

# Conceptualising Subaltern Politics in India: A Theoretical Framework

Phulmoni Das  
Assistant Professor  
Department of Political Science  
Dibrugarh University  
Dibrugarh, Assam  
Pin: 786004  
Contact Number: 7002116417  
Email Id: phulmoni2508.das@gmail.com

## Article Info

Volume 82

Page Number: 5065 - 5073

Publication Issue:

January-February 2020

## Abstract:

This paper deals with the theoretical understanding of the term subaltern, subalternity and subaltern politics in India. It also highlights the contribution made by the subaltern studies group towards the understanding of subaltern politics in India. In the contemporary times subaltern social groups is placed in relation to socio economic relation, political institutions and cultural forms and their struggle against the unequal power structure, unjust societies and unequal developmental trajectories. It was found that the subaltern politics cannot be identified as an autonomous domain since the dominant and subaltern discourse has become interdependent in the present socio political context. The politics of elite and subaltern cannot be formulated or separated rigidly rather they are more flexible and interconnected. The study further asserted that the different subaltern groups also celebrated their differences and heterogeneity while the earlier subaltern struggle was seen as the struggle for recognition of equals. By celebrating and acknowledging the differences they try to produce their identity. Therefore the study comes into proposition how the subalternity and differences intersects with each other owing to the context in which it has been examined.

**Keywords:** Subaltern, Subalternity, Subaltern Politics, Resistance, Power

## Article History

Article Received: 18 May 2019

Revised: 14 July 2019

Accepted: 22 December 2019

Publication: 25 January 2020

The term Subaltern signifies a group of people or an individual who falls outside the power structure and is without any agency by their or his/her social, political and economic status. The subalterns thus represent a community or the individuals who are not a part of the elite but under their subordination. The term elite here refers to the colonial elite, post-colonial elite, indigenous elite, regional elites etc. Further, the category 'elite' and 'subaltern' cannot be put in a fixed category as it depends greatly on a given context. For example, a class which is dominant in

an area can also be seemed to be dominated in another area. Likewise, the subaltern concept too has a long history of its formation. The term Subaltern was first used by Italian Marxist political activist Antonio Gramsci in his widely known book, *Prison Notebook*. Gramsci in his meaning of the word subaltern consigned to that faction of people in a society suffering under the ideological domination of the ruling elite section as a result of this eroding their agency of being in creating their local history and culture as citizens.<sup>1</sup> Further Gramsci was also interested in studying

the formation of the class consciousness and culture among the subalterns to make their voice heard, that he speculated would not happen if they rely on the historical narrative of the State, as the history of the State happens to be the history of the ruling class.<sup>2</sup> Gramsci at the same time tried to analyse the politics of making of the subalterns or the position of the Subalternity by inquiring into the various dimensions of its transformations<sup>3</sup>-

- a. in the sphere of economic production;
- b. their propaganda representing the mentality, ideology and aims which the subalterns have conserved for a time
- c. their active or passive affiliation to the dominant political formations
- d. their attempts to influence the programmes of these formations in order to press claims of their own, and the consequences of these attempts in determining processes of decomposition, renovation or neo-formation.
- e. the new developments that occurred along with the growth of the subaltern consciousness leading to the birth of new parties of the dominant groups which intend to appease the subaltern groups and also maintain control over them;
- f. the formations which the subaltern groups themselves produce, to press claims of a limited and partial character;
- g. and finally, those new formations which assert the autonomy of the subaltern groups, but within the old framework etc.

Thus, within this context, one can locate the term "Subaltern Politics" as the groundwork of Gramscian thought. Here the Subaltern politics uses interchangeably the phenomenon exercised by the Subaltern in making of the Subalternity a contextual event, and the formation of the

subaltern conscious of identity despite their dispersion over a wide geographical area, cultural backgrounds, race or class etc. It studies the trajectories of the development of consciousness formation of the subaltern community over a shared experience, and use of this consciousness in the articulation of interest by the new community to influence policy formulations or to create a permanent revolution by dismantling the master/slave patterns of cultural hegemony created by the ruling class.

