

Subalternity: An Instrument of Empowerment - A Historical Perspective

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Abstract

Subalternity is a state of being inferior rank or position in societal set up. Practice of ascribing inferior rank or position upon a group of people arising out of socio-political and economic conditions existing in a society. This inferiority is expressed in the form of class differentiation, caste discrimination, gender inequalities etc. Subaltern studies became popular by 1980s. It was the contributions made by Ranagit Guha and Bernard S. Cohn made this school thought popular. It is post colonial concept and against colonial ways of writings. A peep in to the history reveals that ascribing Subalternity upon the people is the root cause all world revolutions, popular agitations and wars happened in the world. Ascribing inferiority upon a people is actually denial justice to such people. The conscious attempts of the predominant section of society to deny justice to subalterns changed the course of the history itself. This paper examines how ascribing Subalternity becomes a tool of eliminating injustice against subalterns and empowering them and setting up an egalitarian social order.

Key Words: Subalternity, status, hierarchy, manifestation, empowerment, inferiority, race

Introduction

The term subaltern is used to denote a category of people someone with a low ranking in a social, political, or other hierarchy. Subalternity means a state of being subaltern. They are deprived of basic rights in social life. They are outside the power structure. The term subaltern came in wide circulation in 1982 as result of a series of journal articles published by oxford University press in India. In critical theory and post colonial theories, the term subaltern designates the populations which are socially, politically, and geographically outside of the hegemonic power structure of the colony and of the colonial homeland. Subaltern studies are a manifestation of the combined efforts made by a group of Indian scholars who were trained in the west with a view to reclaim their history. Their main agenda was to retake history for the people whose voices had not been heard previously.

Genesis of subaltern studies

Subaltern literature or studies is a term that originated around the year 1960. Main inspiration behind it was oppression and the racism. In addition to this social, economic and political issues associated with resistance and the struggle against hegemony or perpetuations of political power in colonial society contribute its genesis. Exponents of the subaltern writings wanted to break way elite domination and bias in writings. Mainly they were against

the Cambridge School as it wanted to uphold the colonial legacy and elitism. But writers of Subaltern literature focused on highlighting the greatness of the class, caste, gender, race, language and culture of the lower strata of society. The primary leader of subaltern studies was Ranajit Guha who had written works on peasant uprisings in India. Another of the leading figure of subaltern studies is Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. She points out a number of theoretical positions in her analysis of Indian history such as deconstruction, Marxism, feminism. She was against colonial writings as it provides distorted version historical facts highlighting the merits of colonial rule. She wanted was to provide due place and respect to subjected people in history and uphold the voice of such people. Colonial writings merely reconstruct imperialist hegemony and do not give voice to the people who resisted and experienced colonial incursion.

Subaltern Studies arrived in the global mainstream in 1993, after Ranajit Guha's alignment with Bernard S. Cohn. Both of them made an attempt for cultural critique of colonialism. The Subaltern Studies is a new critique of both colonialist and nationalist perspectives in the historiography of colonized countries. Gayatri Spivak, Partha Chatterjee made remarkable contributions to make subaltern studies a best known postcolonial studies.

Subalternity becomes an instrument of empowerment.

A bird's eye survey of international, national and local history reveals that all revolutions, revolts, rebellions, skirmishes and protest movements are the products of the willful attempts of the dominant classes to ascribe some kind of Subalternity upon people who are not in forefront society. It is prevalent in all human societies even from very old ages. It is a product of unending craze of man to maintain their superiority upon others. Such practices succeeded in history to certain extent only. In our society ascription of Subalternity are mainly through ideologies, religions, racism, caste system, gender and power politics. Imperialism and colonialism are other major practices that are used by Europeans for the ascription of Subalternity upon afro-Asian people. They justified their colonial and imperial aspirations through propagating ideas like White man's burden and civilizing mission. But all these types of subordination and subjugation by predominant category of the people upon commons ultimately led to all world revolutions and anti colonial movements.

