

# Subalterns



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Concept of Subaltern and Subaltern Studies Dr. Abhishek Gopal\* 'Subaltern' originally is a term for subordinates in military hierarchies which is elaborated in the work of Antonio Gramsci to refer to groups who are outside the established structure of political representation. Subaltern was first used in a nonmilitary sense by Marxist Antonio Gramsci. Some believe that he used the term as a synonym for proletariat, possibly as a codeword in order to get his writings past prison censors, while others believe his usage to be more nuanced and less clear cut (Morton, Stephen).

It has also been emphasised that the term "subaltern" is an allusion to the work of Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci (1881-1937) which literally, refers to any person or group of inferior rank and station, whether because of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity or religion. The term 'subaltern' is used in post-colonial theory. The exact meaning of the term in current philosophical and critical usage is disputed. Some thinkers use it in a general sense to refer to marginalized groups and the lower classes – a person rendered without agency by his or her social status (Young, Robert J.

C. , 2003). Others such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak use it in a more specific sense. She argues that 'subaltern' is not just a classy word for oppressed, for others, for somebody who's not getting a piece of the pie... In post-colonial terms, everything that has limited or no access to the cultural imperialism is Subaltern – a space of difference. Now who would say that's just the oppressed? The working class is oppressed. It's not subaltern... Many people want to claim subalternity. They are the least interesting and the most dangerous.

I mean, just by being a discriminated – against a minority on the university campus, they don't need the word 'Subaltern... '. They should see what the mechanics of discrimination are. They are within the hegemonic discourse wanting a piece of the pie and not being allowed, so let them speak, use the hegemonic discourse. They should not call themselves subaltern (de Kock, Leon; 1992 : 29-47). Gayatri Spivak suggests that the subaltern is denied access to both mimetic and political forms of representation. \*

Ex-Lecturer, Sociology, Govt. Degree College, Jhakhini, Varanasi 2 It may also be pointed that in several essays, Homi Bhabha, a key-thinker within post-colonial thought, emphasizes the importance of social power relations in his working definition of 'Subaltern' groups as oppressed minority groups whose presence was crucial to the self-definition of the majority group : Subaltern social groups were also in a position to subvert the authority of those who had hegemonic power (Laura Garcia et. al. , 1996, pp. 191-207).

It is noteworthy that Bonaventura de Sousa Santos (2002) uses the term 'Subaltern Cosmopolitanism' extensively in his book. He refers to this in the context of counter-hegemonic practices, movements, resistances and struggles against neoliberal globalization, particularly the struggle against social exclusion. He also uses the term interchangeably with cosmopolitan legality as the diverse normative framework for an 'equality of differences'. Infact, here, the term subaltern is used to denote marginalized and oppressed people(s) specifically struggling against hegemonic globalization.

It may be emphasized that subaltern is a term that commonly refers to the perspective of persons from regions and groups outside the hegemonic power structure. Infact, in the 1970s' the term began to be used as a

reference to colonized people in the South-Asian sub-continent. It provided a new perspective on the history of colonized place from the perspective of colonized rather than from the perspective of hegemonic power. In this context, Marxist historians had already begun to view colonial history from the perspective of the proletariat but this was unsatisfying as it was still a Euro-centric way of viewing the globe.

However, Subaltern is now regularly used as a term in history, anthropology, sociology and literature. (Gyan, Prakash, 1994). " Subaltern studies began in the early 1980s' as an intervention in South-Asian historiography. " While it began as a model for the sub-continent, it quickly developed into a vigorous post-colonial critique. The term subaltern studies group (SSG) or subaltern studies collective (SSC) are a group of South Asian scholars interested in the post-colonial and post-imperial societies of South Asia in particular and the developing world in general.

It may be pointed out that the term subaltern studies is sometimes also applied more broadly to others who share many of their views. Infact, their approach is one of history from below, focused more on what happens among the masses at the base levels of society than among the elite. It may be observed that the group associated with the subaltern studies arose in the 1980, influenced by the scholarship of Eric Stokes, to attempt to formulate a new narrative of the history of India and South Asia.

Undoubtedly, as stated before this narrative strategy most clearly inspired by the writings of Gramsci was explicated in the writings of the 'mentor' Ranjit Guha, most clearly in his 'manifesto' in 'Subaltern studies I' and also in his classic monograph 'The Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency'

although they are, in a sense, on the left, they are very critical of the traditional Marxist narrative of Indian history, in which semi-feudal India was colonized by the British, became politicized, and earned its independence.

In particular, they are critical of the focus of this narrative on the political consciousness of elites, who in turn inspire the masses to resistance and rebellion against the British. Instead, they focus on non-elitesubalterns as agents of political and social change. They, infact, have had a particular interest in the discourses and rhetoric of emerging political movements, as against only highly visible actions like demonstrations and uprisings.

Thus, from the above discourse it can be observed that the Subaltern studies started in the early 1980 as an intervention in South Asian Historiography and emerged as a model for the subcontinent which quickly developed into a vigorous post-colonial critique. So far as the formation of subaltern studies group is concerned it was founded by Ranjit Guha. It may be pointed out that in more recent times, some former members have become disillusioned with the post-modern turn that the group has taken (notably Sumit Sarkar who left the group).

A galaxy of eminent scholars such as Ranjit Guha, David Hardiman, Partha Chatterjee, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Gyan Pandey, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Susie Tharu, Gyan Prakash, Sudipta Kaviraj, Edward Said, David Arnold, Gautam Bhadra, Ajay Skaria, Qadri Ismail, Kamran Asdar Ali, Shail Mayaram, Sumit Sarkar (later dissented), Lata Mani, Aamir Mufti, M. S. S. Pandian, Shahid Amin are associated with Subaltern studies. The subaltern concept has become so prominent now a days that it is being regularly used in various disciplines such as literature, history, anthropology and sociology

etc. REFERENCES 1. Morton, Stephen, " The subaltern : Genealogy of a concept", in Gayatri Spivak : Ethics. 2. Young, Robert J. C. Postcolonialism : A very short Introduction. New York : Oxford University Press, 2003. 3. de Kock, Leon, " Interviewwith Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak : New Nation Writers Conference in South Africa. " A Review of International English Literature. 23 (3) 1992 : 29-47. 4. Bhabha, Homi K. " Unsatisfied : notes on Vernacular Cosmopolitanism". Text and Nation : Cross-Disciplinary Essays on Cultural and National Identities. Ed. Laura Garcia – Moreno and Peter C. Pfeiffer. Columbia, SC : Camden House, 1996 : 191-207. 5. Santos, Boaventura de Sousa (2002). Towards a New Legal Common Sense, 2nd ed. (London : Lexis Nexis Butterworths), particularly, pp. 458-493. 6. Gyan Prakash, " Subaltern Studies as Postcolonial Criticism", The American Historical Review, December 1994, Vol. 99, No. 5, 1475-1490, 1476. 7. Chaturvedi, Vinayak, ed. , Mapping Subaltern Studies and the Postcolonial. London and New York, 2000. 8. Ludden, David, ed. , Reading Subaltern Studies. Critical History, Contested Meaning and the Globalization of South Asia, London, 2001.