Based on Gramscian views on the subaltern politics, *the subaltern studies* group led by Ranajit Guha, Partha Chatterjee, Dipesh Chakrabarty etc. tried to analyse the subaltern's resistance to modern forms of power and domination. They tried to analyse the resistance and movements of the peasants, workers, traditionally and historically neglected groups, the rural and urban poor, scheduled castes, scheduled tribes, landless, the dispossessed and women. The central argument of the subaltern studies group tends to contradict the present phenomenon of subaltern politics is their belief that "the politics of subaltern social groups should be conceived as constituting an 'autonomous domain' that is different and distanced from the realm of *elite politics*"<sup>4</sup>. Here the subaltern social groups consist of the part of the population which is composed of the working classes, peasantry, and subordinate classes, that are not a part of the elite. Thus, the identity of the subaltern here is derived from the meaning "subordination" and is used to identify homogenous binary i.e. 'the subaltern' signifying the subordinated groups in South Asian society and 'the elite' signifying the constitutive dominant group in that society<sup>5</sup>. Ranajit Guha in this regard analysed the peasants' revolt during the colonial period in his, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* where he tried to conclude that the peasant revolt was directed by the subaltern conception of reality and was free and independent from the mainstream elite politics

and consciousness. In other words, he argued that, the consciousness of the peasants was not derived from the political influence of the elites, but it was in its pure state, and the rebellion signified the true vocation of the peasants to end their oppression indicating an active political character of the subaltern identity<sup>6</sup>. However, this participation of the peasants articulating their grievances against colonial exploitation was excluded by the grand historiography of nationalist freedom struggle. Ranajit Guha in this context criticises the mainstream historiography for stressing all praise for the middle-class elites as speaking for the nation excluding the participation of these subaltern peasant groups in resisting colonial exploitation. Guha with this argument tried to recover the agency of the subaltern that had been denied by the elite historiography, through his strategic use of the subaltern as an “autonomous subject-agents”.

Spivak in her essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” criticized Guha’s contention that the Subalterns is an autonomous subject. According to her, the subaltern can be represented or retrieved only within the dominant structure of elite discourse. As there is no space separate from the dominant discourses available to the subaltern to speak, they have to speak within the available dominant discourse. Guha and other historians of the subaltern studies groups are thereby blamed for objectifying the subalterns while attempting to give voice to them. Partha Chatterjee in this connection framed a dichotomous relationship between *political society and civil society*. Chatterjee somehow deviated from the debate that whether subalterns are autonomous subjects by acknowledging that, the deepening and widening of the apparatus of governability have transformed and influenced vehemently the quality of mass politics. According to him, the subaltern politics operates in the terrain of political society where civil society remains a domain of elite politics and political society. Partha Chatterjee in his book,

*The Politics of the Governed* coined the term “Political Society” signifying the existence of the majority of people in varying degrees of subordination in postcolonial India along with the privileged few. This condition, he claimed has enabled these subordinate subaltern populations to make claims on patrons within governmental structures, to use electoral democracy strategically to their advantage, and to engage in seemingly uncivil or unruly forms of politics that nonetheless serve their interests.

### **Understanding the Subaltern and the Subaltern Politics: Contribution of the Subaltern School:**

As discussed above, the subaltern is a term which is commonly referred to persons who are systematically kept outside the hegemonic power structure. In the 1970s the term widely began to be used as a reference to the colonized people in the South Asian subcontinent. The Subaltern is now regularly used as a term in history, anthropology, sociology and literature<sup>7</sup> The notion of Subaltern was first used by Antonio Gramsci in his *Prison Notebooks* written between 1929 and 1935. Gramsci first used the term ‘subaltern’ to refer the non-commissioned military troops, who were subordinate to the authority of the lieutenants, colonels, and generals. Later, Gramsci broadened the purview of ‘subaltern’ by referring to other sections of the society other than military groups. So, the subaltern classes refer fundamentally in Gramsci’s words to any ‘low rank’ person or group of people in a particular society suffering under hegemonic domination of a ruling elite class that denies them the basic rights of participation in the making of local history and culture as active individuals of the same nation<sup>8</sup>. Here, the words subaltern and subalternity refer to those who are subordinate to a ruling group’s policies and initiatives, who have been marginalized, distorted, suppressed and sometimes even whose history is forgotten and whose voice is never heard. It reinforces the point

