Subaltern Studies in Retrospect and Reminiscence

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The Subaltern Studies project is now over three decades old. One of the founding members of the collective looks back at the “generative errors” which help carry the idea forward, even if the project is formally closed.

A Prefatory Note: Partha Chatterjee (2012) and Hiren Gohain (2012) recently discussed the project of “Subaltern Studies” in the pages of this journal. This essay joins that discussion in a slightly roundabout and peculiar way. The bulk of what follows was actually written sometime before Chatterjee penned his essay. His essay, in fact, refers to and in part engages in a conversation with the lecture on which this present contribution is based. I thought that publishing the substance of that earlier lecture of mine would provide the readers of the EPW with some of the background to what Chatterjee wrote and instantiate at the same time the very “diversity” and “eclecticism” within the Subaltern Studies editorial group that Chatterjee mentioned.

I should also explain why I write the expression “Subaltern Studies” in two different ways. When I do not italicise the expression “Subaltern Studies”, I refer to an ongoing field of studies – not dead or extinct by any means; Subaltern Studies, on the other hand, refers to the series of publications initiated by Ranajit Guha, a series that has now closed. Subaltern Studies may have opened up a new area of academic and political investigation and I consider the field of studies to be a larger phenomenon than the series we collectively edited and published. I return to this distinction briefly in a postscript to this essay.

Looking Back at Our History

I wish to present here a retrospective and personal view of Subaltern Studies and to discuss what that series and the ideas underlying it may have bequeathed to us. Thirty years have gone by since the first volume of Subaltern Studies came out in 1982. Ranajit Guha, the founding editor of the series, had taken up in 1980 his position in what was then the South Asian History Section in the Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies at the Australian National University (ANU). Anthony Low, the then vice-chancellor of the university, had invited him to move to Canberra from Sussex where Guha had been teaching. Guha stopped by in Calcutta on his way to Australia. I was in the city doing research for my ANU doctoral thesis.

Guha’s visit created a stir among the left intellectuals of the city. I had just been to England and spent a few days with him in Sussex, discussing the project of Subaltern Studies in which David Hardiman, David Arnold – two of Low’s and Guha’s ex-students – and Shahid Amin and Gyan Pandey from Oxford – Guha’s acquaintances from the year he spent in Delhi – were already involved. I had carried the exciting news of Subaltern Studies to friends in Calcutta, mainly Partha Chatterjee and Gautam Bhadra, both of whom Guha spent much time with during his brief stop-over. They also became part of the collective.

And thus began the journey of a project that looked on itself, at first, mainly as an intervention in Indian, not even south Asian, history. Of course, others joined Subaltern Studies later – Sumit Sarkar (who also eventually registered strong public disagreement with Subaltern Studies), Gayatri Spivak, Gyan Prakash, Susie Tharu, Shail Mayaram, Ajay Skaria, and M S S Pandian. Twelve or 13 volumes later, the group was formally disbanded in 2008 when we gifted our royalty incomes to the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies in Delhi.

During its lifetime, the project garnered its share of praise and criticism. But whether or not one agrees with the stated aims of the project, it is perhaps undeniable that Subaltern Studies and the scholarship coming out of it made waves in the world of the social sciences and the humanities generally. There are many different and unanticipated ways the influence of Subaltern Studies has travelled, truly beyond the confines of south Asian studies. It also says something about the richness of the original project that the members of the founding editorial collective, instead of forming any kind of an intellectual monolith, have individually pursued a diverse range of questions that both connect back to where they started from and evolve towards different futures.

An earlier version of this essay was delivered as the opening keynote lecture at a conference held at the Australian National University in Canberra in August 2011 to commemorate 30 years of Subaltern Studies. I am grateful to Debjani Ganguly and Assa Doron who invited me to give the lecture.

