later by the collaborators including Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Edward Said. Today total eleven numbers of volumes of *Subaltern Studies* have appeared later which in fact inspired Latin America Subaltern Studies Group. By 1980s, it was a ‘decade of historical efflorescence’ in South Asian studies. The subjects of these studies were initially more on narratives of nationalism, representation of oriental images and ethnic stereotypes.

Foucault’s concept of power was manifested in the writings of Subalternists that concerned in and outside the Subaltern project; the issue of daily resistance and struggles. The transition took place from the theoretical ‘history from below’ concept which gave new meaning to the historical studies. Any sort of revolt, resistance, domination and subordination and other hegemonic concepts are considered under the subaltern study.

In recognition to this shift- or broadening – the more recent volumes have brought together essays that are no longer confined to the discipline of history, displaying, as the editors of this

collection describes it, the Collective's 'engagements with more contemporary problems and theoretical formations.' This expansion of critical and theoretical scope has benefited the fast growing body of South Asian sociocultural studies, providing it with the (predictable, but) dependable subalternist slant, routed, usefully, through history. (Bose 1)

It is understood that subalternity is a fluid concept for no consensus definition was given to the earlier subaltern projects. The projects' cultural critique of colonialism arrived in the global mainstream during 1990s. The subaltern concept is a legacy of colonialism. It also carries the postcolonial philosophy that rejects the Eurocentric belief of universal truth; the denial of European history that shows superiority of a specific ethnic group.

The resistance to western ideologies and exercises were contested with the memory of the history of the nation. The postcolonial aspects revolve around the practice of dismantling the political and ideological thought and representation of the 'other' by the western world. The question of representation of the non-western world as primordial, superstitious and savage was being challenged by the postcolonial writers. Subaltern concept already had its impact upon the western intellectuals with the class struggle and social stratification as the main domain. It is paradoxical, that those academicians implemented the same doctrines of domination while dealing with the non-western world of which they were against. In India, a comprehension of subaltern concept in the context of history of minority changed the outlook of imperial domination and cultural subjugation. An attempt to retrieve the devalued past, to find a voice and identity of their own were both postcolonial and subaltern aspirations. Subalternists negate the idea of representation and are critique of selective historical writings. Subaltern theory is an amalgamation of postcolonial and poststructuralists thinking that are skeptical about the fixity of subaltern identity. It seeks to find a voice out of voiceless mass of the people by dismissing the normalization of dichotomy of superior and inferior specifications on ambiguous grounds.

The history of *Subaltern Studies* in India surveyed the history of rebellions, peasant revolts and struggles and insurgencies of colonial India, “the contributions to *Subaltern Studies* make an important point in establishing the centrality of the historical movement of rebellion in understanding subalterns as subjects of their own histories” (Das 312). The rejection of colonial history writings was evident from various contributors of the collective work such as Sumit Sarker’s book *Modern India (1885-1947)*, which was a new kind of national historical text with popular movements at the core. This book criticizes Cambridge School of South Asian history. Hari P Sharma’s *Imperialism and Revolt in South Asia (1973)* and many other works emerged as the path breakers. In other words it can be said that “a critique of colonial discourse is the starting point for Subaltern Studies” (Ludden 19). The idea of both anti colonialism and nationalism paved the way to look back at the past nation. This claiming of the past was contested with various challenges.

In subaltern Study, the identity of the dominant group is to be deconstructed in order to understand the non-existent identity of the subaltern groups because the nature of reality is dubious “what the people say, and how they say it, reflect their interests; together these competing claims construct reality as we experience it” (K. Riach 29). Spivak’s notable work *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (1985) questioned the authenticity of the agency of subaltern subjects of cultural historians. The representation of subalterns by deceptive agencies causes nothing but more damages to the core identity of the subalterns and marginalizes them to further extent. Therefore, it is apprehensible that the subalterns are made silenced systematically within existing means of representations.

Subalternity and Nationalism

It is understood that *Subaltern Studies* in India is against ‘religious fascism’ whereas in the West, it is seen as the representation of identity of India through the ideologies of difference and otherness and considers nationalism and colonialism as cultural phenomena.

For South Asian, colonialism is more than a cultural phenomenon; it in fact entails capitalist imperialism. The history of India unites the diverse communities into a single frame but the differences and biased form of national writings urged to divide the histories into two groups; history of people's popular culture and insurgencies and on the other full of elites and political parties writing official history. Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* (1983) for instance avoids politics of the states and class struggle and focused on cultural force in the formation of national identity. The challenges of fragmented histories could not solve the representation and identity conflicts. India's diverse indigenous culture and insurgencies are self-limiting. For internal divisions of class conflicts, religious tensions and gender issues make it difficult to engender any unified and unbiased national narratives. With the age of globalization, the politics of language, media and representation evoke subaltern theory of resistance and invigorate the subaltern readers to criticize the use of elite languages and representations of nation that are devoid of subaltern histories.

