

Contested Histories and Politics of People

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Theorizing Subalternity

By

P. Prayer Elmo Raj

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To
Joerg Rieger

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PREFACE

Subaltern Studies aims to unveil the histories of the subalterns subdued within colonial and nationalist archives. As an interdisciplinary analytic, Subaltern Studies, along with postcolonial studies, has influenced academia immensely. The influence of poststructuralism and Marxism makes Subaltern Studies a viable tool to critically assess the influence of hegemonic powers in subjugating the subaltern classes. While Gramsci discussed the subaltern with regard to the peasant classes under the fascist regime, the scope has now widened to embrace and unearth the subaltern consciousness, culture, and history as a possible means to bring to light and resist hegemonic historical narratives around the globe. The book is inclusive as it brings together theoretical voices from across the globe, even though it otherwise remains an exclusive and individual body of work. It is analytical and interpretive rather than a re-narration of subaltern histories and politics.

A conversation with Dr. Joerg Rieger about Subaltern Studies more than a decade ago gave me the impetus to think of a full-length study on subalternity. His own intellectual engagement with postcoloniality and subalternity enabled me to move forward with this work. Joerg has been a friend and an inspiration over the years. I am indebted to Dr. James Reynolds Daniel, my guru and, without his patient guidance, Spivakian texts would have been more obscure to deal with. Dr. Elaine Heath and Pamila Liston, you are the reason for every new venture in my life. Dr. Elena Marchenko, your optimism and affection carries me through every productive endeavour. Thanks to Dr. Joanne Ella Parsons for proofreading the entire manuscript. My gratitude to Dr. P. Malathy Thulasiraman for reading through the Introduction and Chapter 1. Thanks to Sumera Saleem, Dr. Kiran Sebastian, Dr. Sathianathan Clarke, Dr. Natalia Kochkina, Dr. Rima Namhata, Dr. Indrani Medhi and Vandana Jha. My love and thanks to Amma and Appa, Pranitha Elaine Raj, and Clara Priel Raj, my companions in life. Thanks to everyone at Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

INTRODUCTION

I

The complex history and incongruent interpretations concatenate in the term “subaltern,” testifies to its familiarity. Indisputably, over a period of time, the idea of subalternity has undergone noticeable transformations. Gramsci’s presentation of “subaltern” represents non-hegemonic groups. The intellectual history of subalternity has constantly been shaped from inside, outside, and in opposition. The term “subaltern” is observed in Subaltern Studies “as a name for the general subordination in South Asian society whether this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office or in any other way” (Guha 1988, vii). Subaltern Studies does not pursue an internal rationality but rather it formulates a substantive perspective. Guha notes that subordination cannot be understood in binary oppositions but subaltern groups are always subjected to dominance amidst resistance. Dominant groups are treated without the specious office attributed to them by elitism in South Asian studies. Therefore, “subaltern” performs as a standard for the “objective assessment” of the task of the elite, as well as a critique of the elite’s interpretations.

The emergence of Subaltern Studies in the 1980s formulated a nonconformist-Left setting, which attempted a revisioning of Marxist theory to write histories from below. Subaltern Studies brought in major changes in South Asian historiography and created a forceful challenge to the existing elite historical scholarship. Through these persistent subaltern/postcolonial critiques, Indian history attained new shades and forms by unearthing muted voices. However, the Indian equivalent of Gramscian “subaltern” is contested:

The subaltern is a creation, a reification of historians. No one in India called themselves subaltern, nor do any of the writers quote Indian terms which were equivalent. The categorization constructs those who joined in assorted and diverse acts of geographically widely dispersed violent action, it brings them together as subalterns and, increasingly frequently in the later volumes, calls them subaltern classes (Masseios 205).

The subaltern is configured in such a way to outwit the impact of economic reductionism and emphasize oppression. Moreover, an unsullied epistemological

methodology has been proposed to unearth subjugated subaltern knowledges. Subaltern Studies offered a fresh and authentic platform for reading history from below, a history that is set free from the politics of the dominant and from the restrictions of the national and nationalism, thereby offering a “post-nationalist reimagining” of history from the periphery. Such a deconstructive approach challenges the sources of knowledge, as well as the method and strategies of comprehension. Consequently, criticism becomes political.

Ludden mentions that the term “subaltern” is introduced by Guha, in *Subaltern Studies I*, with “conceptual emptiness” (See Ludden 2002, 15). The Gramscian notion of subalternity is re-invented and reconceptualized in an Indian historical context. The idea of the subaltern, in the Indian context, is not only a “history from below” but also a “discourse of power.” Given the context, subalternity became a “novelty invented *de novo* by Subaltern Studies, which gave old terms new meanings and marked a new beginning for historical studies. Domination, subordination, hegemony, resistance, revolt, and other old concepts could now be subalternized” (Ludden 2002, 16).

Subaltern Studies, as it progressed, took the form of a postcolonial critique of modern European and Enlightenment epistemologies. A new kind of cultural essence, for India, has been found in the iconic residues of hidden identities, expressions of difference, and misunderstood meanings (Ludden, “Introduction” 19–20). The departure from the elitist bias that had already influenced Indian historiography became the foundational motif of Subaltern Studies. Any history is embedded with power and subjugation. Therefore, it becomes significant to investigate the diverse cultures that colonial modernity encompassed through dominance. Subaltern consciousness, as it transpires out of its texts, is the “consciousness of resistance.” Consciousness may include within it propositions and notions of religion, caste, and power but all are considered through protest and resistance to subjugation.

Ranajit Guha envisaged a subaltern India transpiring out of its fragments during the 1980s. During the same period, Benedict Anderson’s *Imagined Communities* (1983) pointed out the failure of dominant European (political) nationalisms with a call to consider nation as “imagined communities.” The advent of Subaltern Studies also saw how India was being “reconfigured and reimagined” as a nation. Consequently, “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 the Indian nation on the underside, at the margins, outside nationalism” (Ludden 2002, 12).