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Thus, to speak of the original “subalterns”, Partha Chatterjee’s work on nationalism has led him now to explore – in his latest book – imperial histories. David Hardiman’s recent work has ranged from Gandhian non-violence to folk forms of healing in south Asia. Shahid Amin has completed a fascinating study of the legend of Ghazi Miyan, the Islamic warrior, in precolonial and colonial India. Gyan Pandey has completed a manuscript comparing subaltern and African-American movements and historiographies. Gautam Bhadra has recently been awarded a prestigious Calcutta prize for his monumental study of the history of Bat-tala publications, colonial Calcutta’s equivalent of London’s Grub Street, and aspects of Bengali book-history. Ranajit Guha, battling health problems in old-age in distant Vienna, has published a series of important and prize-winning books in Bengali carrying forward both the theses of old Subaltern Studies and the anti-history position he advanced in one of his more recent books, History at the Limit of World-History (2003).

There are many ways of counting time. One way to mark the passage of time is to historicise, and many today will claim that Subaltern Studies was an expression of its own times; a recognition of the changed historical circumstances of the present will no doubt form an element of the conversation we may now have about the series. The story of time’s passing is also told, ironically but inevitably, in our own aging. But the passage of time reminds us, both personally and intellectually, how important being young was to the original Subaltern Studies project. And being young at a very particular historical conjuncture: in the late 1960s and early 1970s when student movements, breaking out all over the world, brought into being a global Maoism (India’s own version was, of course, the Naxalite movement); when civil rights movements and movements for recognition of indigenous peoples’ rights put the language of anti-colonialism to new and creative uses; when the Vietnamese and the Chinese revolutions inspired spirited debates and scholarship on the political and analytical viability of the category “peasant”; when western countries, facing demographic problems of a shortage of skills, opened up to highly skilled immigrants from the erstwhile colonies of the west; when movements were afoot that, in settler-colonial nations such as Australia, would help dismantle the “White Australia” policy and eventually foster debates on multiculturalism and cultural diversity.

### Generative Errors

Clearly, many of these issues do not strike us today with the same force as they once did though some still command attention. The cult of peasant-based modern and armed revolutions that the Chinese and Vietnamese experiences once inspired among the young has been replaced by the talk of globalisation while migrants, asylum seekers, illegal workers, and refugees have emerged perhaps as the new subalterns of the present era. Gramsci, a key theoretical influence on Subaltern Studies, is still a respected name in many quarters, but he does not seem to occupy the same pedestal as Deleuze, Badiou, or even Agamben. Mao Zedong, on the other hand, has suffered a decline in status both globally and within his own country.

One could ask: Has time rendered Subaltern Studies invalid? Was the vision of peasant revolution on which the project was based romantic and utopian? These are legitimate questions; they have been asked not only by outside observers of Subaltern Studies but by “subaltern” scholars themselves. I had an exchange of emails with Partha Chatterjee a few years ago over the argument that the model of peasant insurgency that Guha tried to construct in his book on the subject was valid for the colonial period but was not helpful for deciphering the nature of peasant and tribal protest against land acquisition for industrial and urban development in contemporary India. (We disagreed mildly and Chatterjee has continued some of that discussion in his recent essay.)

Should we then, as Shelley famously said in his Letters from Italy, spend our manhood “unlearning the follies and expiating the mistakes of our youth”? Perhaps that advice holds true in the world of action where unlearning past follies makes but eminent sense. In the domain of ideas, however, it has long seemed to me that something like the opposite holds true. We keep reading Marx or Weber or Durkheim or Freud not so much for what they may have been simply correct about – for those “correct” formulations are possibly a part of our academic “common sense” today – but to understand how and where they went wrong or how we may revise/update them for contemporary use. It is the “mistakes” of great thinkers, in other words, that end up having very long lives! Not because they were silly and obvious mistakes but because they were fascinating and interesting mistakes, committed precisely because the questions behind them were of fundamental importance to the social sciences even if the answers provided were at best controversial and at worst wrong.