There are many practices in global level in ascribing Subalternity upon the people. In the primitive society the practice of ascribing subalternity was in the form of slavery. Slavery began to exist before written history, in many cultures. Under slavery system subalternity imposed upon a person by their birth, capture, or purchase and principles of property law are applied to the people. Individuals are free to own, buy and sell other individuals, as a form of property. Therefore Slaves forced to work against their will. They could not withdraw unilaterally from such an arrangement and works without remuneration. The slave trade and slavery constitute one of the darkest chapters in the history of the world. It was a dehumanizing practice and was a challenge to the very basis of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In view of its duration, its extensiveness and its consequences; it constitutes the biggest tragedy in the history of humanity. In the period between 16th and 19th century centuries millions of Africans were deported to plantations in the New World, thus depleting the African continent of its most precious human resources.

Deplorable living conditions and exploitation of slaves gradually led to the birth of anti slavery movements throughout the world. Struggles against slavery began, around 250 years ago. There were no TV bulletins or news papers showing the terrible conditions on slaves. Newspapers tended to reflect the views of the ruling classes. The first revolution against imposing Subalternity through slavery was Haitian Revolution. It was a successful anti-slavery revolution and also was an anti-colonial insurrection by self-liberated slaves against French rule. It started on August 22, 1791 and ended in 1804 with the former colony's independence. It was the only slave uprising that led to the founding of a state which was both free from slavery, and ruled by non-whites and former captives. Following Haitian revolution anti slavery movements assumed strength in different parts of the world. One of the noteworthy features of all these revolutions was that slaves used their Subalternity as an instrument for emancipation and empowerment. Following Haitian Revolution slavery was outlawed in all recognized countries the last being Mauritania in 2007. Nevertheless, there are still more slaves today than at any previous point in history with an estimated 45 million people being in slavery worldwide. The most common form of the slave trade is now commonly referred to as human trafficking. Chattel slavery is also still practiced by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant. In other areas, slavery continues through practices such as debt bondage, the most widespread form of slavery today are serfdom, domestic servants kept in captivity, certain adoptions in which children are forced to work as slaves, child soldiers, and forced marriage.

In Medieval period dominant the practice of ascribing Subalternity upon people was through Feudalistic social order. Medieval Europe ruled this social order. Under feudalism there was a hierarchical system of social relationships. A peasant or worker known as a vassal received a piece of land in return for serving a lord or king, especially during times of war. By doing so Subalternity was imposing upon them. Feudalism was actually a system full of social evils. It divided the society into two classes, viz, the feudal class and the peasantry. The Lords acquired more wealth and power. In due course of time they hated the Vassals and did not do any good for them. This created dark clouds in the mental horizon of common men. It made the condition of peasants deplorable. It became difficult on their part to earn their livelihood from a small quantity of land. Peasants became upset and unsatisfied with this way of life. They were tired of being treated inferior and worked as slaves when their production of goods was low. Peasants lived in a state of serfdom, a condition that essentially turned them into rural slaves. Pitable living conditions of peasants' provoked and many rebellions broke out in Europe. One of the major uprisings occurred in England during the late fourteenth century. It was known the Great Rising of 1381. It represents the most extreme and well- documented rebellion in medieval Europe. But the rigid and cruel medieval system of law and order that accompanied feudalism succeeded as a tool for social control and largely prevented peasant resistance or rebellion. Feudalism declined steadily throughout the medieval period and was nearly extinct in Western Europe by the Renaissance. It was powerful Subaltern discontent and protests that undermined feudalism. Subalternity became an inspiring force.

