



SUBALTERN STUDIES AS POST-COLONIAL CRITIQUE OF MODERNITY

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ABSTRACT:

The present research paper tries to explain the key concepts: subaltern studies and postcolonial criticism. It is necessary to understand post-colonialism to study varied means of subordination that are a prime focus of subaltern study collectives. As post-colonial criticism has caused a revolutionary reconsideration of knowledge and social identities; written and dominated by colonialism and eurocentrism of the dominant west. Nowadays, subaltern concern has become so overriding that it is recurrently used in various disciplines such as history, psychology, sociology, anthropology and literature. The emergent post-colonial critique seeks to undo the structure of western domination and the Eurocentrism produced by the institution of the West's trajectory. Subaltern studies which began in 1982 as an intervention in South Asian historiography and developed into a dynamic post-colonial critique, put forth challenges to the existing historical scholarship. The term 'subaltern' now appears with growing frequency in the studies on Africa, Latin America, Europe, the subaltern analysis has become a recognizable mode of critical scholarship in history, literature, and anthropology.

Key words: - *Post-Colonialism, Subaltern Studies, subordination, eurocentrism, Nationalism, Marxism, etc.*

INTRODUCTION:

The publication of the series entitled Subaltern Studies: Writings on South Asian History and Society (1982) by Oxford University Press, Delhi, provided the platform for the exploration of subaltern voices in history, anthropology, and literature. The series, Subaltern Studies, was a joint venture of some western- educated Indian and English historians who were influenced by the radical historical trend of the 1960s and 1970s represented by British Marxist historians such as Edward P Thompson, Eric Hobsbawm, Rodney Hilton, Christopher Hill, and George Rude, who set a trend of historiography which is called history from below. The trend 'history from below' gained a foothold in India after 1960 after observing the disillusionment caused by the social failure of independence multiplied the number of extreme activities among the intellectual youth, and even drove a fraction of them towards Maoist militancy in the

countryside. An idea, which was spreading at that time among the historians in India as well as in other parts of the formerly colonized world, is that a real history from below involved a break with the 'nationalist paradigm' of the dominant historiography, which tended to mask or underplay class antagonism in the name of national unity, thereby espousing the official political line of the independence struggle. "It is in this intellectual and political context, marked by the criticism of both orthodox Marxism and the socializing rhetoric of Indian state, that the subaltern studies project took shape at the initiative of Ranajit Guha." (Poucheпадass, 101)

DISCUSSION:

The term 'Subaltern', which has been taken from Antonio Gramsci's writings, denotes the subordination in terms of class, caste, gender, race, language, and culture and is used to signify the centrality of dominant/dominated relationship in history. The main exponent of

the subaltern studies, Ranajit Guha, intimated that while subaltern studies would not ignore the dominant, because the subalterns are always subject to their activity, its aim was “to rectify the elitist bias characteristic of much research and academic work.” The act of rectification sprang from the conviction that the elite had exercised dominance, not hegemony, in Gramsci’s sense, over the subalterns. About this form of domination Guha in the first volume of *Subaltern Studies* said that the subaltern had acted in history on their own, that is, independently of the elite. The subaltern studies group has adopted the Gramscian types of Marxism, feminism, postmodernism, poststructuralism, and specially postcolonialism only to call attention to the decentralization of Europeanized histories of the countries with colonial past. According to Vinay Lal *Subaltern Studies* is a method of post-colonial practice having competence in post-colonial ‘classics’ with a degree of knowledge of European masters, copiously equips the readers to understand subaltern history. (Lal 187)

The historiography of Indian nationalism has for a long time been dominated by colonialist elitism and bourgeois nationalist elitism both originating as the ideological product of British rule in India. Indian elites have imitated colonialist elites while describing Indian nationalism. Both the varieties of elitism believed that the making of the Indian nation and the development of nationalism were predominantly elite achievements. The colonialist historiography defines Indian nationalism primarily as a function of ‘stimulus and response’. Colonialist historiographers give recognition to the British colonial rulers for the promotion of nationalism and gaining of nationhood about India by giving of how Indian elites responded to the policies and institutions they brought to India. Indian Elites were only interested in the shares in the wealth, power,

and prestige created by and associated with colonial rule. As Ranajit Guha points out, What made the elite go through this process was, according to this historiography, no lofty idealism addressed to the general good of the nation but simply the expectation of rewards in the form of a share in the wealth, power, and prestige created by and associated with the colonial rule; and it was the drive for such rewards with all its concomitant play of collaboration and competition between various elements among the latter themselves, which, we are told, was what constituted Indian nationalism. (Guha 2)