So if unintended but generative mistakes – let me call them that – are committed in pursuit of questions that may be termed “fundamental”, what I would like to do then by way of initiating a discussion on the global legacy of Subaltern Studies is to ask: What “mistakes” of the Subaltern Studies project could still be considered generative? There could be many possible examples of such mistakes. The examples I give will relate – since I am a historian – to problems encountered in historical thinking. In the interest of space, I will organise my examples of some generative mistakes under two sub-themes: the archaic in the modern, and the subject of history. But this is not an exhaustive list of such possible sub-themes. I could have picked others: the religious and the political; or the problem of representing the subaltern; or the problem of the archives and so on.

### The Archaic in the Modern

Let me first state the problem here anecdotally and in south Asian terms and then move on to some general considerations. The subcontinent is one part of the world where everyday life is marked by cohabitation and intermingling of practices and objects that look ancient and modern. A lathe machine being carried for delivery on a bullock cart or a pushcart was not an uncommon sight in the Calcutta I grew up in. Or if technology has indeed made a difference to such sights, think of how ubiquitous the representation
of puranic or for that matter Quranic themes are in everyday life. Again to use a very common Calcutta example simply for reasons of familiarity, think of getting into any public vehicle, a taxi, a bus or into what they call a mini-bus: you will find pictures hung around the driver’s seat that put historical figures such as the saint Ramakrishna (1836-86) and the image of a puranic goddess like Kali in the same frame, or maybe the picture of a sufí shrine and a folk religious saint framed together. In other words, putting humans and gods in the same field of vision is part of popular practices in India. This is an everyday phenomenon (and, as indeed, Gohain says, “hardly news”) but that does not mean we have satisfactory explanations for it. The question we always face is: how should we think about this phenomenon analytically?

The problem in turn poses many questions – about religion (I will come to that shortly), historical time, about “belief” and its relationship to practices, about elite and folk religion, and so on. Historians often deal with the problem by speaking of change and continuity though we seldom know why certain things change while others just continue to be. In Indian history as the subject existed up until the coming of Subaltern Studies, we had parcelled life out into a neat division of labour: we left matters religious or ancient to Indologists and historians of ancient India; matters that required the historian to know Persian or Arabic fell into the province of the so-called “medievalists” (I should mention here the terrific work that Kathleen Davis, a medievalist, has done on the whole question of periodisation), and things pertaining to the period of British rule and after fell to the historian of modern India. And the three groups seldom spoke to one other.

As a young Indian and a student of Indian history, I was aware – as I could not be any otherwise – of gods and goddesses or even of seemingly ancient practices and sentiments that were part of my Indian life but this was not something for which I could make room in my work (except for using slots like “residues” or “left-overs” that modernisation literature, including Marxism, made readily available). The mismatch between life as described and probed in history and life as lived remained stark. And, this in spite of D D Kosambi’s pioneering, creative, and learned attempts to answer this question, for his answers did reproduce the language of “residues” and “left-overs” that perhaps was adequate for his times but did not work as well for us.

My first experience of meeting Guha was something that gave me a jolt on this very particular problem. He invited me to spend a weekend with him at Sussex in 1979 and, as way of introducing me to the incipient Subaltern Studies project, he read out to me a draft of what later became Chapter 2 of Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India (1983). I was amazed to find that he was relating oppressive acts and ideologies of rural landlords vis-à-vis the peasantry in 19th century colonial India to a now-infamous text of the ancient sage Manu (the Manu Samhita), probably composed around the beginning of – or just before – the Christian era. First, scholars who worked on the colonial period seldom used Sanskrit texts. But, more importantly, I wondered how a historian could relate 19th century practices and ideologies to ideologies separated by thousands of years. On the other hand, I had this strange feeling that these ideologies of hierarchy and domination, however separated they may have been from my times in their historical origins, were not at all unfamiliar to me, that I was already aware that I had been brought up in a society in which they were valued, so that even the 19th century of Guha’s description melted away before my mind’s eye and blended with the India I knew from experience. It left me wondering about his method.

