
UNIT 25 *SUBALTERN STUDIES*

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25.1 INTRODUCTION

The *Subaltern Studies* is the title given to a series of volumes initially published under the editorship of Ranajit Guha, the prime mover and the ideologue of the project. He edited the first six volumes of the *Subaltern Studies*. The next five volumes are edited by other scholars associated with the project. Right from the beginning the *Subaltern Studies* took the position that the entire tradition of Indian historiography before it have had elitist bias. The historians associated with the *Subaltern Studies* declared that they would set the position right by writing the history from the point of view of the common people. In this Unit we will discuss the various positions taken by the writers associated with the *Subaltern Studies* as well as the criticism of the project by historians and others working in the area of Indian studies.

25.2 BEGINNING OF THE IDEA

The *Subaltern Studies* was proclaimed by its adherents as a new school in the field of Indian history-writing. Some of the historians associated with it declared it to be a sharp break in the tradition of Indian historiography. A group of writers dissatisfied with the convention of Indian history-writing became part of the collective and contributed for the volumes. It, however, also involved historians and other social scientists not formally associated with the subaltern collective. Besides the articles published in the volumes of *Subaltern Studies*, these writers also wrote for many other journals and edited volumes as well as published monographs which are today associated with subaltern themes and methodology. Starting the venture with the help of those whom Ranajit Guha termed as ‘marginalised academics’, the *Subaltern Studies* soon acquired vast reputation both inside and outside India for the views they professed as well as for intensive research on subaltern themes. Initially planned as a series of three volumes, it has now become an ongoing project with eleven volumes in print till date. Apart from these volumes, Ranajit Guha has also edited one volume of essays taken from the various earlier volumes for the international audiences. In some of the recent volumes the *Subaltern Studies* has included themes from non-Indian Third World countries also.

The term ‘subaltern’ has a rather long history. It was initially applied to the serfs and peasants in England during the Middle Ages. Later, by 1700, it was used for the subordinate ranks in the military. It, however, gained wide currency in scholarly circles after the works of Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937), an Italian Marxist and Communist Party leader. Gramsci generally used the term in a broader connotation of ‘class’ to avoid the censorship of the prison authorities as he was in jail and his writings were scanned. Gramsci had adopted the term to refer to the subordinate groups in the society. In his opinion, the history of the subaltern groups is almost always related to that of the ruling groups. In addition, this history is generally ‘fragmentary and episodic’.

Ranajit Guha, however, in the Preface to *Subaltern Studies I*, did not mention Gramsci’s use of the term, even though he referred to Gramsci as an inspiration. Instead, he defined it as given in the *Concise Oxford Dictionary*:

‘The word “subaltern” in the title stands for the meaning as given in the *Concise Oxford Dictionary*, that is, “of inferior rank”. It will be used in these pages 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.’

A little later, at the end of his opening essay in the volume, he further clarified this term:

‘The terms “people” and “subaltern classes” have been used synonymously throughout this note. The social groups and elements included in this category represent the demographic difference between the total Indian population and all those whom we have described as the “elite”.’

The Subaltern historians made a radical departure in the use of the term from that of Gramsci. Even while accepting the subordinated nature of the subaltern groups, they argued the their history was autonomous from that of the dominant classes.

25.3 DEVELOPMENT OF THE PROJECT

Now there is a general and clear acknowledgement of basically two phases in the career of the Subaltern Studies. Phase I consists of :

- a) concern with the subaltern, i.e., lower, exploited classes;
- b) criticism of the elite, i.e., exploiting classes; and
- c) influence of Gramscian thought and Marxist social history and an attempt to work within broader Marxist theory.

In the second phase, there is a clear shift from these concerns. Now :

- a) there is an increasing engagement with textual analysis, a shift away from exploring the history of the exploited people, and more engagement, even though critical, with elite discourses; and
- b) Marx and Gramsci are jettisoned in favour of Michel Foucault, Edward Said, and other postmodernists and postcolonialists.

25.3.1 First Phase : Elite vs. Subaltern

The Subaltern Studies asserted itself as a radically new form of history-writing in the context of Indian history. It was initially conceived as a series of three volumes to be edited by its eldest protagonist and the prime mover of the idea, Ranajit Guha. The idea

was seemingly informed by Gramscian thought. A deliberate attempt was made to break from both the economic determinism of a variety of Marxist theory as well as the elitism of bourgeois-nationalist and colonialist interpretations. A group of writers similarly dissatisfied with the convention of Indian historiography joined the collective and contributed essays for the volumes. It, however, also involved historians and other social scientists not formally associated with the subaltern collective.