as Gyanendra Pandey has mentioned that not all citizens (or human beings) are born equal because they are treated as 'second class' in spite of granting the formal status of citizens, who are deprived and denied formal citizenship altogether. The Subalternity as a concept gained worldwide attention with the collective effort of the group called subaltern studies headed by Ranajit Guha. The group comprises several South Asian historians, social critics and scholars such as Shahid Amin, Dipesh Chakrabarty, David Arnold, Partha Chatterjee, David Hardiman, Gyanendra Pandey and Sumit Sarkar. The Subaltern school is a movement in itself which stands against elitist historiography. It started its journey as a strong critic of the two contending schools of history: the Cambridge school and the nationalist historians. The Subaltern school believes that historiography produced by these two groups only reflects the elitist point of view and represents only their achievements and success. They did not record or accounted for the history of 'the contribution made by people *on their own* that is *independent of the elite* to the making and development of nationalism'.<sup>9</sup> This is what Ranajit Guha called history from below. Therefore, the objective of subaltern studies is to analyse the history of those people whose voices were not heard, who were an undeniable subject of history but independent of elite groups. Ranajit Guha defines 'the subaltern as a name for 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'.<sup>10</sup> Here subaltern school argued that elitist historiography ignores the 'politics of the people'. According to Guha, an autonomous group of subaltern classes composed of the labouring population and the intermediate strata in town and country has existed along with the domain of elite politics in the colonial period. The politics of the referred autonomous group of people differs from the domain of elite politics where Guha asserted that the politics of people's resistance was there due to the *failure of Indian*

*bourgeoisie* to speak for the nation. In the book, *Elementary Aspects of Peasants Insurgency in Colonial India* within this context, he has elaborately dealt with various aspects of peasant's insurrection in colonial India. This peasant's uprising had a 'separate and autonomous agenda' against the landlords, the money lenders and the colonial government officials. Guha pointed out that even in the case of resistance and protest by urban workers; the 'figure of mobilization' was one that was derived from peasant insurgency<sup>11</sup>. This context has invited fierce criticism from Guha towards the Eurocentric Marxism which ignored the protest and problems of the peasants of India, which was characterized by Hobsbawm as pre-political. Here pre-political is referred by Hobsbawm as the lack of any organised ideology and consciousness. He called that the peasants' insurrection of the colonial period were 'pre-political', as he believed that these movements were mostly unorganised and devoid of political consciousness. However, Ranajit Guha disagreed with the Hobsbawm's views on considering peasants and tribal uprising as 'Pre-Political' rather, Guha tried to highlight that subaltern groups had the awareness of what they were doing and for what.<sup>12</sup> That is why Ranajit Guha opposed many prevailing academic historiographical writing for its failure to regard the subaltern as the makers of its destiny. So, he refused to accept the Hobsbawm's comment on peasant insurgency as 'pre-political'. The radical popular protest of the 60s and 70s, especially of the peasants, the imposition of Emergency, and the high-handed response of the Indian state to the civil unrest of those times created a legitimacy crisis of the Indian state. Therefore, the Subaltern Studies project came up with an alternative to understand those times. The Subaltern studies school collective was influenced by the social history of Hill, Hobsbawm and Thompson and their approach of writing 'history from below'. It was the 'product of its times' which emerged with



the objective of 'rectifying the elite biases' of Indian historiography.