As far as subaltern studies is concerned, they thought that like nationalist historiography, Marxist historiography was also elitist because they only considered the specific consciousness of the peasants, particularly the economic factor for the outbreak of rebellions. The Marxist historians, advocates of the emancipation and upliftment of the subaltern class, regarded the independence movement as only the linear development of class consciousness. They didn’t find the other factors like caste, colour, domestic abuse, as means for subjugation, and repression of the subjectivity. They considered peasant insurgency as primitive and pre-political needed to be trained and mobilized by elites. In this way the caricatured peasant insurgency as an ephemeral, irrational, disorganized, spontaneous outpouring of collective anger requiring better training and leadership for mobilization. As Jacques Pouchepadass points out,

Marxist historiography of the national movement, which alone had stood in strong contrast to the conventional nationalist narrative during the first decades of Independence, suffered from yet another form of elitism: although it spoke on behalf of the oppressed classes and in order to facilitate their march towards emancipation and progress, it stigmatized their culture of resistance as an

instance of pre-political mentality or false consciousness, belonging to a primitive stage of the development of revolutionary consciousness. (103)

The subalternist historiographers focused on exploring the people's autonomous domain of resistance which was governed by the experience of labour and exploitation and characterized by the ties, not of class but those of kinship, religion, caste, community, or languages, which they thought to have sustained to exist despite the colonial interference and to have attained new forms and conformation. They tried to establish people in binary opposition to the elite in order to explore subaltern culture to repudiate elitist history. They sought to provoke human sensibility towards the marginalized, the underprivileged, and voiceless section of human society and asserted that if the subalterns were given a chance, they could utter their resistance and know their history. Subalternists found it difficult to recover subaltern history because they had left no written record of their insurgency but only had to be depended on oral culture. As Guha says, "to rehabilitate the consciousness and agency of the subaltern, whose culture is and who leave no written documents, one is left no alternative, but go back to the accounts of popular rebellion kept in the administrative records of the state, and try to read them 'against the grain'." Their search for suppressed and hidden fragments in order to make history more inclusive and more authentic reveals how historical writing is fictional writing and subaltern history is a narrative hidden from official history:

We find frequent reference to such things as gaps, absences, lapses, ellipses, all of them symbolic of the truths that historical writing is after all writing and not reality, and that as subalterns their history, as well as their historical documents, are necessarily in the hands of others, the Indian elite and the British

colonizer who ran, as well as wrote the history of India. (Said vii)

In the late 1980s, the second orientation of subaltern studies began in which we find broadened and shifted conceptual thrust of subalternists away from Thompsian, Gramscian, Marxian domain of popular politics towards culture history, critical theory, and discourse of subaltern subjectivity under the influence of postmodernist theorists like Foucault, Derrida, and post-colonial theorists like Spivak and Edward Said. The Young members of the subaltern studies group viewed Guha's concepts and ideas in different perspectives under the influence of the prevailing postmodernist critique of knowledge, power and progress, rationality, and epistemological relativism. Under this new influence, subalternists altered the conception as they did not view domination in the socio-economic term but in discursive cultural terms as power knowledge of the enlightenment, and they criticized Marxism as another type of Eurocentrism. They now focused more on the failure of modernity whose ideals like liberty and progress were overwhelmed by the relentless urge of capital to expand than the failure of the modern state to represent the common people of the nation. As David Ludden points out, "Subaltern Studies thus becomes a postcolonial critique of modern, European, and Enlightenment epistemologies". (20)

CONCLUSION :

In nutshell, subalternists now focus on deconstructing state-sponsored, elite historiography in order to bring forth the hidden and repressed cultures, experiences, and memories of the ordinary people. This new form of historiography incorporates dispersed moments and fragments which are found in ethnography; it also incorporates subversive cultural politics that expose the oppressive forms of power/knowledge used against the people for whom it also advocates an alternative of liberation. The subalternists in the company

of post-colonialists aim to condemn colonialist modernity to realize the emancipation and autonomy for common people by listening to them, permitting them to speak, criticizing powers that exploit them, and recording their past. As Ludden says, “The project’s search for hidden pasts evokes textual criticism, fragmentary testimonies, and lost moments, to restore the integrity of indigenous histories that appear naturally in non-linear, oral, symbolic, vernacular and dramatic forms,” (20) In This new form, they aim to show power as a governing and crucial role-player in a social organization and try to emphasize and disclose that the assertion of elitist historiography that they represented the nation-state as plural is basically false.

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