Although basically concerned about India, the *Subaltern Studies* project was first conceived in England by some Indian academics, Ranajit Guha being the principal motive force behind it. Right from the beginning it was set against almost all existing traditions of Indian historiography. In what can be called as the manifesto of the project, Ranajit Guha, in a vein reminiscent of the opening line of *The Communist Manifesto* ('The history of all hitherto existing societies is the history of class struggle'), declared in the very first volume of the *Subaltern Studies*, that 'The historiography of Indian nationalism has for a long time been dominated by elitism – colonialist elitism and bourgeois-nationalist elitism.' Both types of historiography was said to derive from the ideological discourse of the British rule in India. Despite their differences, both shared certain things in common and the most important of these was the absence of the politics of the people from their accounts. In his view, there was now an urgent requirement for setting the record straight by viewing the history from the point-of-view of the subaltern classes. This standpoint as well as the politics of the people was crucial because it constituted an autonomous domain which 'neither originated from elite politics nor did its existence depend on the latter'. The people's politics differed from the elite politics in several crucial aspects. For one, its roots lay in the traditional organisations of the people such as caste and kinship networks, tribal solidarity, territoriality, etc. Secondly, while elite mobilisations were vertical in nature, people's mobilisations were horizontal. Thirdly, whereas the elite mobilisation was legalistic and pacific, the subaltern mobilisation was relatively violent. Fourthly, the elite mobilisation was more cautious and controlled while the subaltern mobilisation was more spontaneous.

The *Subaltern Studies* soon became the new 'history from below' which did not try to fuse the people's history with official nationalism. It, therefore, attracted the attention of the scholars who had become disenchanted with the nationalistic claims as embodied in the post-colonial state. Largely influenced by Gramsci in its initial phase in trying to discover the radical consciousness of the dominated groups, it was pitted against the three main trends in Indian historiography – colonialist, which saw the colonial rule as the fulfillment of a mission to enlighten the ignorant people; nationalist, which visualised all the protest activities as parts of the making of the nation-state; and Marxist, which subsumed the people's struggles under the progression towards revolution and a socialist state.

The aim of the project was manifold :

- a) To show the bourgeois and elite character of Congress nationalism which was said to restrain popular radicalism;
- b) To counter the attempts by many historians to incorporate the people's struggles in the grand narrative of Indian / Congress nationalism; and
- c) To reconstruct the subaltern consciousness and stress its autonomy. Considering the non-availability of evidences from subaltern sources, it was a difficult task. To overcome this, the subaltern historians endeavoured to extract their material from the official sources by reading them 'against the grain'.

Subaltern Studies was conceived in an atmosphere where Gramsci's ideas were making significant impact. Eric Hobsbawm, Raymond Williams and Stuart Hall were incorporating Gramsci's ideas into their works. Perry Anderson and Tom Nairn, on the other hand, were developing a favourable critique of Gramsci. Other influences were that of the new social history, written by Western Marxist historians such as Henri Lefebvre, Christopher Hill, E.P. Thompson, Eugene Genovese and others, who emphasised the necessity for considering people's point of view. Thus the objective of the *Subaltern Studies* was proclaimed to 'promote a systematic and informed discussion of subaltern themes in the field of South Asian studies and thus help to rectify the elitist bias characteristic of much research and academic work in this particular area'. (Ranajit Guha, 'Preface' to *Subaltern Studies I*.) Guha, in the Preface to vol. III, stated that what brought the subaltern historians together was 'a critical idiom common to them all – an idiom self-consciously and systematically critical of elitism in the field of South Asian studies'. He further asserted that it was in the opposition to this elitism that the unity of the subaltern project lay:

'We are indeed opposed to much of the prevailing academic practice in historiography and the social sciences for its failure to acknowledge the subaltern as the maker of his own destiny. This critique lies at the very heart of our project. There is no way in which it can express itself other than as an adversary of that elitist paradigm which is so well entrenched in South Asian studies. Negativity is therefore the very *raison d'être* as well as the constitutive principle of our project.'

