



# REVIEW OF RESEARCH

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## SUBALTERN STUDIES: HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT AND NEW IMPLICATIONS

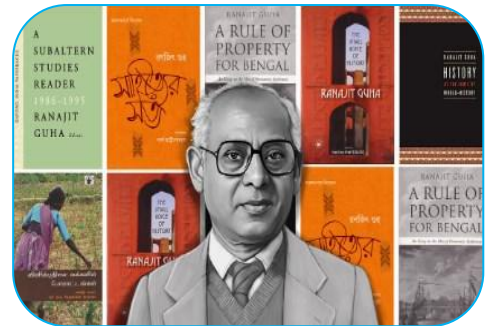
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### ABSTRACT:-

*Subaltern Studies is new trend in writing history which negotiates and resists the elitism, essentialism. It centres on the life of marginalizes and oppressed whose voice is suppressed and overlooked. It is a rewriting and revaluation on the basis of narration of history that is being expressed. It is a counter history of popular forms of cultures to contest both colonial and nationalist's accounts.*

*This research paper attempts to interpret the major concerns and issues of subaltern studies by focusing on the main proponents who have contributed to the subaltern studies. The aim of this paper is retrace the historical development and new implications of subaltern studies. This research paper is designed to show Gramscian exploration of the term subaltern and its influence on the subaltern studies group.*



**KEY WORDS:-** Subaltern, Hegemony, Marginalized, Underprivileged, historiography, essentialism etc.

### INTRODUCTION :-

The term subaltern represents a person who is socially, politically and geographically outside the hegemonic structure of the society. This theory is a negotiation to the dominant social class and their legitimized and perpetuated values and beliefs. The main proponent of subaltern studies is Italian Marxist thinker Antonio Gramsci who used this term while talking about the underprivileged people. He mainly concentrated on the subaltern communities which have been neglected, disregarded and unnoticed. In India, this theory took its different turn by associating with castes and creeds rather than class.

### OBJECTIVES:

1. To understand the meaning and nature of subaltern.
2. To focus on the main proponents of subaltern writing.
3. To interpret the major concerns of subaltern studies.
4. To figure out the diverse responses and criticism to the same.

### METHODS AND MATERIALS:

This is the **secondary research** based on the major concepts of the main proponents who have been contributing to the study of subaltern. So, it is basically interpretative and analytical.

### Scope and Limitation:

The present work entitled *Major Issues in Subaltern Studies* is a secondary research which is a reflection on the meticulous thoughts of subaltern studies. This study highlights the general issues and concerns related to the subaltern studies.

### Denotations:

The word subaltern tends to signify as marginalized, demoted or oppressed. This word is trace back its origin in Latin in which *sub* stands for subservient and *alternus* represents other. Antonio Gramsci introduced this word to describe someone who has no political and economic power. The poor person with lower rank in the hegemonic society is called as subaltern. Gayatri Spivak thinks that subaltern is not just a classy word for the oppressed. She says the mechanics of discrimination is not just class rather it is a culturally associated in the hegemonic discourse of society. Spivak argues that Gramsci used this term to reflect proletariat society where the interpretation of this is contested. She measures subaltern as a persons who are not to have voice to speak for himself or herself.

### Genesis:

In the earlt 1980s, a small group of Marxist scholars influenced by Antonio Gramsci's *Prison Notebook* introduced *subaltern* as a new analytic category within modern historiography. The scholars like Ranjit Guha interpreted the mainstream history of India and converted some of the ideas and beliefs of dominant social castes and classes. Ranjit Guha founded the subaltern project in collaboration with Shahid Amin, David Arnold, Partha Chatterjee, David Hardiman and Gyanendra Pande. They aimed at providing a corrective to the historiography of Indian elitism.

### Analysis:

Antonio Gramsci basically talked about the subaltern community which is a group excluded from established institutions of the society. He was contemporary of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar both were born in 1891, although operating in different environment, the similarities of their strategies and political philosophy to empower the subalterns/ Dalits are indeed striking. Their activity as leaders always combined with sound theoretical reflection spring out their own and others' lived experience of subalternity. Both found inspiration in Marxism, both were critics of religion. They assessed the presence of subalterns through social, cultural and historical critical analysis and sought to negotiate a rightful place within the state, society and history / historiography for these excluded individuals. For both of them, the solution would come from the effort of the subaltern themselves.