Racism was another powerful mechanism prevalent in society ascribing Subalternity upon the people. Under this system Subalternity of a group of people imposed on the colour of skin. Racism happens every day around the world regardless of any countries. Racism is a

very sensitive issue as it discriminates and offends people of a certain race. Racism brings bad consequences as for it may result in causing racial destruction and disharmony among the people living in a particular country. This practice was popular in Africa and America. Racism is actually happens due to the stubbornness and ignorance of a certain group of people from all races. Ascribing Subalternity based on colour invited much criticism and many popular movements were formed against this evil practice. It includes organized resistance from individual acts of resistance to broad-scale, collective, cross-system movements. In USA many civil right movements were formed against it. By the mid-20th century, Blacks in Americans had more than enough of prejudice and violence against them. They, along with many whites, mobilized and began an unprecedented fight for equality that spanned two decades. During the Harlem Renaissance blacks used their Subalternity as a weapon for empowerment. Blacks took on leadership roles like never before. They held public office and sought legislative changes for equality and the right to vote. In 1868, the 14th Amendment to the Constitution gave blacks equal protection under the law. In 1870, the 15th Amendment granted blacks the right to vote. Prior to World War II, most blacks were low-wage farmers, factory workers, domestics or servants. By the early 1940s, war-related work was booming, but most blacks weren't given the better paying jobs. They were also discouraged from joining the military. After thousands of blacks threatened to march on Washington to demand equal employment rights, President Franklin D. Roosevelt issued Executive Order 8802 on June 25, 1941. It opened national defense jobs and other government jobs to all Americans regardless of race, creed, color or national origin. During Cold War period President Harry Truman initiated a civil rights agenda, and in 1948 issued Executive Order 9981 to end discrimination in the military. These events helped set the stage for grass-roots initiatives to enact racial equality legislation and incite the civil rights movement.

It was in South Africa most powerful and violent struggles against imposing Subalternity based on colour happened. The African National Congress (ANC), founded in 1912 became the major force opposing of such practice of ascribing Subalternity. Using mostly legal tactics of protest during its first four decades, the ANC became more militant in the early 1950s and began using nonviolent direct action. But discouraged about the lack of results from their nonviolent campaign, Nelson Mandela and others called for an armed uprising. The violent resistance was limited to occasional bombings of government facilities and avoidance of civilian deaths. On 17 March 1992 two-thirds of South Africa's white voters approved a negotiated end of the minority regime and the apartheid system. Nelson Mandela was elected as the President of the new South Africa in the first free elections by the entire population.

It is to be noted that the might of the subalterns rooted out racial discrimination in South Africa. Constitutional democracy based on the rule of law established in South Africa. The powers of government at all levels are limited by a constitution with some of the world's strongest protections of human rights. Elections are regarded by outside observers as comparable in quality and credibility to those in mature democracies, such as the United States and Japan, and polls show that South Africa's constitutional democracy enjoys wide support from all racial groups. Formal racial segregation has been entirely dismantled, and

black South Africans, who comprise 80 percent of the population, are present in all aspects of national life, from formerly all-white universities to country clubs.

In all major revolutions in the world subaltern elements played a crucial role in eliminating injustice. The end of British colonialism in America and emergence of the American state was a source of inspiration to suppressed peoples all over the world. It sanctioned the right of an oppressed people to overthrow a government that lost the faith and support of the people. French Revolution was also a manifestation of ascribing Subalternity on the basis of estate system. French society was divided society into three estates: the First Estate (clergy); the Second Estate (nobility); and the Third Estate (commoners). The king was considered part of no estate. Clergy and nobles owned most of the land and monopolized the higher offices in the church and state. But the third estate or the commons groaned under the crushing burden of taxation. The prolonged difficulties united commons and revolted against the government. It removed the legal and economic barriers that had protected the nobility, clergy, guilds, and urban oligarchies and established the principle of equality before the law.

Russian Revolution of 1917 is another major world event in which subaltern elements acted as a catalyst for great social change. It has been called the best planned proletarian revolution of all time in the world. Tsarist Russia stood well behind the rest of Europe in its industry and farming, resulting in few opportunities for fair advancement on the part of peasants and industrial workers. It provoked peasants and working class and revolted against Tsarist autocracy. The predominating element among the Russian people is its peasantry. It opened up a new historical epoch, and was greeted with enthusiasm by workers around the world. Never before workers come close to winning power.

