

After Subaltern Studies

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As an intellectual project, Subaltern Studies was perhaps overdetermined by its times. Given today's changed contexts the tasks set out by it cannot be taken forward within the framework and methods mobilised for it. Subaltern Studies was a product of its time; another time calls for other projects. An exploration of what Subaltern Studies achieved, what remained unmasked and unrecognised and what has changed in the historical context to necessitate new intellectual project(s).

It has been some time that people started talking about "After Subaltern Studies". In fact, if one thinks of the coming and going of intellectual fashions, 30 years is an unusually long time for a school or trend to stay in or around the limelight. In the half a century or so that has passed since I first became aware of such things, I have seen the rise and demise of existentialist philosophy, structural anthropology, structural-functionalism, modernisation theory, structuralist Marxism, history from below, dependency theory, world systems theory, postmodernism and deconstruction; there must have been a few other trends that were once in vogue but I cannot now recall. Many are unaware of the fact that I was present at the birth, more than 40 years ago, of rational choice political theory and participated in it with some diligence, if not enthusiasm or conviction. So it is neither a matter of surprise nor of sadness to engage with the subject "After Subaltern Studies".

Nonetheless, it is not an elegy that I will offer. Instead, I will argue that several of the questions raised by Subaltern Studies have been neither dismissed nor properly answered, while others are only now beginning to be addressed. The task, as it now stands, cannot, I think, be taken forward within the framework of the concepts and methods mobilised in Subaltern Studies and certainly cannot be carried out by the original participants in that project. What is needed is not an extension or reformulation of Subaltern Studies; what is needed are new projects.

The Project and Its Time

It has often been observed that Subaltern Studies was a product of its time. Speaking at a meeting of the Latin American Subaltern Studies Collective in 1993, Ranajit Guha said:

Our project belongs to our time. It made its debut at a time of turbulence marked by the

difficulties that faced India's new nation state, by acute civil disturbances which threatened occasionally to tear it apart, by a common anxiety in which the frustration of the Midnight's Children born since Independence blended with the disillusionment of older generations to produce an explosive discontent...

He also added (2009) that this time of Subaltern Studies was also "thoroughly overdetermined by global temporalities". The period from the mid-1960s to the early 1980s was indeed such a time of churning and it had its effect on our intellectual formation. More specifically, however, if one thinks of the role of specific networks of scholars and institutions that produce innovative arguments or approaches in particular scholarly disciplines at particular moments in time, then we must remember, as Dipesh Chakrabarty (2011) has pointed out recently, that apart from Ranajit Guha, those of us who first came together to launch Subaltern Studies were all young in the 1970s. This had several implications for our work even though we were not necessarily conscious of them at the time.

First of all, we brought to our work a certain naïve eclecticism that allowed us, as it were, to hunt and gather in the forests of scholarship in several disciplinary as well as geographical regions. Having received our formal degrees from many different universities in at least four different countries, we had the great advantage of not owing allegiance to any established school of history writing and thus were free to strike out on our own. Our individual fancies sometimes acted as encouragements for others; at other times, they were kept in check by their disapproval. In my own case, for instance, given my early association with the Calcutta variety of Marxism, I was deeply sceptical of structural anthropology; it was at the prodding of David Hardiman and Shahid Amin that I began to read Lévi-Strauss seriously. On the other hand, while several of my colleagues were great admirers of E P Thompson and the *Annales* variety of popular history, especially Le Roy Ladurie, I preferred for a long time to stick to

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Althusserian structuralism to which I was unable to convert the others. Later, when Dipesh Chakrabarty turned to a serious reading of Heidegger, many of the others resisted.

Testy Debate

What this meant, however, was the opening up of a space of vigorous, sustained and sometimes testy debate within the group. We usually had one annual meeting of the editorial group where we discussed one another's ongoing work over two or three days. The discussions frequently ended up in heated debates over philosophical or methodological positions. After one such session held in the guest house of Hamdard University in Delhi, I remember a somewhat bewildered Gautam Bhadra remarking that he felt he had been watching a game of world championship table tennis where the rallies were so fast and furious that the spectators frequently lost sight of the ball. The reason why these full-throated debates never led to acrimony was also, I think, that we were still young enough not to have developed deep personal stakes in the positions we took or the company we kept. We could disagree wholeheartedly and still belong to the same somewhat beleaguered group called Subaltern Studies.