Ranjit Guha tried to establish the subaltern philosophy in India and the trend of '*Subaltern studies*' prevailed in India, in the last twenty years of the 20th century. This new trend gave a way to new challenges by crossing the traditional writing of history. It provided a new direction, new amplitude and helped to begin a new chapter. Indian point of view of Subaltern history is similar to the trend of writing in England, which became famous as '*History from Below*'. The '*Centre of South Asian Cultural Studies*' was established with the assumption that without knowing the work of downtrodden people, it is not possible to obtain the true sight of the contemporary history. Dr.Ranjeet Guha played a vital role in the establishment of this institute. He discussed about this view point of history with some of the Indian scholars. The historians, who experienced the need to study the new point of view regarding the revolt movement during the British rule in India, came together and deliberately started new experiments in the field of history. In 1982, a collection of articles edited by Dr. Guha "Subaltern studies" was published. This first issue of Subaltern studies can be called a concrete invention of the new trend of thoughts. Guha tried to write history of subaltern from the subaltern perspective. Then and then alone would it be possible to notice the kind of role that the majority of the population, the silent majority if you wish, played in directing the course of history. Inevitably, the issue is who was dominating whom and who revolted against the domination and in what kind of manner came to be central importance in these studies.

The philosophical base (foundation) of Dr. Guha's '*Subaltern studies*' is found in the writing of Gramsci. Later on, eight issues of '*Subaltern studies*' were published. Through these issues he gave an outline of common people's history. He also wrote "*Elementary Aspects of Peasant Emergency in Colonial India*" In this book he wrote about the main parts of peasant's revolt "A farmer is the creator of his own history", says Dr. Guha. Dr. Shahid Amin, a close associate of Dr. Guha, has important contribution in the writing of '*Subaltern Studies*'. He was the founder; editor and worked as teacher in history in Delhi University. He has analysed the effect of Mahatma Gandhi on the minds of the farmers who participated in non-cooperation movement. He has tried to know the intention of different elements of society related to "*Chauri- Chaura*" incident. He wrote an article '*Making the Nation Habitable*' and a book, '*Remembering the Mussalmans*." He has expressed his thoughts about the dangers and bad effects on history writing from the point of view of any religious group.

In the trend of '*Subaltern studies*' Dr. Sumit Sarkar also has contributed a lot. He is known as a brilliant historian, he employs the term subalterns for tribal and low-caste agricultural labourers and share croppers, landholding peasants, generally of intermediate -caste status in Bengal and labour in plantations mines and industries. He studied Marxism and his important writings consist of the history of common people in national movement, history of neglected group, leadership of Mahatma Gandhi in national movement and the dominant nature of foreign colonial government. In 1977, he discussed with Dr. Ranjeet Guha and turned towards this new trend. He wrote book like: *Swadeshi Movement in Bengal (1973)*, *Popular Movements and Middle Class Leadership in the late Colonial India*, *Prespectives and problems of History from Below (1985)*, *Writing Social History, Modern India 1885-1947 and 1983-1985*. He wrote articles as, *Limits of Nationalism*, *Decline of the Subaltern in Subaltern studies*, *Beyond Nationalist Frame*. Dr. Sumit Sarkar is closer to the concept of "History from Below" by Edward Thomson. In the introduction to his book, '*Popular Movements and Middle Class Leadership*' he says - "History from Below being by concentrating on local and regional developments, encompassing various groups in the word popular-tribal, Peasant, artisan, labour protests and in the middle class a class which started asserting some kind of regional on national leadership and which had a totally different composition from Princes and Zamindars." Dr. Sumit Sarkar has expressed meditative thoughts about Subaltern studies. He says '*Subaltern studies with its critique of all varieties of eliticism, whether colonist, nationalist or even Marxist has its focus on lower class indicatives, its pioneering efforts do represent a major breakthrough in our history writing*'. He does not neglect the leadership of organic group of middle class as insignificant. Apart from this, in his article '*Decline of the Subaltern in Subaltern studies*' he says that while giving emphasis on the psychology and work of deprived group in society, their social history is neglected.