Subaltern perspective recuperates everyday resistance and deconstructs cultural power. In this regard, the subaltern history also discusses plural identity of subaltern subjects by rejection of socially construct role of minorities. In today's context the substance of subalternity has constantly remained fluidic by nature. This constancy in the field of subaltern study has expanded in the global context as transnational study of colonialism and also as unequal cultures. The recuperating of subaltern subjectivity entails analytical and rhetorical liberation of minorities' culture and identity from the false histories of elite's narration.

Understanding Subaltern Ideals

The vision of contemporary subaltern study is to give a ground for over sighted groups; to bring their voices and opinions into the light for all to see. According to Spivak there is a need of native informant that could communicate the desires of the subalterns. In other words, the native informant becomes a descriptor that defines the others just like

Derrida's *pharmakon*, while "at the same time, remind(ing) us of the possibility of complicity and of the need for continuous strategizing" (Devadas and Nicholls 81). For instance, the woman who died as *Sati* does not speak but the other widow who gives testimony of the death woman and expresses the desire of dead over going through the *Sati pratha* act as the closest to the native informant, "And yet, she herself did *not* die. While her voice is no straightforward testimony to rebellion, it also militates against too absolute a theory of subaltern silence" (Loomba 197). Although the objective of subaltern study is to provide a platform to represent themselves and the recovering of their voices seem to be arduous due to the lack of documentations to write the history of subalterns, but just because they do not speak the language of the elite people does not mean they do not speak and "to be able to master the problems of crafting such narratives – particularly under circumstances where the usual archives do not exist – is how the discipline of history renews and maintain itself" (Chakrabarty 473). It is on the part of Subalternists or historians to acknowledge the language the subalterns speak. Subalternists try to 'learn to learn from subaltern'; their various forms of expressions. The ideals and aspirations of subaltern subject are not just to have voices but also to be heard; to make their existence and views about the life known to the world in order to avoid the misunderstandings by investigating the constrict power relations of social structures. In addition to this, there is a need to rethink the structures of power; cultural, academic, patriarchy to end the very aspects of society that create subalterns in the first place.

The subaltern consciousness lies in the disparity of social structure and is associated with existential crisis. The hegemonic dominance of the powerful group engenders subaltern consciousness in their relations. In social context, the hegemony is imposed through the combination of force and consent. In the view of Gramsci, the process of hegemony is disseminated and maintained by the discursive production of authoritative set of ideology and practices. Although subalternity exhibits power relation, it is also an 'anti-essentialist' notion

to represent the social constrain of subaltern subjects if not a representation of the subjects itself. The agency of the subaltern has always been absent in the history of tracing of the subalterns. The aspects of 'absence' and the 'lack' underpin the discreet representation of the noble society. The representation of marginalized as mass of spectators and audiences to the greater narrations are to be reviewed. In other words, the representation of subjectivity is required. The subaltern concept in present day context incorporates not only history writings but also encompasses socio-political, philosophical and metaphysical aspects.

Conclusion

The concept of subalternity contests essentialist historiography which reduces the subaltern identity into a uniformed mass with unchanging features. Subalterns are not alike nor do they have same voices and positions. In fact subalterns are multi faceted. The binary system of thinking and the negative representation of the subordinate groups reveal the attempt to achieve certain political goals. The problem of recovering the subaltern archives is associated with their undermined existence, for these reasons the scholars seek to understand the subaltern status through their social relations with the dominant mass for many scholars agree with the fact that the term subaltern is not a thing that referred or belonged to any particular social group but a relation. This relation makes up the subaltern consciousness. Those in dominant position can also shift to subaltern position yet the subversion is not of the question. The unbending nature of the 'other' is what the modern historians are skeptical of. Depravation is what makes subaltern. This depravation indicates the lack of rights owing to which the location of subaltern always lies in the peripheral view. The subaltern as a theoretical concept encompass colonial legacy, national aspirations and individual subjectivity. The transition of subaltern study from a history writing to all sorts of subversion of certain individual and groups in general discourse has unveiled the dimensions to the

theory and beyond. In this regard, a proper analysis on the social relation of the subalterns with the dominant groups can assist to venture into the multiplicity of the subaltern identity.

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