On the political side, the international and national scenes of the late 1960s and early 1970s had become radicalised and questions were being raised on the established and conventional ideas. The conventional political parties, from the Right to the Left, came for criticism and much emphasis was placed on the non-conventional political formations and activities.

The Subaltern historians, disenchanted with the Congress nationalism and its embodiment in the Indian state, rejected the thesis that popular mobilisation was the result of either economic conditions or initiatives from the top. They claimed to have discovered a popular domain which was autonomous. Its autonomy was rooted in conditions of exploitation and its politics was opposed to the elites. This domain of the subaltern was defined by perpetual resistance and rebellion against the elite. The subaltern historians also attributed a general unity to this domain clubbing together a variety of heterogeneous groups such as tribals, peasants, proletariat and, occasionally, the middle classes as well. Moreover, this domain was said to be almost completely uninfluenced by the elite politics and to possess an independent, self-generating dynamics. The charismatic leadership was no longer viewed as the chief force behind a movement. It was instead the people's interpretation of such charisma which acquired prominence in analysis of a movement or rebellion.

Shahid Amin's study of the popular perception of Mahatma Gandhi is a revealing example. In his article, 'Gandhi as Mahatma', deriving evidences from Gorakhpur district in eastern UP, he shows that the popular perception and actions were completely at variance with the Congress leaders' perception of Mahatma. Although the mechanism of spread of the Mahatma's message was 'rumours', there was an entire philosophy of economy and politics behind it – the need to become a good human being, to give up drinking, gambling and violence, to take up spinning and to maintain communal harmony. The stories which circulated also emphasised the magical powers of Mahatma and his capacity to reward or punish those who obeyed or disobeyed him. On the other hand, the Mahatma's name and his supposed magical powers were also used to reinforce as

well as establish caste hierarchies, to make the debtors pay and to boost the cow-protection movement. All these popular interpretations of the Mahatma's messages reached their climax during the Chauri Chaura incidents in 1922 when his name was invoked to burn the police post, to kill the policemen and to loot the market.

Earlier historians were criticised not only for ignoring the popular initiative but, equally seriously, accepting the official characterisation of the rebel and the rebellion. Ranajit Guha, in his article 'The Prose of Counter-Insurgency', launched a scathing attack on the existing peasant and tribal histories in India for considering the peasant rebellions as 'purely spontaneous and unpremediated affairs' and for ignoring consciousness of the rebels themselves. In his opinion,

'Historiography has been content to deal with the peasant rebel merely as an empirical person or member of a class, but not as an entity whose will and reason constituted the praxis called rebellion. The omission is indeed dyed into most narratives by metaphors assimilating peasant revolts to natural phenomena : they break out like thunder storms, heave like earthquakes, spread like wildfires, infect like epidemics.'

He accused all the accounts of rebellions, starting with the immediate official reports to the histories written by the left radicals, of writing the texts of counter-insurgency which refused 'to acknowledge the insurgent as the subject of his own history'.

Gyan Pandey, in 'Peasant Revolt and Indian Nationalism, 1919-1922', argued that peasant movement in Awadh arose before and independently of the Non-cooperation movement and the peasants' understanding of the local power structure and its alliance with colonial power was more advanced than that of the urban leaders, including the Congress. Moreover, the peasant militancy was reduced wherever the Congress organisation was stronger.

In Stephen Henningham's account of the 'Quit India in Bihar and the Eastern United Provinces', the elite and the subaltern domains were clearly defined and distinct from each other. Thus, 'the great revolt of 1942 consisted of an elite nationalist uprising combined with a subaltern rebellion'. Their motives and demands were also different :

'Those engaged in the elite nationalist uprising sought to protest against government repression of Congress and to demand the granting of independence to India. In contrast, those involved in the subaltern rebellion acted in pursuit of relief from privation and in protest against the misery in which they found themselves.'

He further contends that it was this dual character of the revolt which led to its suppression.

David Hardiman, in his numerous articles, focused on subaltern themes and argued that whether it was the tribal assertion in South Gujarat, or the Bhil movement in Eastern Gujarat, or the radicalism of the agricultural workers during the Civil Disobedience Movement, there was an independent politics of the subaltern classes against the elites.