Gayatri Spivak brings a combined Marxist, deconstructive and feminist perspective. She rejects the west and western intellectuals perceive the subalterns as other. The question raised by her is the role of western theory and Indian historiography in the alignment of subaltern is false, far-fetched and wrong.

There has been wide-ranging criticism of the *Subaltern Studies* from many quarters. Right from the beginning the project has been critiqued by the Marxist, Nationalist and Cambridge School historians, besides those who were not affiliated to any position. Almost all positions it took, ranging from a search for autonomous subaltern domain to the later shift to discourse analysis, came under scrutiny and criticism. Some of the earlier critiques were published in the *Social Scientist*. In one of them, Javeed Alam criticized *Subaltern Studies* for its insistence on an autonomous domain of the subaltern. According to Alam, the autonomy of the subaltern politics is predicated on perpetuity of rebellious action, on a consistent tendency towards resistance and a propensity to rebellion on the part of the peasant masses. Whether this autonomous action is positive or negative in its consequences is of not much concern to the Subalternists: 'the historical direction of militancy is of secondary consideration. What is primary is the spontaneity and an internally located self-generating momentum. Extending the implications of the inherent logic of such a theoretical construction, it is a matter of indifference if it leads to communal rioting or united anti-feudal actions that overcome the initial limitations.

Sumit Sarkar, who was earlier associated with the project, later on criticised it for moving towards post colonialism. Over the years, there began a shift in the approach of subaltern studies. The influence of the post modernist and postcolonist ideologies became more marked. In his two essays, 'The Decline of the Subaltern in Subaltern Studies' and *Orientalism Revisited*, he argues that this shift may have been occasioned due to various reasons, but, intellectually, there is an attempt to have the best of both worlds : critiquing others for essentialism, teleology and related sins, while claiming a special immunity from doing the same oneself.' Moreover, such works in Indian history have not produced any spectacular results. Even earlier, according to Sarkar, there was a tendency towards essentialising the categories of subaltern and autonomy, in the sense of assigning to them more or less absolute, fixed, decontextualised meanings and qualities. Sarkar argues that there are many problems with the histories produced by the subaltern writers and these arise due to their restrictive analytical frameworks, as Subaltern Studies swing from a rather simple emphasis on subaltern autonomy to an even more simplistic thesis of western colonial cultural domination'.

Such criticism of the *Subaltern Studies* is still continuing and the Subaltern historians have responded to it with their own justification of the project and counter-attacks on critics. The subalternists took some time before reacting to the critiques. Ranjit Guha railed against the criticism by those whom he called the vendors of readymade answers and academic old rods who supposedly posed as the custodians of official truth entrenched within their liberal and leftist stockades. He peremptorily dismissed the criticism by those scholars who have lived too long with well-rehearsed ideas and methodologies. The subalternists took some time before reacting to the critiques. Dipesh Chakrabarty's reply was more detailed and asserted that : The central aim of the Subaltern Studies project is to understand the consciousness that informed and still informs political actions taken by the subaltern classes on their own, independently of any elite initiative.' It was because, as shown by subaltern historians, in the course of nationalist struggles involving popular mobilization the masses often put their own interpretations on the aims of these movements and proceeded to act them out.

### CONCLUSION:

The subaltern studies asserted itself as a radically new form of history-writing in the context of Indian history. The History written till now is one-sided, partial and not showing true picture of low level group in society. A group of people is deprived of proper position. A great man or intellectual group cannot create history. True history is not of superior group but it is shaped from the group of common people. Subaltern studies became an original site for a new kind of history from below, a people's history free of national constraints, a post-nationalist reimagining of Indian nation, on the other side, at the margins, outside nationalism. This work brings together all the historians through the new trend of writing 'Subaltern studies', so that the recipients of success should get justice and in the same way true history will be written.

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