The third implication of being young was our ability to endure and survive not only the intellectual criticisms which came thick and fast but also the many institutional impediments we began to face as we continued our collective work. We had almost no institutional funding for our research, and when we attempted to hold conferences in India under the name of Subaltern Studies, we received no cooperation, and sometimes open hostility, from institutional authorities. We took the bold decision to hold our conferences and editorial group meetings independently, without any institutional support, by using the royalties from the sale of *Subaltern Studies*. I remember that we paid second-class train fares, stayed with each other or with families and friends, charged participants for cyclostyled copies of papers (this was before bulk photocopying became affordable) as well as for lunch

– unthinkable in Indian academic conferences. Our enthusiasm could only have been sustained by friendships among the young. Dipesh Chakrabarty and I have also agreed that it was a distinctly male circle of friendship that could have given the early Subaltern Studies its particular character. It, of course, had the unfortunate consequence that there were no women in our editorial group, leading to the glaring omission of the subject of gender in the early volumes of *Subaltern Studies*. By the time we responded to the legitimate criticism on this score by bringing women members into our group, Subaltern Studies was no longer in the same embattled and indigent condition as before.

The fourth consequence of our youthful enthusiasm came from the fortunate guidance we received from Ranajit Guha who, of course, belonged to a completely different generation. Perhaps remembering his own chequered career in the academy, he curbed and steered our exuberance by constantly reminding us that despite our political predilections, we would have to carry on the fight *within the academy*. Hence, we should neither expect, nor indeed should we allow ourselves, any relaxation of the technical standards of scholarship within the discipline. In other words, no matter how radical our historical claims, we must scrupulously follow every accepted professional norm and not let anyone accuse us of shoddy scholarship. Even when we made methodological departures, using unconventional sources or reading documents in unprecedented ways, we would have to defend our innovations by deploying the best possible theoretical arguments. I sometimes think that this is one of the reasons why Subaltern Studies took the course it did after the initial barrage of criticism it faced over the portrayal of the subaltern rebel as the new sovereign subject of history. Like many radical movements in the past, we could have dug in our heels and insisted that that was the radical political core of our project which we would never abandon, no matter what our academic critics said. Instead, we chose to embrace the criticism, work alongside it and formulate far more

nuanced positions. This meant that as we passed from youth to middle age and beyond, we not only stayed in the academy but were able to branch out individually to take up other intellectual projects, many of which were deeply informed but not limited by Subaltern Studies. It also meant that instead of being cornered into a derelict ghetto, we actually prospered in the academy.

Changes over Three Decades

In order to correct the impression that I am focusing exclusively on the so-called subjective factors concerning our own biographies, let me also mention that the objective conditions within which Subaltern Studies was located also changed drastically in the last three decades. In the years following the Emergency, when Subaltern Studies was born, we were thoroughly convinced that the political order in India lacked foundation in popular consent and that the facade of electoral democracy would be thrown aside once more should it become inconvenient again for the rulers. The insurgencies in Punjab and Assam in the 1980s and the state response there only strengthened our suspicion. Yet when economic liberalisation came in the early 1990s, it did not have to be imposed by authoritarian means. Something had clearly changed in Indian politics. Greater and greater sections of the people were developing a stake in the governmental regime and becoming aware of the instruments of electoral democracy as a means to influence that regime. The arms of administration were reaching deeper and wider into domains of everyday life hitherto untouched by government. At the same time, corporate capital was gaining a position of unprecedented legitimacy within urban civil society, displacing the status once enjoyed by the postcolonial developmental state.

The image of the subaltern rebel so meticulously portrayed by us now seemed like a throwback to the days of the British Raj – a construct that historians of colonial India might find useful but one that would be of little help in understanding the contemporary Indian peasant. We now saw that the latter

would have to be understood within a new framework of democratic citizenship – complex, differentiated, perhaps fundamentally altered from the normative ideas of citizenship in western liberal democracies, but nonetheless citizenship, not subjecthood. Subalternity would have to be redefined.