The peasant revolt has defied the codified regulations and laws, which dictated the existence of the peasants under colonial rule in a semi-feudal society. Subalternity, in this context, is “materialized” by the constitution of property, standardized by law, and sanctified by religion and tradition. Accordingly, to obliterate normalized and existing standards is to rebel against the world in which the peasants live. The danger of rebellion, given these conditions, was an engagement in a “state of absent-mindedness” (Guha 1983, 1).¹ We do not have an instance of peasantry where the rebellion was not planned or mobilized. The rebellion was a deliberate and desperate means of unendurable dilemmatic survival. However, in elite historiography, this awareness receives almost no notice. Historiography attempts to deal with the peasant rebellion as an “empirical” subject or an affiliate of a class but not as an individual whose will and reason were brought into play in the “praxis called rebellion.”²

When historiography is shoved to the point of suspicion, it explains the rebellion in terms of the distinctiveness of nature and culture where the subalterns are signified into subjects with lawlessness. Economic and political deprivation is not taken into consideration as that constitutes an infectious impact over the peasant’s consciousness, thereby activating the rebellion as a “reflex action.” Peasant insurgency, thus, has been considered to be “*external* to the peasant consciousness and cause is made to stand in as a phantom surrogate for Reason, the logic of that consciousness” (Guha 1983, 3).

¹ Guha suggests, “There is nothing in the primary sources of historical evidence to suggest anything other than this. These give the lie to the myth, retailed so often by careless and impressionistic writing on the subject, of peasant insurrections being purely spontaneous and unpremeditated affairs. The truth is quite to the contrary. It would be difficult to cite an uprising on any significant scale that was not in fact preceded either by less militant types of mobilization when other means had been tried and found wanting or by parley among its principals seriously to weigh the pros and cons of any recourse to arms” (Guha 1983, 1).

² “The omission is indeed dyed into most narratives by metaphors assimilating peasant revolts to natural phenomena: they break out like thunderstorms, heave like earthquakes, spread like wildfires, infect like epidemics. In other words, when the proverbial clod of earth turns, this is a matter to be explained in terms of natural history” (Guha 1983, 2).

As Subaltern Studies grew in scholarship, its focus became broader and its ideas more fluid and assorted. The idea of subalternity in Subaltern Studies changed as the structure of its investigations increasingly confronted the significant “clash of unequal cultures under colonialism and the dominance of colonial modernity over India’s resistant, indigenous culture” (Ludden 2002, 19). Subalterns, in the Indian context, belong to the peripheries. They are the “fragments of a nation.” Colonial subjugation configured subaltern identity and consciousness. Subaltern Studies identifies the subaltern consciousness and psyche through a colonial archive that records subaltern resistance through insurgency. It is these records that allowed Subaltern Studies to reformulate Indian history from the subaltern perspective and bring subaltern voices to light. Writing subaltern history configured a “subversive cultural politics” and offered “liberating alternatives” (Ludden 2002, 20). Moreover,

Methodologically, recuperating subaltern subjectivity entails the analytical and rhetorical liberation of Indian culture from its domination by the colonial archive and by modernity. Ingenious methods for uncovering fragments of subaltern nationality became the project’s particular specialty. Critical readings of colonial texts, oral histories, and ethnography techniques are employed to reveal India’s cultural roots in subaltern subjectivity (Ludden 2002, 19–20).

Bringing in eclectic appropriations and linguistic similarities, Subaltern Studies aspires towards a self-consciously polysemic re-interpretation of the subaltern consciousness. The subaltern agency was recreated and restored by theorizing heterogeneity and the autonomy of historical acts. Furthermore, political agency, for Spivak, cannot be represented but the subaltern obtains their political and discursive identities within historical determinants. Subalternity “celebrates hybridity, and cultural polyvalency” (Barry 2002, 198) because subaltern identity is an identity of difference. Epistemic systems and methods of knowing history are examined as having imperial influence. Therefore, discursively, deconstructing power turns resistant in the context of hegemony. The dynamics and meaning of subalternity is altered because it entails the oppositions of asymmetrical cultures.

Guha announced a severance from the elitist, colonialist, and bourgeois bias that have dominated in writing history. The history of the subaltern class is that of resistance against the subjugation of the elite and the discursive power of colonialism. In the pre-capitalist Indian context, class patterns stayed amorphous. Subaltern, as a category, therefore, aimed to circumvent the consequences of economic reductionism to highlight domination and exploitation. Imperial rule introduced an “absolute rupture” whereby the

colonial subjects were only configured by imperialism. Thus, Subaltern Studies formulated a fresh “methodology, epistemology and paradigms” (Bahl 2002, 365), thereby challenging colonially dominated and configured narratives, knowledges, and histories.

Subalternists juxtapose subaltern history with colonial history. Accordingly, any discourse or history on peasant insurgency is a discourse on power and dominance. Ludden observes that “colonialism includes capitalist imperialism (which is still at work in the world of globalization” (Ludden 2002, 4). The significance of subalternity in Subaltern Studies changed as the conflict of disparate cultures under colonial modernity came into contact with local and resistant cultures. In this setting, Subaltern Studies opened up an avenue for the analysis of colonial texts after its detailed analysis of subaltern voices of resistance. The recovery of subaltern subjectivity involves the systematic empowerment of silent subaltern voices from their subjugation by colonial modernity and documentation. In order to unveil the splintered nature of subaltern identity and nationality, Subaltern Studies required resourceful and inventive methods. Consequently,

Critical readings of colonial texts, oral histories and ethnographic techniques are employed to reveal India’s cultural roots in subaltern subjectivity. Subaltern Studies thus become post-colonial critique of modern European and Enlightenment epistemologies. A new kind of cultural essence for India is found in iconic residues of hidden identities, expressions of difference, and misunderstood meanings (Ludden 2002, 19–20).

It is true that the analysis and emphasis on politics and representation “evoke anti-hegemonic possibilities.” However, by theoretically subalternizing history from the margins, the division between the center and periphery widened. Analysis based on class distinction removed the subaltern discussion from social histories in a multifaceted Indian society.³ Further, Subaltern Studies, captivated by the emphasis on subaltern history and

³ Ludden explains: “the new substance of subalternity emerged only on the underside of a rigid theoretical barrier between ‘élite’ and ‘subaltern,’ which resembles a concrete slab separating upper and lower space in a two-storey building. This hard dichotomy alienated subalternity from *social histories* that included more than two storeys or which move among them; and not only histories rendered through the lens of class analysis, because subaltern social mobility disappeared along the class distinction” (16).