In India the practice of ascribing Subalternity was through untouchability and caste system. Before and after the attainment of independence those who branded as untouchables and inferior caste used their inferior position in the social ladder as an instrument of empowerment. In pre-Independence times, leaders like Jyoti Rao Bapule started satya shodak Samaj and also written a book called Gulamgiri creating awareness in the minds of untouchable people. There were also movements to make the lower caste people to enter the temples such as Guruvayur Satyagraha. Gandhiji also played his part in the anti-caste movements by integrating the issue of untouchability into the national movement. Babu Jagjeevan Ram, the prominent harijan leader started Kheth Majdoor Sabha and depressed class league to alleviate the problems of depressed classes. Dr. B.R Ambedkar, popular leader of depressed classes founded Independent Labour Party in 1936 and All India Scheduled Caste federation in 1942. Ambedkar tried to empower the depressed classes by providing them legal rights which we can found in the constitution. In 1956, Republican Party was formed to fight for the rights of Dalits under the leadership of Y.V.Chavan. In early 1970's a new trend called Dalit Panthers was emerged in urban areas showing waves of radical politics with student and youth support base. In 1978, there was an agitation to rename Marathwada University as Ambedkar University which resulted in anti-dalit riots. In 1990, Prakash Ambedkar tried to combine all the dalit organisations for contesting Maharashtra assembly elections but was not successful. In 1980's, in North India Bahujan Samajwadi party (BSP) was emerged under Kashiram with basic aim and strategy based on electoral power that is to empower the depressed classes in political manner.

All of these developments in history learn that imposing Subalternity on any grounds later becomes a force capable of rewriting history itself. We need no hesitation to say that Subalternity is a powerful instrument to assert identity for rights and self-respect of the people who suffer oppression and exploitation on the basis of caste and religion, colour, powerlessness etc. It is recent trend in social mobilization and empowerment. It is used for the enhancement of the socio political, economic and spiritual strength of individuals and communities. Throughout history this trend is rampant. Placing Subalternity on the basis of caste, creed colours etc. irritate those who suffer from such segregation and from this irritation movement for empowerment takes its birth. It assumes different forms like skirmishes, revolts, rebellions revolutions etc. During the period of colonialism and imperialism Subalternity imposed upon Afro-Asian people through the idea of white man's burden and civilizing mission.

It is learnt from historical experiences that emergence of a mass movement is the beginning of an attempt to eliminate Subalternity of any kind. Emergence of Indian national freedom movement was in response to the British attempt to ascribe subalternity upon Indian. The British treated Indians as one of the many inferior races around the world. Feminism took its birth in response to ascribing subalternity upon female gender. Feminism is a collection of movements and ideologies that share a common goal: to define, establish, and achieve equal political, economic, cultural, personal, and social rights for women. This includes seeking to establish equal opportunities for women in education and employment.

In the era of globalization ascription of subalternity has assumed a different form. Processes of globalization have had contradictory consequences in postcolonial societies, where recent neoliberal policies have exacerbated uneven development that began with colonial rule. In the era of globalization economic and educational status of a person determines his or her Subalternity person himself can determine his or her degree of subalternity and he or she is free to remove the subalternity being imposed upon by possessing more wealth and education. A situation is come in which subalternity of a person is not determined by his birth, caste, or class but by education and economic status and his inferior status can easily be removed by acquiring education and wealth.

Conclusion

To conclude Subalternity is a dynamic process. Imposing inferior status turns to be a powerful tool for mobilization and empowerment. History is filled with a numerous examples for such empowerment. One of the noteworthy features of subaltern Movements for empowerment is that such movements were not represented by any celebrity or famous personality. They are highlighting causes of their inferiority. Globalisation ensured exposure to novel ideas of civil liberty which gave impetus to subaltern empowerment. Denial of justice is actually equal to imposing subalternity. It naturally leads to the formation of mass movements against injustice. It may be in against government, individual, political parties etc. There is no hesitation to say boldly that subalternity is a symbol of identity and empowerment. History proved it.

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