Errors and Corrections

Chakrabarty (2011) has recently begun a discussion of the “unintended but generative mistakes” of Subaltern Studies. Referring, in particular, to the heavily structuralist depiction of the rebel consciousness in Ranajit Guha’s *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (1983). It is a depiction that has been criticised by many precisely for its insistence on a singular structural form. Chakrabarty speaks of the portrayal of the peasant rebel in the early Subaltern Studies as one way to construct “a genealogy of the mass-political subject in India” that emphasised the presence of “the archaic in the modern”. The phenomenon of the crowd as a distinct political presence, whether in organised demonstrations or riots, or in the electoral “waves” of post-Independence India, certainly carried distinctive traces of collective practices that were much older than the Indian Constitution. Chakrabarty (1989) himself showed this very effectively in his study of the industrial working class in Calcutta: despite the strenuous efforts of left-wing organisers to instil in them the modern habits of class consciousness, workers in the city apparently never quite stopped thinking and behaving like peasants. Subaltern Studies contained some of the most persuasive demonstrations of the truth that the time of colonial and postcolonial modernity was heterogeneous, that its practices were hybrid, and that the archaic was, in many significant ways, constitutive of the modern.

But the so-called mistake as well as its generative potential need, it seems to me, further consideration. An example Chakrabarty often cites is the common phenomenon of the little gallery of gods, goddesses or godmen displayed above the dashboard of a bus or truck everywhere in India. The practice of displaying sacred images to bring success or

ward off bad luck is undoubtedly archaic, even though some of the deities or godmen may actually be of fairly recent vintage. Hence, to discover that this practice is now intimately connected to the operations of such a modern contraption as a motorised vehicle is undoubtedly a significant revelation about the archaeology of Indian modernity. However, we should not, for that reason, forget to notice that there is nothing archaic about the materiality of the images themselves, for the pictures have been probably produced by a large offset printing press in Sivakasi and the little Narayana or Ganesha figure that lights up every time the brakes are pressed was probably made by a toy manufacturer in China. Indeed, there is a serious case to be made that these practices of contemporary bus or truck drivers in India are intimately shaped by the circulation of industrially mass-produced sacred objects. Hence, while there is undoubtedly a genealogical trace of older practices in the phenomenon that Chakrabarty describes, the practices themselves, even in their material embodiment, are part of the technologically nurtured modern.

The question, therefore, becomes: What was true, and what indeed was wrong, with the formulation about the insurgent peasant? Clearly, we can now sort out more precisely than we could have done in the early 1980s the archaeological sediments of heterogeneous time in the collective life of peasant societies in contemporary south Asia. We may also be able to trace more exactly the many lines of genealogical descent through which these collective practices have acquired their current shapes. Ranajit Guha was also right in insisting that it was not a question of drawing the faces in the crowd, as the radical social historians of France or Britain might have suggested, for his case was that the insurgent peasants of colonial India were political not in the sense of the individualised bourgeois citizen of liberal democracy; they were mass-political subjects whose rationality had to be sought in the collective life of the peasant community. He found his answer in the structure of rebel consciousness

which he located, in turn, in the structure of the peasant community.

Now, there were several criticisms made of Guha’s answer that entirely missed the point. Surely, the insurgent peasant as mass-political subject did not exhaust the entirety of peasant life; there was indeed a great deal that this structural explanation of peasant politics was not meant to illuminate. Most importantly, the everyday reality of subordination, with its attendant ideologies and practices containing elements of submission as well as intransigence, still required specific analysis and explanation. Thus, James Scott’s (1985) demonstration of the many “weapons of the weak” was undoubtedly a reminder that even acts of insubordination in the everyday life of peasants could not be clubbed together and explained by some invariant structure of rebel consciousness. Indeed, the fact that episodes such as the ones highlighted by Scott require separate analysis was demonstrated brilliantly by Guha himself in his essay “Chandra’s Death” (1987). Chandra was no insurgent peasant, but she deployed the meagre resources at her command to mobilise the help of her female relatives and fight against the oppressive patriarchal order in the only way she could: the result was her tragic death. Whether her act was political or not might be a matter of debate. But it is indisputable that she did not represent the mass-political subject in colonial India, and that is what the structural analysis of rebel consciousness was intended to explicate.