³ The confinement of Subaltern Studies to subaltern histories “alienated subalternity from *political histories* of popular movements and alienated subaltern groups from organized, transformative politics, in the past *and* in the present” (Ludden 2002, 16).

politics, failed to challenge the “political structure.”⁴ Politics and representation elicit anti-hegemonic possibilities in embodying subaltern subjectivities and in formulating resistance.

Amongst the realm of politics and the economic procedures of capitalist alteration lies a “mental space” where social systems of existence and consciousness persist to exert their rights and therefore resist the dominant groups. Intermediate space recognizes subjectivity, as a place for political activity where a subaltern subject emphasizes its position on history not just as objects but also as legitimate subjects. The historian’s task is to legitimately locate and present the autonomy of peasantry and how they demonstrated their struggles as a productive political activity. It offers an axiomatic “meta-theoretical position.” Hegemony relies on the historical position of the bourgeoisie. The failed transition of capitalism expands the analogy of pre-capitalist forces where hegemony and the capitalist transformation become an empty abstraction.

Subaltern Studies was heavily influenced by the Western critical stance against metanarratives. However, in the following Western models, Subaltern Studies was bound within metanarratives.⁵ Power and dominance, they argued, deprived ordinary people of their agency. Therefore, their attempt to write history from below diverged from the dominant Western model of historiography. Unlike Western histories which are based on written sources, the history of the subaltern is recreated through critical reading of scarcely available sources.⁶ The production of knowledge of

⁴ The confinement of Subaltern Studies to subaltern histories “alienated subalternity from *political histories* of popular movements and alienated subaltern groups from organized, transformative politics, in the past *and* in the present” (Ludden 2002, 16).

⁵ Bahl writes: “Trained in Western academic institutions, most of the Subaltern Studies members were clearly influenced by the prevailing trends in historical writings of the 1970s under the impact of social historians such as E.P. Thompson and Eric Hobsbawm. Subaltern Studies, in fact, represent the application of these ideas to Indian historiography. Although Subaltern Studies rejects metanarratives, their own conditions of existence and emergence remain primarily within the metanarrative. Today, the subaltern field heavily depends upon post-modernist ideas (which emerged in the West) and methods for textual analysis while at the same time claiming to ‘provincialise Europe and its history’” (360–1).

⁶ “British workers left diaries behind for British historians to find their voices in, but Indian workers and peasants did not leave behind any ‘original authentic’ voices. Therefore to find Indian subaltern voices, Subaltern Studies had to sue different methods of reading the available documents, that is, read them ‘against their grain’” (Bahl 2002, 361).

history and the effort to decolonize such colonially configured knowledge helped the Subalternists to identify the colonially subjugated knowledge of history. They recognized that only when history is rewritten from the point of view of the subaltern can one decolonize colonially subjugated knowledge and history. The significance of culture from a cultural relativism perspective countered the metanarrative by not just making it oppositional but also strategically identifying the specificities of the local culture's self-creation, liberation, and choice. Freedom and choice, therefore, moved to identify the demerits of the class system and challenge the epistemological tradition of historical materialism with questions beyond the boundaries of (pseudo) universalism and (pretensive) objectivism (see O'Hanlon and Washbrook).

Beyond the uniqueness of culture, every social system built on culture and relationships exhibits interconnections. Therefore, to determine the specificities of a culture, society, or event, one has to investigate the recurring social processes and historical conditions.⁷ When a culture is considered "inferior" to another, the cultural capability becomes unidentified and, therefore, its social relationships are frozen. When the West establishes itself as a "modern" culture in opposition to other cultures that are not "modern," it is the universal that legitimizes the existing inequalities. If culture is a collection of values and traditions associated with everyday life and the pattern of perceptions that allow us to assess the world, then culture does not undergo a transition because it is inept in terms of self-configuration and self-generation. Culture records a "world-view." When individuals engender history, culture extends a process of change that intersects the extant culture.

By evoking Gramsci and Marxist reflections, Subaltern Studies invoke credible situations and positions that suffered at the interstices. Nevertheless, gradually, it has been taken to a different territory that has centered on the critique of "Western-colonial power-knowledge" from a "non-Western 'community consciousness'" (Sarkar 2002, 400) anticipating alternatives. Sarkar writes, "With the withering hopes of radical transformation through popular initiative, conceptions of seamless, all-pervasive, virtually irresistible power-knowledge have tended to displace the evocation of moments of resistance central to the histories from below of the 1960s and 1970s. Domination is conceptualized overwhelmingly in cultural, discursive terms, as the power-knowledge of the post-Enlightenment West" (Sarkar

⁷ Bahl warns of the danger of analyzing culture: "Making "culture" the basis of historical analyses will only help ruling class interests to justify their actions against oppressed groups in the same social system" (373).

2002, 402). Exemplified within institutional positions, domination intends to be recognized in a differentially administrative nationhood involving the exploration of specific socio-political and economic interrelationships. Therefore, the emphasis is to attempt Marxist histories that critically analyze the Eurocentrism and universalism intrinsic to Marxist criticism.

The elitist bias conveyed by economic suppositions, which is also part of colonialist thinking, has been dealt with in terms of its substantial legitimacy by Subaltern Studies. It has displayed the “manipulative in colonial, and as idealistic or charismatic in nationalist, historiography” (Sarkar 2002, 403).⁸ Its intensive theoretical advancement has also resulted in essentializing “subalternity” and “autonomy”, thereby conveying predetermined “decontextualised meanings” (see Sarkar 2002, 403), which are often held responsible for Marxist inclinations.⁹ The exemplification of the subaltern is discarded on the basis of “culturalism,” leading to the manipulation of resistance that diverges from productive and dialectical aspects. Subaltern “social groups” contribute to the realm of economic production. The sphere of politics and the call for autonomy is concomitant to the reciprocated habituation of social formation. The interrelation between autonomy and domination is deceptive. When domination is overwhelming, autonomy becomes erroneous.¹⁰ Power relationships with extreme differences and

⁸ “The ‘historiography of colonial India’ somehow slides quickly into that of Indian nationalism: the fundamental lacuna is described as the failure, ‘to acknowledge the contribution made by the people *on their own* to the making an development of this nationalism,’ and the central problematic ultimately becomes ‘*the historic failure of the nation to come into its own*’” (Sarkar 2002, 408–9).