More reading and a few conversations later, I realised that what allowed Guha to connect texts separated by centuries and thus deliberately flout some fundamental rules of historical writing was his deep acceptance of French structuralism, so that the underlying proposition was that certain cultural practices could continue to exist long beyond their historical origins by becoming codified through constant repetition and by thus entering the structural aspects of a culture. The analyst’s job was a semiotic one: she or he needed to be able to decode the structure in order to see how the archaic could be alive and well inside the heart of the modern! (And this could hold even if one – and I do – granted Chatterjee his point about technological change.) I was very excited by this discovery and remember that over the following three months of my stay in Britain, while I spent the daytime working in archives and libraries, I spent most evenings and weekends giving myself a course on structuralism and reading a good bit of Levi-Strauss, Barthes and Jakobson.

Seeing a Different World

The discovery of structuralism was quite a heady experience for us – Guha was the first scholar to introduce structuralism and the so-called linguistic turn into Indian history – but it caused us many problems afterwards. Most historians of south Asia were unfamiliar with the literature – Guha had arrived at it via his interest in painting – and some well-known scholars mistook it for Orientalism (in Said’s sense) and accused us of recycling Orientalist themes in a post-colonial garb.

I had a first-hand experience of how unfamiliar some of my Marxist historian friends in Delhi were with these continental streams of thought. I came straight to Delhi from the UK to do some more work at the National Archives of India. One day, I got into a scooter-rickshaw to visit some reputed historian friends at one of the universities in Delhi. On my way to the university neighbourhood, as my scooter-rickshaw was making its way through the crowded, busy, and bustling thoroughfare of Chandni Chowk – literally the “moon-lit square” of the walled city of Delhi as it was built by the Mughals in the 17th century – my scooter-rickshaw screeched to a halt as a man on a bicycle happened to come in front of it. And something happened in a minute that worked for me as almost a structuralist revelation or epiphany (hard to avoid a theological word here). The man on the bicycle had a bird of prey – a large falcon – sitting on the back of his left hand, and my driver of the Jat peasant stock, even as he pressed the brake, could not but help exclaim in admiration, as if driven by an invisible cultural compulsion, shabash (bravo)!
Right in the middle of Chandni Chowk that afternoon in 1979, the bicycle, the scooter-rickshaw, the modern buildings, and everything around that was not 17th or 18th century vanished as if by magic before my eyes, and I felt transported to the cultural world of Mughal India, where in the middle of the city square it would not have been surprising or unusual at all or a peasant-worker to express admiration for the valour and manhood of a person who was able to tame the falcon, very much a royal symbol of the period. I suddenly felt as though I had just watched a bit of Mughal India enacted for me, not as a piece of commercial historical re-enactment as you might find in the Red Fort or Golconda Fort today in India, but as part of busy, unselfconscious, everyday life. I had just seen a cultural code – all that Guha had spoken to me about in Sussex – in action.

“Structuralism works!”, I thought. Excitedly, the first thing I spoke to my historian friends about when I got to their place was this incident, but feeling rather unexcited by my narration of this revelatory experience, they immediately sought to calm my nerves down by telling me that Foucault had gone to my head! What could I say? They could not see that it was not Foucault but Levi-Strauss who was the corrupter here, and that Foucault was a rebellion against all that the structuralist tradition might have stood for. That is how unfamiliar historians in India were with anything that happened outside the British tradition in which they had been reared. Just to verify that I had not been entirely delusional in my sense of there being a cultural code at play in the event in Chandni Chowk, I related the incident next day to another historian friend, a Bengali person but also someone who had grown up in Delhi. I stopped the story at the point where my scooter-rickshaw driver had suddenly halted to notice this man with a falcon sitting on his hand, and asked my friend, “What do you think my driver said when he saw this man?” Shabash, he guessed. And I felt totally confirmed in my new-found structuralist intuition!

Well, structuralism may have been a wrong answer – at least it has its own share of methodological problems – but Guha’s question was right. And the problem of the archaic in the modern is not just a problem for less developed countries. We find this, in many interesting ways, even in a developed nation like Australia, a nation that often finds interesting substitutes for the “medieval” or “the ancient” past it tells itself it does not have, but that is a different story.