Subject to Citizen

The question that has become imperative in the last two decades is whether this figure of the mass-political subject in India needs to be redrawn. My view is that it does. The deepening and widening of the apparatuses of governmentality has, I believe, transformed the quality of mass politics in India in the last two decades. A crucial element in the structure of rebel consciousness in colonial India was the location of the state and ruling authorities *outside* the bounds of the peasant community. This structural element of externality explained several

features of negativity that characterised the actions of the insurgent peasant. But now that the activities of the government have penetrated deep into the everyday lives of rural people and affect matters like the supply of water to their fields or electricity to their homes, or the access of their villages to public roads and transport or to the facilities of schooling, public health services, public distribution of subsidised foodgrains or kerosene, and employment in public works, or indeed to such novel necessities as the registration of lands and houses or births and deaths, should we not expect that even mass political action will no longer be characterised principally by the marks of negation that Guha demonstrated so elegantly in his classic work? I think that the transformation is actually visible in much of recent mass politics in India's chaotic democracy.

Since I have made this point at length in some of my recent work (Chatterjee 2004, 2011), I will not repeat my arguments here. But I should point out what I think is at stake in recognising the change as one that calls for a paradigmatic shift on our part. For the sake of convenience, let us distinguish between two aspects of mass politics in contemporary Indian democracy – one that involves a contest over sovereignty with the Indian state and the other that makes claims on governmental authorities over services and benefits. There are indeed territories and peoples in India that may be described as challenging the Indian state's sovereignty over them: the insurgent movements in Kashmir are a clear example, as are the periodic insurgencies in some of the north-eastern states. The continued insurgency that has simmered in the forest regions of central India since the 1970s also has, at least in the recent phase of the Maoist-led war on the Indian state, the characteristic of a contest over sovereignty.

Of course, as many reports from these regions indicate, the continued insurgency has not meant that governmental agencies have simply disappeared from the scene. Rather, complex negotiations take place between the insurgent movements and government agencies over what services or benefits should be

delivered, to whom and through which agencies, and who should supervise the operations. These are, I think, fascinating aspects of politics that affect the daily lives of millions of people in Kashmir, Manipur, Chhattisgarh, Jharkhand or Orissa that deserve close study as instances of the overlap of the politics of sovereignty with the politics of governmentality. But if, in our judgment, the contest over sovereignty predominates here, then, when insurgents attack an army camp or blow up an army truck, or villagers refuse to disclose where a suspected Maoist may be hiding, or women and children throw stones at policemen, we may be right in concluding that Guha's framework is still relevant in understanding what is happening.

But outside these relatively marginalised zones, the ordinary stuff of democratic politics is about constant tussles of different population groups with the authorities over the distribution of governmental services. I have shown elsewhere that this tussle becomes political because many of the demands cannot be conceded within the normal rules of legal and bureaucratic rationality. The usual way of accommodating those demands is to declare them as exceptional cases that have to be dealt with by administrative adjustments to the normal rules without, however, jeopardising the normative rationality of the legal structure itself. This is not always easy, and the justifications are often confused and arbitrary, leading quite often to conflicts between the administrative, legislative and judicial branches of government. But a large degree of arbitrary political power has made its way through these practices of democratic politics into the rational structure of the equal application of the law to all citizens as enjoined by the Indian Constitution. The forms of mass politics, in turn, very often seek the application of arbitrary and exceptional power in order to address what various population groups think are pressing issues of justice and fairness.

If one looks at the common techniques of mass agitation in India today – road blocks, disruption of train services, destruction of property, setting fire to vehicles,

attacking government officials or the police – one would surely find genealogical links to older practices resorted to by rebellious peasants. But I believe it would be a mistake to try to understand these activities of contemporary mass politics within the theoretical paradigm of peasant insurgency. Just as the relation between rulers and subjects has changed, so has the formation of the political mass. I think a theoretical framework such as, let us say, populism, which describes a process of the temporary and often fragile aggregation of disparate groups under a common signifier called “the people” assembled against a putative enemy of the people, might be more appropriate for our purposes. But this is a new research question that has now emerged from transformations in the real domain of politics. It points to entirely new problems about which populist aggregations might become effective and which would fail.