⁹ The issue of essentializing is complex and not only pertains to the Marxist inclinations of theoretical expositions. Sarkar elaborates: “That there had been such elements of ‘essentialism,’ ‘teleology’ and epistemological naivete in the quest for the subaltern subject has naturally not escaped the notice of recent post-modernistically inclined admirers. They tend, however, to blame such aberrations on Marxist residues which now, happily, have been largely overcome. What is conveniently forgotten is that the problems do not disappear through a simple substitution of ‘class’ by ‘subaltern’ or ‘community.’ Reifying tendencies can be actually strengthened by the disassociated detachment from socio-economic contexts and determinants out of a moral fear of economic reductionism” (Sarkar 2002, 405; see O’ Hanlon 2012).

¹⁰ For instance, “Said’s views regarding the overwhelming nature of post-Enlightenment colonial power-knowledge were applied to the colonized intelligentsia, who were thus virtually robbed of agency and held to have been capable of ‘derivative discourses.’ Beyond it lay the domain of community consciousness, still associated, though rather vaguely now with the peasantry, but embodied somehow in the figure of Gandhi, who was declared to have been uniquely

variations become unilinear as in the case of the colonial cultural domination erasing plurality and difference. The tussle between the “fragment” and the epistemologically indeterminate aspects of politics countering the Grand Narratives discard their fundamental explication. It is appropriated by derivative discourses. Therefore, the discourse against religio-cultural homogenization and dominant epistemic positions imposed against positivist positions regain abstract universalization for human contingencies.

Bahl recognizes another missing link in Subaltern Studies: “What is missing, however, in their analysis is: how do the social order and social institutions articulate in the formation of the subject (individual); or how is the link between social and psychic reality to be spelled out, let alone how it should be theorized?” (359). What lacks prominence is the “material culture, such as clothes, food, furniture, living and working conditions, housing, technology, and financial system, and failed to show how material culture is produced by human agency in the process of social interaction” (Bahl 2002, 359). Material culture is pivotal in the making of culture along with psychic ramifications. Besides, Subaltern Studies fails to contribute toward any “emancipatory politics” resulting in a positive change. Bahl raises pertinent questions:

Does Subaltern Studies as it has evolved up till now help us in getting closer to the goal of social justice for all? What type of collective action would be possible based on ‘differences’ as promoted by Subaltern Studies? With the promotion of ‘differences’ what type of actions would be taken and against what force/s? Do Subaltern Studies help in creating an emancipatory politics for the subalterns? Does this historiography help in understanding people’s lives their actions and their histories more meaningfully in terms of developing strategies to make their lives better? (366).

The history of Indian nationalism has been monopolized by “elitism” for a long time. Foreign elites portrayed Indian nationalism as an offer by a group of Indian elites who manipulated caste and communal bonds to organize the masses against British rule. Guha proposes that the elite views constitute neither a place for political action nor a place for the subalterns. History in “Subaltern Studies focused on: the distinction between the political intentions and methods of the colonial and elites and the subalterns and the autonomy of subaltern consciousness” (Chatterjee 2010, 295). The colonial historians’ argument that the mobilization of the masses for the anti-colonial

free of the taint of Enlightenment rationalism, prior to his partial appropriation by the Nehruvian ‘moment of arrival’” (Sarkar 2002, 408).

movement was based on “kinship and patron-client relations” was fallacious. Moreover, subaltern historians perceive the idealistic nationalist leaders as those who have been instrumental in invigorating the subaltern consciousness. The mode, objectives, and strategies of the subalterns are completely different from that of the elites. In short, “within the domain of nationalist politics, the nationalism of the elites was different from the nationalism of subaltern classes” (Chatterjee 2010, 296). Subaltern historians emphasize that subaltern politics has been configured by subaltern consciousness, which advanced from resistance, subjugation, and denial to protect their “collective identity”. To understand the autonomy of subaltern consciousness, one need not turn to the archives of the elite histories exemplifying their servitude. Their autonomy is demonstrated in the rebellion and resistance where they express their sovereignty and self-determination. Resistance and rebellion insist that subalterns have a consciousness and the means to organize protests. Therefore, if one has to find proof for autonomy, it has to be found in the “documents of revolt and counterinsurgency” (Chatterjee 2010, 292). Subaltern Studies has evolved from the instances of peasant revolt. By using the reports on peasant revolts provided by officials, subaltern historians analyze the consciousness of the rebel.¹¹ Guha argues that the subaltern of colonial India had an innately “autonomous domain” which is independent of elite politics and support. The foundations of the subaltern can be traced back to the pre-colonial period and then it continued to perform under British rule with fresh vigor. Resistive modes of subalternity reflect the autonomy of subaltern culture and consciousness. However, the autonomy of the subalterns and the hegemony of the elite enter into a relationship where resistance and domination stay oppositional.

¹¹ “They also showed that when elite historians, even those with progressive views and sympathetic to the cause of the rebels, sought to ignore or rationally explain away what appeared as mythical, illusory, millenarian or utopian in rebel actions, they were actually missing the most powerful and significant elements of subaltern consciousness. The consequence, often unintended, of this historiographical practice was to somehow fit the unruly facts of subaltern politics into the rationalist grid of elite consciousness and to make them understandable in terms of the latter. The autonomous history of the subaltern classes, or to put it differently, the distinctive traces of subaltern action in history, were completely lost in this history in this historiography” (Chatterjee 2010, 97).