The Subject of (Indian) History
As many would know, Subaltern Studies began with the aim of making the subaltern the subjects of their own history. “Subject” was tricky territory in the 1980s. Rosalind O’Hanlon (1988) first pointed out in print that the ostensible subject of Subaltern Studies seemed familiarly male. Gayatri Spivak, who began to be active in our discussions around the mid-1980s, not only repeated the charge; she also made the point that our idea of the “subject” was somewhat naïve in the age of poststructuralism and deconstruction. Some of us had made some use of Foucault in a spirit of updating Marx – in fact, it was Guha who introduced me to Foucault as well during those research months in the British Isles – but we had no idea of Derrida or Lacan or Deleuze and Guattari or Bataille or any other of the poststructuralist gurus. I remember walking into Guha’s office in the Coombs Building at the Australian National University one day in the early 1980s when Guha, pointing to a book on the top and unreachable part of his bookshelves, asked me, “Have you read that book?” It was Derrida’s Grammatology in Spivak’s translation. (Guha and Spivak had already met in Calcutta.) I had not; had barely heard about it. The conversation did not proceed further until Spivak (1988) entered the scene in the mid-1980s with her epochal question: Can the Subaltern speak?

Deconstruction was not easy to absorb. Its linguistic acrobatics alienated many in the group – David Hardiman wrote an important and critical essay once on these divisions amongst us – and Sumit Sarkar (1997), taking his departure from the group, wrote a complaining essay entitled, “The Declare of the Subaltern in Subaltern Studies” though he blamed it all on the deleterious influence of Edward Said. And many others on the Indian and international left saw this new turn as giving ammunition to the Hindu right.

In retrospect, however, we can safely say that Spivak’s question has had a long life (a book was published from Columbia University recently to celebrate 20 years of that essay). Again, I am not sure that I am persuaded by the answer that Spivak gave to her question – one has to remember that Spivak’s answer itself has been a moving target for critics for she has continued to revise and rewrite that essay – but there is no doubt that whatever her errors, they were, in my sense, “generative” for they were motivated by a question we cannot escape: in whose voice does the subaltern speak? As Derrida once famously said, voice is no guarantor of presence.

Agency of the Crowd
But I do not want to pursue here Spivak’s line of inquiry. I want to return to the foundational moment of Subaltern Studies and look at Guha’s book, Elementary Aspects for the way it posed the question of the subject of history. Obviously, Guha’s expectation, born of the 1970s’ discussions of peasant rebellions, that the popular insurgencies of the 19th century could be seen as presaging or anticipating a more political popular struggle for the wholesale transformation of the Indian social structure in the direction of socialist equality will not seem valid today to many. But I do think that with his careful study of the methods by which crowds mobilised themselves in the cities and countryside of 19th century India, Guha gave us a most interesting and creative genealogy of crowd politics as it actually exists in India today.

At bottom, Guha asked a question that had been asked in the English context by someone like E P Thompson: what role did the people of England play in shaping the English institutions of democracy? That, for example, was an animating question both in The Making of the English Working Class and in Whigs and Hunters. Guha’s question was similar: How did popular politics develop and shape the democracy that India became after Independence? But Guha’s approach to answering this question and I would say his answer itself – often implicit in the pages of Elementary Aspects – were different from
what leftist “Anglo-historians” had divined. Whether it was Edward Thompson or George Rudé, their analysis of rioters and crowds went in the direction of humanising the crowd by looking for individual faces. Rudé is of course famous for his innovations in this regard.

There is no doubt that historiography in general has been enriched by the efforts of these deservedly famous European historians. Yet Guha’s structuralist answer was significantly different from theirs. He did not look to delineate faces in the crowd, for that method only dissolves the crowd into so many individuals, whereas the agency of the crowd is effected and legitimised precisely by its facelessness.