A quite difficult riddle, for instance, is posed by the recent spate of farmer suicides caused by indebtedness in many regions of India. Scholars in Subaltern Studies, along with many other historians, have analysed in detail the numerous instances of anti-moneylender riots in late colonial India, from the Deccan riots of the 1870s to those in Punjab, Uttar Pradesh and Bengal. In fact, it would not be an exaggeration to say that one of the most common responses to mass indebtedness among the peasantry in most parts of India was a violent agitation aimed against moneylenders and landlords. Why is the response now the suicide of the indebted peasant, presumably to save his family from the loss of land? What has changed? As I said before, the question of the mass-political subject was posed by Subaltern Studies, but given the form that question has taken today, it cannot be answered any more within the conceptual framework of that project.

Subaltern, Popular, Vernacular

Let me turn to another area that was one of the central concerns of Subaltern Studies but where, I believe, the results of recent research has thrown up entirely new topics.

The concern with peasant consciousness led many of us in Subaltern Studies to explore two sets of archives that until then had not been seriously looked at by historians of south Asia. One was the archive of the non-canonical, unsophisticated, down market, often not-intended-for-print, literature of songs, ballads, chapbooks, local newspapers, almanacs and ephemera of various kinds that had somehow managed to survive, mostly in private or small institutional collections (apart from the quite remarkable *Vernacular Tracts* series in the India Office Library in London which came into existence simply because of the legal requirement of surveillance over the Indian language press). Guha's essay "Chandra's Death" was written on the basis of a snippet of a court deposition excerpted in a compilation on early Bengali letter writing. Much of this exploration of unconventional stores of evidence was prompted by our search for sources where the subaltern subject might be seen to be representing himself or herself. The problems with this rather naïve search for subaltern subjectivity have been much discussed since. But our efforts in this direction soon merged with other projects to mine the rich deposits of vernacular print literatures in the 19th and 20th centuries. The search for the subaltern voice led us into the domain of what has now come to be called popular culture.

There are several significant aspects of this more recent project that need to be pointed out. First of all, recent researches into the print literature in the major Indian languages have brought to the fore the great variety of regional cultural formations that emerged in the 19th and 20th centuries and that demand significant reformulation of the questions of modernity and nationhood in south Asia. It is now clear that there was no unmediated access to an idea of India or that of Pakistan or Bangladesh except through the regional linguistic formation. Further, each regional formation had its own peculiarities, with regional minority cultures that were either assimilated or sought to be suppressed, including the varying degrees and forms of assertion in different regions by the non-brahmin and dalit castes. Second, the

rise to prominence of the non-canonical and unsophisticated varieties of printed material meant that the focus shifted away from intellectual or high literary history to the historical construction of the national-popular which demanded entirely different principles of literary and aesthetic judgment. Third, each regional formation was shown to consist of graded hierarchies ranging from elite high culture to nationalist modern middle-class culture to popular urban culture to rural culture, often with blurred boundaries and varying distributions of westernisation, urbanity and vernacular modernity. This was the space where the new forms of modern mass culture began to be produced through printed texts, printed visuals, advertising, gramophone records and cinema, but the specific effects in each regional culture were often quite different.

Cultural History

This is the exciting new space of cultural history where much scholarly work is now going on. What has been opened for theoretical formulation and empirical study is the category of the popular. Following Gramsci, the idea of the people-nation was always entailed by the concept of the subaltern classes. It

was the basis for the description of the postcolonial state as a dominance without hegemony or passive revolution. But the description was quite abstract, because the content of the "people" in the people-nation could not be specified except as formulaic statements such as the one provided in the so-called "manifesto" in the first volume of *Subaltern Studies* (Guha 1982). I believe we now have a much richer stock of descriptions of the domain of the popular in the different linguistic regions of south Asia in the last century and a half to enable us to supply more concrete, nuanced and chronologically specific accounts of the formation of the national-popular.