II

Contested Histories and Politics of People is a critical discourse on the conceptual and analytical heritage of Subaltern Studies. Gramsci's contribution to the idea of the subaltern is discussed in Chapter One. Having first employed the idea of subaltern, Gramsci demarcated a group of people who suffered under the hegemonic domination of the ruling class that denied them fundamental rights in being part of history and culture as dynamic individuals of the nation. While Gramsci puts forward the idea of subaltern concerning the peasant classes under fascism, the scope of his study has reached across to unearth subaltern consciousness, culture, and history as a possible means to bring to light and voice the subaltern historical narrative blocked by hegemonic elite classes. Subaltern history is as complex as that of the ruling classes. In the long past, it remained unrecorded, had no conspicuous unity, and was limited in its representation and accessibility to social systems. It is in its splintered totality that its resistance to hegemony is configured.

Chapter Two discusses the historiographical project undertaken by Subaltern Studies, which is one of the most significant and persuasive trajectories in historical thought. Taking its cue from Gramsci, Subaltern Studies borrows its insights from poststructuralism, Marxism, and postcolonial theory to put forward a history from below. Guha's critical investigation of peasant movements and insurgency unearthed the absence of peasants in historical records as written from the perspective of colonial state authority. The peasant insurgency followed specific codes in exhibiting dissent and resistance to invert the existing social order. In his analysis, Guha presents a fresh picture of the dynamics of colonialism, as well as how it influenced and configured a resistant peasant consciousness and patterns of social conflict. Moreover, Subaltern Studies critically analyzed the nationalist historiography that advanced the ideology of nationalist leaders marshalling the Indian masses from the pre-political to nationalist era. This leadership transformed the masses from being the subjects of autocrats/despots to the citizens of the state. In this transformation, the elite leadership proved immensely oppressive to the varied forms of peasant leadership and mobilization subverting the national cause.

"Can the Subaltern Speak?" is a groundbreaking moment in Subaltern Studies and postcolonial theory. Drawing from poststructuralist sources, Spivak offers a critique of the Subaltern Studies project. While the subalternists recognize the empowerment in all forms of subaltern resistance, she points out that the unjustified sanguinity has been flawed and

inadequate. Moreover, she argues that the subaltern representation is itself enveloped in a posture of discursive power, which is not perceptible in the substantive experience of the oppressed but only through the subalternists' attempt to represent/speak for the subaltern classes. Bringing in examples from the real lives of women, she contests the patriarchal prejudice of the Subaltern Studies project. Cautioning the subalternists about how they formulated their subaltern historiography, she calls for a deconstructive method observant of the textual configuration of power and hegemonic discourses.

Latin American Subaltern Studies (LASS) vehemently articulates the "decolonial option" constituting itself as a model of critical postcolonial thought. Interrogating the insufficiencies of the traditional representation of subaltern as part of bourgeois-national and historical narratives, attempts were made to reclaim subaltern identity and dignity using the creative and productive potential of subaltern consciousness. LASS is a critical project against the hegemonic colonial experiences that exist unresolved. Therefore, deconstructing the historical narratives of the subjugated subaltern classes from their perspective will not only give voice to the subaltern but also bring to light the emergent subaltern dynamics resisting neo-colonial and globalized systemic dominations. As a strategic posture, LASS challenges the social, political, and heuristic intermediaries limiting the socio-political condition of the subaltern classes. Consequently, this project brings together the splintered movements that resist hegemonic state power in revolutionary ways by unearthing subsumed narratives.

The final chapter is a critical discussion on the subaltern and capital. In his now famous and comprehensive response to Subaltern Studies, Chibber argues that its basic suppositions are founded on logical and historical misconceptions. An assertion of a universalizing hypothesis without capitulating to Eurocentrism is an apparent possibility. Within colonial and postcolonial space, capitalism universalizes itself without infusing into varied aspects of social systems and practices. Chibber's notion of the rational human subject is based on the universalistic condition of human subjectivity. However, instead of getting into the dynamics of political power and the "axiomatic of imperialism," the analysis of Subaltern Studies remains incomplete. In a reductionist approach, Chibber envisages Marx as an Enlightenment theorist ignoring other philosophical traditions surrounding his arguments. Marxism concerned with Subaltern Studies and the capital exhibits the sovereignty of the varied realms of social life through persistent procedures.

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CHAPTER ONE

GRAMSCI AND THE SUBALTERN

The term “subaltern” constitutes an intricate and convoluted past. Around the 18th century, the term addressed the lower ranks in the military. The term “subaltern,” as used by Gramsci, denoted those subordinated by the hegemonies of power.¹² Gramsci interlaced his ideas on subaltern identity with class struggle. While the term “proletariat” had invited the consideration of fascism, the term “subaltern” had exhibited its merits. The term “subaltern” cuts across the boundaries of “capital” and “labor” to encompass a wider evocative influence. Besides, gathering under its umbrella are further forms of subjugation to hegemonic forces.¹³ Gramsci employed “subaltern” in a dual sense: primarily, as a “code” for the labouring class and, secondly, “the subaltern classes in precapitalist social

¹² Interpreting the term “subaltern” as used by Gramsci remains inconclusive. In his *Prison Notes*, Gramsci uses the term “subaltern classes.” It is a term enveloped with a political-ideological relationship. Modonesi notes, “It seems then that the use of ‘subaltern classes’ in various ways implies the lack of an exclusive definition. However, it is the only definition highlighted by Gramsci and placed at the center of his thinking, at the heart of the political-ideological relationship between the dominant and the dominated. On the other hand, it should be noted that Gramsci uses ‘subaltern classes’ as a synonym for ‘popular masses’ on one occasion and for ‘popular classes’ on another. This is a term interspersed throughout his notes along with ‘subaltern classes’, but which he does not highlight in the same way. In this sense, ‘subaltern classes’ both is and is not a synonym of ‘popular classes’, since the latter appears to be used in a sense that is more descriptive than analytic, in what could be called a second-order sense” (38).

¹³ The broader implication of the term “subaltern” involves “subjective formation”: “The specificity of the notion of subalternity refers to the subjective formation inherent in and derived from relationships and processes of domination. This formation occurs through the incorporation of collective experience of subordination, characterised fundamentally by the combination of acceptance and resistance within the frame of existing domination projecting towards a renegotiation or an adjustment of the exercises of power-over” (Modonesi 2019, 51).

formations” (Chatterjee 2006, 94).¹⁴ The latter sense of the term mainly connotes the subjugation of the peasantry.