### **Subalternity and Subaltern Politics in India**

The people's resistance to elite domination represents the core of the politics of 'subalternity'. The concept of the subaltern moved to further debate with the intervention and arguments put forward by Indo-American, postcolonialist feminist critic, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, who criticized the subaltern school of thought in her ground-breaking essay 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' Spivak pointed to the absence of gender questions in Subaltern Studies. Spivak questioned the representation of women in the true sense of the term by reiterating her standpoint that 'the subaltern cannot speak.' Nevertheless, the subaltern historiography tried to develop a new kind of history, the history of the masses or history from below. The histories that the subaltern studies scholars have sought to engage are the histories of the underprivileged and disenfranchised, religious, ethnic, and sexual minorities, marginal nationalities, dispossessed indigenous communities; immigrant labourers, rural poor, urban squatters and working people of numerous other description; African- American and Dalit women in the US and India, Dalits and women etc<sup>13</sup>. Therefore, the subaltern studies school is an endeavour to liberate the disenfranchised voices of history and empower the masses, this is what subaltern studies project is engaged with.

The concept of Subalternity has been reinvented by the subaltern studies. The project made itself original by divorcing itself from Gramsci to invent a distinctively Indian Subalternity<sup>14</sup>. The concepts like domination, subordination, hegemony, resistance, revolt and other old concepts could be used interchangeably as the subaltern because these are associated with the marginal people whose voice has been

suppressed or ignored earlier. Subalternity refers to the state of condition of the subject under exclusion and marginalization. Vinay Gidwani opined that the subalternity as the state of being subaltern of the persons and groups hierarchically positioned as subordinate or inferiors within the nation states, capitalist production relations, or relations of patriarchy, race, caste, and so forth.<sup>15</sup> Therefore, it is observable that the meaning or the trajectory of the term subaltern has moved from identity to power even within the Subaltern Studies project. Since the notion of Subalternity is no longer only characterized with the identity positions, it has shifted and associated with the domain of power, subordination and agency within a specific set of social relation. Gidwani's observation on the term 'Subaltern' is only limited to the empirical designation of subaltern groups but the term subaltern and subalternity can be understood in terms of the subordination of class, caste, gender, language, culture, race etc. It can be looked from the perspective of below or the category of otherness who are systematically being oppressed through the legitimate power structure in the society. It is the structure of power which creates the position of subordination and systematically sidelines the common masses from the position of privilege. This position of subordination has been created in a specific context of social relation where Dalits, women, tribal or Adivasis and minorities etc. have been the target of oppression. But there is a contradiction regarding the consideration of 'autonomous domain' of subaltern class. Guha tried to affirm that subalterns acted independently of elites and their politics constituted an autonomous domain, 'for it neither originated from elite politics nor did its existence depend on the latter'. In this context, Marcus Green's views on the subalternity of the subaltern can be referred. The subaltern according to Green is not just the non elite but those who are 'also displaced and they lack political organization and representation'.<sup>16</sup> Spivak in this regard pointed out

that 'subalternity is where social lines of mobility, do not permit the formation of a recognizable basis of action'<sup>17</sup>. It is therefore in this sense Spivak noted that proletariat is not a subaltern group because it is organized in most instances, as the subaltern in true sense is deprived of the systematic organization and representation and they are being structurally obstructed from accessing power and voice. For her, representation and organization are key to Subalternity and once they are achieved the subaltern cease to be a subaltern. However, this conception is quite distinct from that of Gramsci. As for Gramsci, disorganization is an element of Subalternity but not the determining element, as a subaltern group can exercise some degree of political organization without hegemonic influence but still be subject to the activity of dominant groups<sup>18</sup>. Gramsci contended that mere organization would not resolve a group marginalization without the transformation of the relations of subordination which would resolve group marginalization. Given this, Subalternity cannot be reduced to the politics of representation alone.