There is yet another area that the study of popular culture has opened up whose significance we were not even aware of when we embarked on Subaltern Studies. This is the domain of the visual. One set of scholars who opened up this field for the study of the national-popular were film theorists who refused to be confined to the rarefied world of art cinema and instead took up the serious analysis of the popular cinema in India as an integral aspect of the political. The complex ways in which the visual is entwined with the narratological in India's popular cinema in

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the different languages, leading to fascinating representations of basic political elements such as power, hierarchy, gender, class, caste, leadership, loyalty, honour, etc, has now emerged in much clearer forms than they were in the early 1980s. Alongside this has emerged the new scholarship on visual culture which has put together an archive of hitherto ignored material such as popular prints, calendars, book illustrations, advertisements, studio photographs, etc, that enjoy enormous currency in the popular domain in a country where most people do not read books or newspapers, but which were never seriously considered as sources for the writing of history. Now it is being argued that these visual sources, if properly read, might lead to the writing of a political history of the popular in south Asia that would not simply be illustrative of, but in fact different from, the history written on the basis of conventional textual sources. Much work needs to be done before this radical proposition can be persuasively established. But it can hardly be denied that the means of visual communication must be given an autonomous status in the study of the domain of the popular, especially in a country where universal literacy is still a long way from being achieved.

To take this point a step further, we must also note the more recent trend in several disciplines to move away from texts to the study of practices. Led by anthropologists, this move highlights the autonomous status of embodied or institutional practices whose significance cannot simply be read off texts describing the underlying concepts. Thus, religious ritual is not necessarily an instantiation of a theological concept or dogma; the practice may be performed without the subject subscribing to, or perhaps even being aware of, the underlying religious concept. This approach has far-reaching implications for the study of such major questions as popular culture, political ceremonies, public and private religion, gender relations, sporting activities, violence, and so on, and much new work is being done that demands a fresh look at topics that were once considered dead and buried. Subaltern Studies was one

of the forces that shifted the attention of historians away from intellectual history to ethnography. Now ethnographic studies are no longer concerned with uncovering the implicit conceptual structures that supposedly underlie the practical activities of people who do not produce large bodies of texts of their own, but rather seek to understand embodied practices as activities that people carry out for their own sake. Once again, the old conceptual structure of Subaltern Studies has become inadequate for the purpose.

Conclusions

There is a price that has to be paid for this shift to the ethnographic, the practical, the everyday and the local. Shahid Amin (2011) has often complained about subaltern histories that do not travel well. It is undoubtedly true that the weaving of a local historical narrative with detailed ethnographic description of local practices requires immersion in a seemingly bottomless pool of names, places and events that are unlikely to be familiar to readers outside the immediate geographical region. This was always the problem with anthropological monographs. The difficulty was circumvented by establishing strong connections between the ethnographic account and the relevant conceptual formations or theoretical debates in the discipline: in the end, the theory predominated. It is more difficult to achieve the same result when the main modality of the work is the narrative flow of history. But then, we should remember that if history students all over the world could read about daily life in a single village in the French province of Languedoc in the 14th century or about the mental world of a solitary Italian miller in the 16th century, then in principle there is no reason why they should not do the same with a book about subaltern life in a village or small town in south Asia.

The challenge is to devise appropriate forms of writing that will preserve the integrity of the study as well as make it accessible outside the region. The proof of the research is in the writing. It is even possible that the task has been made easier by the emergence of subaltern global networks that convey images and

stories, ceremonies and cults, and objects and practices, from one part of the world to another without going through the sanctified channels sponsored by global corporations or governmental agencies. Future historians of subaltern life in south Asia may learn something from the way migrants from the region carry stories back and forth between their natal homes and places of domicile, using the full panoply of modern technologies of communication, switching and mixing languages and media, and making sense of as well as enriching the diverse worlds they inhabit. In some ways, that may be more than what we historians have managed to accomplish so far.

As I said at the beginning, this is not an elegy. Even if the specific project called Subaltern Studies begun 30 years ago has run its course, it has managed to scatter, reinvent and insert itself in several subsequent projects. The questions it asked have now taken other forms; to answer them, it is necessary to craft new theoretical concepts. Subaltern Studies was a product of its time; another time calls for other projects.

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