The terms “subaltern” and “popular” are, for Gramsci, interchangeable. Hoare and Smith, in their “Introduction” to the *Prison Notebooks* observe that “it is difficult to discern any systematic difference in Gramsci’s usage” (1971, xiv) of the terms “subaltern” and “subordinate.” The conditions in which subalterns live are forced. They are subjugated by the power, policies, and initiatives of the dominant. The Gramscian “subaltern” is identical to the “popular classes” with subordinate social positions.¹⁵ The terms “subaltern classes” or “subaltern groups” in the *Prison Notebooks* allows Gramsci to employ an Aesopian language to avoid being censored. Hence, the “subaltern” shall be comprehended as peasants similar to that of the perception of the “philosophy of praxis” as Marxism or the “integral” as revolutionary (Beverly 1999, 12). “Subaltern” is not only an investigation of a group but also an intellectual approach towards subalternity. It is encompassed by the actions of the dominant even when they counter hegemony, and it is constantly in a state of “anxious defense.” Gramsci investigates the power relations by preserving their subordination and anticipating strategies to overcome this. He perceives the existence of peasants¹⁶ as a living force that has historical, political, cultural, and social

¹⁴ Within political modernity, subalternity is associated with the integral state: “Subaltern social groups are enclosed within the relations of the integral state, and it is precisely this ‘enclosure’ that constitutes them as distinctively modern subaltern social groups. They are conceived not as a sociological entity, endowed with a prior history that remains determining if not determinant, but as constituted solely within and by the novel political relationality that exists only within political modernity” (Thomas 2020, 179).

¹⁵ Thomas views Gramsci’s understanding of the subaltern “integral state” and “passive revolution” as interconnected: “On the one hand, subalternity is one of the themes by means of which Gramsci clarifies for himself the political significance of the concepts of the integral state and passive revolution; that is, subalternity is conceived as the concrete political relation that is produced by the historical emergence of the bourgeois integral state. On the other hand, the concept of the modern state as an ‘integral’ state, particularly when complemented by Gramsci’s parallel development of the notion of passive revolution as a ‘logic’ of state development in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, is one of the ways in which he clarifies the historical and political structuring dynamics of subalternity” (186).

¹⁶ Arnold explains how Gramsci understands the peasants: “For Gramsci, then, the peasants were not the doomed breed they so often appear as in the pages of Marx, inherently, even irredeemably, conservative and barbaric in the context of modern society. But neither did Gramsci veer to the opposite extreme: his childhood in

inclinations. Therefore, the study of subaltern insists on a close analysis to bring to light the historical particularities and subaltern consciousness as revealed by beliefs and histories.¹⁷

Subaltern is also developed as a socio-cultural identity and a conflict of positions. Beverley maintains that Gramsci's conception of the "subaltern" also proposes "the primacy in social conflict of determinations of consciousness, contradiction, and political agency that are in a broad sense cultural rather than economic or political" (Beverley 1999, 12). This brings out their rebellious and resistive potential and political agency.¹⁸ Guha appropriates the Gramscian concept of subaltern and the lower section of the society as a "lack" in the natural revolutionary attitude. Historians identify the schemes of the subaltern as a directive to their history. For Spivak,¹⁹ the word "subaltern" is "totally situational. Subaltern began as a

Sardinia had been too harsh, his experience of the peasantry too intimate, for him to espouse a romantic or utopian view of peasant life" (27).

¹⁷ Subaltern as a political-ideological category invokes the significance of historical consciousness in its discussion: "For Gramsci, historical consciousness appears as a preparatory moment for the very possibility of political action. It is important to be aware that the subaltern classes are capable of rebellion and that they represent a nucleus of autonomy in respect to the dominant classes which Gramsci values supremely—while recognizing that acting alone, they will always be insufficient" (Liguori 2015, 125).

¹⁸ This denotes the splintered nature of the subaltern: "The category of 'subaltern social groups/classes' encompasses many other components of society besides the 'working class' or proletariat.' A distinguishing characteristic that Gramsci identifies in subalterns and subaltern groups is their fragmentation. Not only are there multiple subaltern social classes or groups, they are also disconnected and quite different from one another" (Buttigieg 2013, 36).

¹⁹ "By "subaltern" Spivak means the oppressed subject, the members of Antonio Gramsci's subaltern classes or, more generally, those of inferior rank. Her question follows on from the work that began in the early 1980s by a collection of individuals now known as the Subaltern Studies group. The stated objective of this group was to promote a systematic and informed discussion of subaltern themes in the field of South Asian Studies. Further, they described their project as an attempt to study the general attribute of subordination in South Asian Society, "whether this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office or in any other way". Fully alert to the complex ramification arising from the composition of subordination, the Subaltern Studies group sketched out its wide-ranging concerns both with the visible "history, politics, economics and sociology of subalternity" and with the occluded "attitudes, ideologies and belief systems—in short, the cultural informing that condition." In other words, Subaltern Studies defined itself as "an attempt to allow people finally to speak within the jealous pages of elitist historiography and, in so

description of a certain rank in the military. The word was under censorship by Gramsci: he called Marxism ‘monism’ and was obliged to call the proletarian ‘subaltern.’ That word, used under duress, has been transformed into the description of everything that doesn’t fall under strict class analysis.” (Spivak 1990, 141). The word, however, does not involve any theoretical tenacity. Given the context of Gramscian state and culture, the perception of “subaltern” signifies an individual or a community subjugated by the power of state, class, caste, race, religion, gender, and/or patriarchy etc. Gramsci associates the term with varied literary representations of the subaltern underpinned within a subjugated position. Within “historical or literary documents, the subaltern may be presented as humble, passive or ignorant, but their actual lived experience may prove the contrary. Hence, an integral historian has to critically analyze the ways in which intellectuals represent varied conditions and aspirations of the subaltern” (Green 2011, 15). Subalterns are “non-hegemonic groups,” as they are fragmented and cannot be bound until they formulate a state. Consequently, the history of subalterns is connected to civil society.