Subalternity was thus conceptualized concerning multiple social groups and the power relations between them. It cannot be reducible to any singular social axis such as gender and class as the early subaltern historians concentrated on the tussle between the peasant communities and the political economy of colonial capitalism. In contemporary times the subaltern social groups are positioned with socio-economic relation, political institutions, and cultural forms and their struggle against the unequal power structure, unjust societies and unequal developmental trajectories. Keeping in view of the expanding theorisation of subalternity, Partha Chatterjee in one of his articles published in Economic and Political Weekly asserted that ever since India's Independence and economic liberalization, the nature of subalternity has changed and requires

fresh modes of analysis<sup>19</sup>. Apart from India's economic growth and social transformation since the 1990s, the existence of persistent poverty, rampant violation and discrimination against Dalits, Adivasis, workers, minorities, women etc. has covered the wide diversity of subordinate or marginalized groups under the aspect of subaltern resistance to the state. Close observations of functioning of the 'everyday state', the magnitudes of compromises and negotiations which needed to work alongside it amidst the politics of corruption, exploitation, subordination and violence of the state machinery and its daily retaliation by the subaltern groups has definitely broadened the purview of subalternity<sup>20</sup>. Hence, the subaltern politics in India is manifested through everyday forms of resistance, via rights based campaigns on the terrain of civil society and participation in electoral democracy, to armed struggles for revolutionary transformations<sup>21</sup>. Similarly Corbridge and Harris in their book '*The Reinvention of India*' show how the dominant and subaltern groups engage in the complex process of negotiation, contestation and struggle over the future form, direction, and meaning of democracy and development, redistribution and recognition and ultimately the very edifice upon which the Indian state rests. The post-1991 neo-liberalisation the Indian Political Economy has further led to the development of a new form of subaltern politics such as the intensification of the struggle against land acquisition and forceful displacement. Therefore, the Subaltern social movements and struggles in India today has continued to proliferate in the post-1991 neo-liberalization of the economy. This process has accelerated the growth of newer domains of subalternation and domination such as forceful displacement and expulsions of Adivasis from their native land areas, the de-peasantisation because of agricultural crisis. Corbridge and Harris also demonstrated the continued relevance of the state and the democratic process for subaltern politics through multiple examples like how even after various

constitutional and legal safeguards by the Indian State, these measures have so far been unsuccessful in transforming the lives and livelihood of the subalterns. Despite the failure of the Indian State in securing the concerns of these subalterns, it has been successful in initiating awareness of potential collective strength among the subaltern groups and has a significant impact on the bargaining position of the subaltern groups, vis-a-vis dominant groups. The formation of caste or class-based political parties or the emergence of the socio-political organization from the subaltern groups does not necessarily improve the living standard of the poor and deprived. Nevertheless, it can be termed as a democratic upsurge with the involvement of the lowest group of the society in the electoral politics that makes them a force to be reckoned with the potential to influence the hierarchy of power in the society. Significantly, the Anti-Dam movement, Adivasi's resistance, Tribal rebellion, Dalit revolution, Women movements, other movements led by civil society, issues generated by LGBT, ethnic movement, the environmental movement, etc. are the immanent forces with the potential to transcend and transform the social-formation. All these subaltern forces emerged through definite subversion of the power relations that can halt modern India to deliver the promises of progress at the cost of the lives of social majorities. Hence, there are multiple forms of subaltern politics which represent another long history, that of resistance to the established order by those who have been the objects of oppression<sup>22</sup>. Here, the multiple forms of subaltern politics represent the domain of excluded, oppressed and the category of otherness who have their own space of autonomy which differs from the politics of elite and which is operated within the state. This diverse form of subaltern politics becomes a challenge to the state apparatus. Therefore, with the rolling back of the state, the marginalized sections became more vulnerable and the legitimacy of the state is questioned now. The issues which affected