Now how does all this relate to Indian democracy? One of the most interesting ways in which Indian democracy – or some other emerging democracies, such as the South African one – has begun to diverge from western liberal democracies is in their use of public “disorder” – I am using that word provisionally, hence the quotation marks – as part of political bargaining within a constitutionally democratic structure. A feature that, for instance, distinguishes Indian mainstream political parties from their counterparts in the west is that a successful Indian political party has to have the capacity to create mayhem on the streets as a way of publicising and pushing their demands. Even political movements fighting for rights of particular castes or those of peasants against land acquisition will try to acquire at least a capacity for public violence or disorder as a way of advancing their cause.

Riotous crowds are an old, established, precolonial feature of Indian politics. The words we use in Hindi or Bengali to describe crowd-violence – fasad, hangama, golmal and so on – are all figures of disorder, which is apposite, for the Mughals and the British rulers after them did treat crowd action only as a problem of order and not as a political problem. (Historical research connecting the evolution of bazaars – hence trade and the move towards urbanisation – to crowd-action would probably pay some rich dividends in south Asian history.) The emergence of the crowd as a mainstream political actor begins, of course, under Gandhi (with some foreshadowing of it in the popular events of 1910s) though he was always formally and morally opposed to the violence that often ensued from this.

In the early years of Independence, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru and the constitutionalist dalit leader, B R Ambedkar, often reminded the nation that even the Gandhian method of satyagraha was only suited for fighting the British and should not be deployed against the national government, but all this has been in vain.

Today, one cannot write off crowd action or more broadly violent politics of the street as simply the disorder of Indian democracy. It is an integral part of how democratic politics are understood and practised in India. And a new kind of political subject has emerged in India that is demotic and democratic, in that it now belongs to the multiple meanings the word “democracy” has come to have in India. The peasant insurgencies Guha wrote about were the forerunner of this political subject and their modes of mobilisation are still visible in many of the riots and insurgencies in India. Guha’s hunch that peasants of colonial societies were not “pre-political” as Hobsbawm had imagined them captured something of the spirit of his (Guha’s) times. But we did not know very clearly what “political” meant in this context. Guha’s answer that these peasant movements could form the basis of a sustained move towards radical social transformation in India has proven wrong. But the error was, in my sense, generative. One day scholars will return to Elementary Aspects not to read the book on Guha’s terms but find in it a way, a method, of constructing a genealogy of the mass-political subject in India. This would not be the only genealogy – the very logic of genealogies is multiple – but would be one important way of figurating out how the history of subaltern rebellion has left its imprint on contemporary India.

Postscript

The above, as I have said, is largely the text of a lecture delivered in 2010. I have on occasions added brief responses to Chatterjee and Gohain. Chatterjee has documented some of the ways in which new projects have been spawned by Subaltern Studies, his own role in introducing the idea of “political society” that many have found useful is a powerful instance of how the original projected has mutated in his creative hands. Gohain, on the other hand, recommends a return – a “wiser” but inevitably “sadder” one – to the initial impulse of the series: to find a connection, that is, between emancipatory politics – “a clear intention to eventually free mankind of its shackles” – and academic studies. I do not wish to be polemical with respect to either, for both Chatterjee and Gohain are thoughtful scholars and I have personally learned much from the writings of both. But it does seem to me that in the times that we presently live in – both globally and in India – any democratic endeavour will have to embrace a plurality of end-goals. There is no single, universally applicable description available any more of what it might mean to talk about “eventually freeing mankind of its shackles” while the evidence that human collectivities do not want to live under the domination of those whom they regard as “others” is to be found everywhere. This is why I made a distinction between the series Subaltern Studies (with which I was associated) and the field of “subaltern studies” the series may have named and initiated. The field is a much larger and more enduring phenomenon than the series that originated from very particular times and authorial intentions. The general interest in the lives and politics of the subaltern classes that Subaltern Studies stoked is here to stay, whether we agree or not with particular authors and their contributions in the field. That itself may have been the greatest legacy of Subaltern Studies.

REFERENCES

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