The positive attributes bestowed on the subaltern as a political force enable the dispersion and isolation of peasants making it difficult to formulate organizations because, fundamentally, subalterns are a heterogeneous group. Subaltern classes encompass an ideology that can be designated as elementary. It is based on acquirement and protection. Moreover, “Even when the material structure of subaltern existence is transformed, ideas are slow to change” (Arnold 2012, 29). The oppositional nature of subaltern culture and politics mirrors the positive and negative features of culture where subordination prevails over a dialectical struggle. Besides, it travels between segregation and collectivity. The importance of consistency and carrying through the positivity of subaltern identities contributes to further interjections in history. Gramsci also recognizes that, from the viewpoint of the subalterns, the consideration of subaltern history was confined by the scarcity of source materials.²⁰

doing, to speak for, or to sound the muted voices of, the truly oppressed” (Gandhi 1998, 1–2).

²⁰ Sarker observes: “The history of subaltern groups is adjacent to this narrative and consigned to time—eternal, abstract, unchanging, un-linear, outside material structure. In other words, subaltern groups may have internal histories but, in their inability to participate or actualize, exist in the a-historical...Subaltern groups, in this aspect of inhabiting time rather than history, are characterized by their paradoxical inclusion in, and exclusion from, statehood. It can be said that this paradox is founded on, and justified by, the paradigm of more than one history in

The idea of subaltern groups was not a theoretical exposition but a category correlating with the political relationships and affiliations of subordination, which Gramsci attempted to alter through political leadership. Gramsci's vision for a politics of inclusion is a radical political idea inclusive of subaltern social groups who reside at the margins of society. The politics of inclusion is an effort to progress towards the center of social and political life instead of the political forces and cultural aspects that averted subaltern social groups from surmounting marginalization. Subaltern social groups widely exhibited their dissatisfaction through collective actions and by their involvement in rebellions. However, they were unable to permanently alter their social conditions. The uprisings were impulsive, spontaneous, and uncontrollable. Hence, they lacked proper alignment, management, discipline, and leadership to permanently transform the plight of subaltern social groups and surmount the dominant ones. However, Gramsci identifies spontaneity as a key trait of subaltern uprisings that edifies and appeals to the masses.

Spontaneous uprisings “have real value in so far as they reveal among the masses a capacity, the beginnings of a new life, the aspiration to create new institutions and the historical drive to renew human society from the roots upwards” (Gramsci 1977, 454). Moreover, the refusal to give credit to the “conscious leadership” of subaltern uprisings is akin to the formation of the “reactionary movement” of the dominant class. Gramsci is mindful of the reality that the subaltern groups “are always subjected to the activity of ruling groups, even when they rebel and rise up: only ‘permanent’ victory breaks their subordination, and not that immediately”. In reality, “even when they appear triumphant, the subaltern groups are merely anxious to defend themselves” (Gramsci 1971, 54). Therefore, he emphasizes the need for a conscious leadership which can direct and organize so that it is able to transform society permanently with an inculcated awareness and ability to constitute and execute a fresh set of social relations to overcome the disparities imposed on them by the dominant classes.

To understand the Gramscian conception of “subaltern,” one has to locate the significance of his critique of the passive notion of culture. Instead of envisaging culture as an “encyclopedic knowledge,” Gramsci wants society to be set free. Irrespective of being repositories of empirical data and body of disconnected raw facts stuffed in the brain as “columns of a dictionary,” human beings shall be enabled to respond to the challenges of the world. A

which the dominant power legitimizes its version and the ‘other (subaltern groups) represented as living in an-other history, which I call ‘time’ above” (97).

culture stuffed with “encyclopedic knowledge” is detrimental to the proletariat because it fashions a “maladjusted” triumphalist society assuming superiority over rest of the humanity and creates obstruction between themselves and others (See Gramsci 2000, 10–1). Gramsci warns about the risk of assuming culture as an all-encompassing knowledge where human beings become mere subjective recipients. Such a notion of culture thwarts the ability to critically approach social systems and issues. In a context where power is exerted top-down, culture as “encyclopedic knowledge” is imposed and left to subjugation. Culture, here, does not encourage dynamic intellectual commitment with others cutting across borders. It forms a “kind of weak and colorless intellectualism” creating “pretentious babblers” who disconnect themselves from others by patronizing the “regurgitation” of facts. The intellect added to such culture is uncritical and dogmatic, thereby denying any opportunity to interrogate one’s socio-political standing and paving the way for monoculture. Culture is an “organization, discipline of one’s inner self, a coming to terms with one’s own personality; it is the attainment of a higher awareness, with the aid of which one succeeds in understanding one’s own historical value, one’s own function in life, one’s own rights and obligations” (Gramsci 2000, 11). This process cannot be an unprompted evolution involving actions and reactions autonomous of one’s will as expressed through the fatalistic law of things. Hence, human beings are a product of “history, not nature.” It is this stance that legitimizes and elucidates the presence of oppressors and oppressed: “the creators of wealth and its selfish consumers” (Gramsci 2000, 11).

Culture is a symmetrical alignment that focuses on the regulation of one’s inner self. It denatures one’s personality so that one can achieve higher awareness with the help of historicity and obligations. Locating human beings as the product of history, Gramsci intends to recognize the “actions and reactions” that are dependent on one’s will. Therefore, change is influenced by human beings. Gramsci’s idea of culture offers a platform for political struggle, as well as an augmentation to critical awareness and the ability to differentiate the values imposed on the subaltern social groups throughout history. Such an awareness transforms itself into consciousness through intellectual reflection on the formulation of resistance. Resistance to consciousness is not only a corporal requirement but also a result of an intellectual reflection where the conditions of social systems are to be reconstructed. Resistance should proceed with the dissemination of culture and ideas among those who have ties of solidarity.