different sections of the society inclusive of caste, tribe, gender, ethnic, and religious groups, became a part of the generalized discourse of discussions, making the issues a 'Public Character' and the collective demand for rights and justice, and their struggle for empowerment made it 'political'. The subaltern politics entered into a new trajectory where the politics of struggle did not remain confined within the political and civil rights but has widened to include the social and economic rights of the marginalized. The subaltern struggle for rights, justice, equality and freedom has expanded the capacity of civil society and widened the dimension of democratic participation. The subaltern mobilisations have provided a political alternative and opened up democratic space for transforming the very nature of the polity. In this context it can be referred to the multiple grassroots social movements that have been initiated by the different subaltern groups such as anti-dam movement, tribal and Adivasis movements against different policies of the government, Dalit movements against social injustice and exclusion, women movements against patriarchy and gender discrimination etc. have translated the submissive language of subaltern from mass alienation to mass mobilization. Therefore, the subaltern struggle for rights has expanded the capacity of civil society and it has widened the scope of democratic participation of the masses. It has transformed the nature of the politics in India with increasing participation of the subaltern groups and rising grassroots movements. Along with the rising of subaltern movement in contemporary time, it is also worth mentioning that the subaltern started to be seen as arising not outside but inside the dominant discourse. Partha Chatterjee in this context tried to analyse the trajectories of history to explain the changes in the conceptualization of the subaltern<sup>23</sup>. At present the subalterns use bureaucratic and institutional means or the ways to achieve their goals, resembling the characteristics of elite politics. Because the

contemporary political activism of the subaltern is no longer manifested through an actual confrontational rebellion as it was the case of peasant insurgency as expressed by Ranajit Guha. Subaltern politics in contemporary time is reflected through different institutional and constitutional means to achieve their objectives which resembles the politics of elite and which also differs from the earlier notion of subaltern movements. Thus, it can be referred that the politics of the subaltern and the elite shows significant interconnectedness in the making of the Indian nation. So, the politics of subaltern and elite cannot be formulated or separated under watertight compartments, rather they are more flexible and interconnected. It is in this context it can be questioned whether there is real political autonomy of the subaltern classes existed or not if the politics of the elite and subaltern interconnected. But it is also not always true that the political autonomy of the subaltern never existed. Rather in contemporary time autonomy of the subaltern politics is affected by several influences. Peasant uprisings of the colonial period as mentioned by Guha and present social movements which exist in a different socio-political context, which explain different conceptualisation of the subaltern and the subaltern politics. As it has been mentioned earlier that spontaneous or sporadic rebellion of the subaltern have transformed the subaltern politics to a new form of politics where they have operated the strategy of elitist which gives a new dimension to the subaltern politics. The autonomy of subaltern politics from elite politics as referred by Ranajit Guha can be reinterpreted. Therefore, the subalterns as an autonomous political and cultural agent has been deconstructed by Spivak and O' Hanlon whereas recently the emphasis shifts to interdependency between the subaltern and the dominant culture<sup>24</sup>. The subaltern politics, therefore, can be considered as an alternative culture and politics but it cannot be identified as an independent autonomous domain since

dominant and subaltern discourse has become reciprocal in the present socio-political context.

The subaltern struggle can, therefore, be considered as the politics of difference and heterogeneity. Earlier the struggles of the oppressed and subordinated were seen as a struggle for recognition as equals. But in contemporary times the battle has extended to recognize the difference, now the different subaltern group is concentrating on celebrating their difference which is a way to produce their identity. Gyanendra Pandey has well argued that there has been a growing awareness relating to the diversity in gender, communal practices, understanding the ways of being, languages and beliefs in human experience. Therefore, Subalternity and difference rolled into one. The difference as Subalternity. Subalternity as difference<sup>25</sup>. For example, in the recent years Dalit social movements and their intellectual leaders tend to project themselves as constituting autonomous alternative cultural domain existing outside of nationalist Hindu culture<sup>26</sup>. By seeking the recognition to be different has been a new domain in subaltern politics. The modern world encouraged new visions of the subaltern that do not seek similarity but are for the recognition of difference<sup>27</sup>. Hence, the emphasis on difference can be attributed to the prevailing notions of multiculturalism as well as the affirmative steps taken up by the state.

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