Non-hegemonic collective

Subalterns are a non-hegemonic collective that is “not unified and cannot unite until they are able to become a ‘State’” (Gramsci 1971, 203). However, the subaltern is a heterogeneous majority group thwarted from making political coalitions to form state power. Power is vested in the hands of capital and coercive force remains the possession of the state and public administration. The dispersal of basic amenities and the agencies involved in marshalling credit are all under the state. The subalterns partook significantly in the struggle against the state but “did not participate in the ideological and practical debates of élite leadership” (Schwarz 1997, 122; see Guha 1992, 69–120). An examination of the Gramscian context depicts the significant relationship between the state and civil society, nation and people, bourgeoisie and working-class, as well as how intellectuals contributed to the formulation of social hegemony and counter-hegemonic coalitions. It is within these associations that Gramsci envisages the possibility of a new state. Creating a new state, which is the foundation of the Gramscian vision for subaltern social groups, requires organization, leadership, and discipline because states are fashioned by charitable heroism and passion, discipline, persistence, consistency, and contempt for irresponsibility. To attain a new civilization, the socio-cultural, political, and economic divisions are to be addressed within subaltern social groups. A responsible and responsive political institution can offer the right political direction, unity, and leadership to the heterogeneous subaltern masses. However, subalterns have always been the subject of dominant groups, even when they resist and challenge their dominance. Their success was transient and was rapidly sunk by their subordination. Moreover, “Subaltern is prevented from becoming dominant, or from developing beyond the economic-corporate stage and rising to the phase of ethical-political hegemony in civil society, and of domination in the State” (Gramsci 1971, 372).²¹

²¹ “The perspective of the subalternity assumes the relations of domination—characterized by the exercise of power-over—as a field of emergence, formation, and development of political subjectivities, and the experience of subordination as a factor. Underlying this perspective are antagonism and autonomy as projections of subaltern subjectivity, as experiences of insubordination and self-determination: power-against and power-to respectively” (Modonesi 2019, 48).

The notion of hegemony is the “unifying thread” in Gramsci’s *Prison Notebooks*.²² The foundational assumption of the theory of hegemony is “that man is not ruled by force alone, but also by ideas” (Bates 1975, 351). Gramsci identifies the hegemony and ideology of the dominant as the governing principle of a society. Hegemony “is an ideological or, in the poststructuralist framework, discursive reality and that it is not correlated with any one particular class” (Britton 1999, 53). The foundation of ruling class, according to Gramsci, reflects a singular global purview. Similarly, Marx and Engels maintained that “the ruling ideas of each age have ever been the ideas of its ruling class” (26). Central to Gramsci’s conception of power is the ideological unity determined by a particular social group. Classless citizens subscribe to the dominant ideology of a society. The Gramscian comprehension of hegemony involves class dynamics. Hegemony is the consequence of the favorable historical endeavor of the bourgeoisie. When the alteration is ineffective, “bourgeois rule is always a case of infirm capitalism riding on the back of what is feudal; being the rider, to stretch the analogy, it channels the energies of pre-capitalist forces, however active they may be” (Alam 2002, 50). Therefore, to discuss hegemony without associating it with the substance and significance of capitalist transformation is to negotiate with an “empty distraction” (Alam 2002, 50).

Subaltern is “nonhegemonic” and eliminated from the representation of the dominant in the society.²³ When appropriated in actual historical contexts, hegemonies manipulate subalternity and conserve hegemonic fundamentals. Therefore, there is no “alternative hegemony” that could counter hegemony or involve the subaltern groups. Neither did Gramsci present subalternity as an everlasting state of victimhood. The category of the subaltern calls for depoliticization because hegemony suppresses any revolution against the state power and is stripped off any “intellectual and moral leadership.”

²² Thomas explains, “Hegemony in this context is conceived as the practice of the material constitution of the type of political power specific to the modern state,” transcending the superstructural elements like civil society and political state (188).

²³ Modonesi notes that, “subalterns appear as passive or apathetic, they suffer the hegemonic initiative, fundamentally a non-violent imposition and the assimilation of subordination, that is, the internalization the values proposed by those who dominate, or who morally and intellectually drive the historical process. Gramsci reinforces the point, noting that his relational mechanism operates even in rebellion, thus implicitly rejecting any Manichean dualism that attempts to divide real subjects based on a separation of resistance, rebellion, and submission as separate moments, in the same way that he rejects the dualism of spontaneity and conscious direction” (36).

Within the formulation of a dynamic ruling class, the state does not accomplish the integration of working class because the pivotal power is strategically functional at the top.

Subaltern history

History is indispensable to deciphering Gramsci's comprehension of subalternity. Gramsci's apprehension about how the literary representations of the subaltern augmented their subjugated position as the records present a modest, submissive, and unwitting subject. However, their real lives proved the contrary. Gramsci envisioned that a historian must document and ascertain the reasons for the progressions toward "integral autonomy," which makes him an integral historian.²⁴ An integral historian has to critically evaluate the method in which the intellectual (re)presents the "conditions and aspirations" of the subaltern. An integral historian is not just a chronicler but comprehends the socio-political, cultural, and economic inferences of historical events in depth. Integral history understands "the totality and complexity of the historical process, from the tendencies of the economic structure to the forms of popular culture that shape [...] the consciousness of the masses" (Duslat 1987, 61). Subalternity is not a "meta-historical or meta-theoretical" idea. The philosophy of praxis emphasizes not only an "absolute historicism" but also an "absolute humanism of history" (Gramsci 1971, 27). However, instead of seeing history as an external force, as in idealism or positivism, which diminishes history to natural laws, Gramsci views history as a human output. Humans are the advocates and protagonists of history. They alter history themselves. The relationship between history and human is a dialectic between "subjective human action and objective historical conditions", thereby allowing history to bear witness to the present:

Every real historical phase leaves traces of itself in the succeeding phases which in turn become its best document, in a certain sense. The process of historical development is a unity in time, which is why the present contains

²⁴ Gramsci envisions autonomy as a part of the subaltern struggle against power: "The condition of subalternity can only be overcome through the attainment of autonomy and that, according to Gramsci, can only come about through a lengthy process and a complicated struggle. In order to engage in a successful struggle against the existing power structure, it is necessary, first of all, to understand precisely what makes it so resilient and durable. The dominant classes in modern states do not hold on to power solely, or even primarily, because they control the coercive apparatuses of the government" (Buttigieg 38).