Similarly, Sumit Sarkar, in 'The Conditions and Nature of Subaltern Militancy', argued the Non-cooperation movement in Bengal 'revealed a picture of masses outstripping leaders'. He stated that the term 'subaltern' could refer to basically three social groups: 'tribal and low-caste agricultural labourers and share-croppers; landholding peasants, generally of intermediate caste-status in Bengal (together with their Muslim counterparts); and labour in plantations, mines and industries (along with urban casual labour).' These

groups might have divisions among themselves and include both the exploiters and exploited in their ranks. However, he argued that :

‘the subaltern groups so defined formed a relatively autonomous political domain with specific features and collective mentalities which need to be explored, and that this was a world distinct from the domain of the elite politicians who in early twentieth century Bengal came overwhelmingly from high-caste educated professional groups connected with zamindari or intermediate tenure-holding’.

Thus we see that in these and in many other essays in the earlier volumes, an attempt was made to separate the elite and the subaltern domains and to establish the autonomy of subaltern consciousness and action. Although there were some notable exceptions, such as the writings of Partha Chatterjee, this phase was generally characterised by emphasis on subaltern themes and autonomous subaltern consciousness.

25.3.2 Second Phase : Discourse Analysis

Over the years, there began a shift in the approach of the Subaltern Studies. The influence of the postmodernist and postcolonialist ideologies became more marked. While the emphasis on the subalterns may be associated with Guha, Pandey, Amin, Hardiman, Henningham, Sarkar and some others, the postcolonialist influences were revealed in the works of Partha Chatterjee right from the beginning. His influential book, *Nationalist Thought and Colonial World* (1986), applied the postcolonial framework of Edward Said which viewed the colonial power-knowledge as overwhelming and irresistible. Such themes were also evident in Chatterjee’s articles in the volumes of the Subaltern Studies even earlier. His later book, *The Nation and its Fragments* (1995), carries this analysis further. Many other writers in the Subaltern Studies slowly abandoned the earlier adherence to Marxism. There was a bifurcation of intellectual concerns in their ranks. While some of the Subaltern historians still stuck to the subaltern themes, a larger number began to write in postcolonialist modes. Now there was a clear move from the research on economic and social issues to cultural matters, particularly the analysis of colonialist discourse.

Subalternity as a concept was also redefined. Earlier, it stood for the oppressed classes in opposition to the dominant classes both inside and outside. Later, it was conceptualised in opposition to colonialism, modernity and Enlightenment. The researched articles on themes concerned with subaltern groups decreased in number in later volumes. So, while in the first four volumes there were 20 essays on the subaltern classes like peasants and workers, in the next six volumes there were only five such essays. There was now an increasing stress on textual analysis of colonial discourse. Consequently, the discourse analysis acquired precedence over research on subaltern themes. The earlier emphasis on the ‘subaltern’ now gave way to a focus on ‘community’. Earlier the elite nationalism was stated to hijack the people’s initiatives for its own project; now the entire project of nationalism was declared to be only a version of colonial discourse with its emphasis on centralisation of movement, and later of the state. The ideas of secularism and enlightenment rationalism were attacked and there began an emphasis on the ‘fragments’ and ‘episodes’.

There is also an attempt to justify this shift and link it to the initial project. Thus the editors of Vol. X of *Subaltern Studies* (Gautam Bhadra, Gyan Prakash and Susie Tharu) proclaim that ‘Nothing – not elite practices, state policies, academic disciplines, literary texts, archival sources, language – was exempt from the effects of subalternity’. Therefore, all the elite domains need to be explored as the legitimate subjects of Subaltern Studies.

Gyan Prakash has argued that since the Indian subalterns did not leave their own records, the 'history from below' approach in imitation of the Western model was not possible. Therefore, the *Subaltern Studies* 'had to conceive the subaltern differently and write different histories'. According to him, it is important to see the 'subalternity as a discursive effect' which warrants 'the reformulation of the notion of the subaltern'. Thus,

'Such reexaminations of South Asian history do not invoke "real" subalterns, prior to discourse, in framing their critique. Placing subalterns in the labyrinth of discourse, they cannot claim an unmediated access to their reality. The actual subalterns and subalternity emerge between the folds of the discourse, in its silences and blindness, and in its overdetermined pronouncements.'

The subalterns, therefore, cannot be represented as subjects as they are entangled in and created by the working of power. Dipesh Chakrabarty goes even further in denying a separate domain not only for the subaltern history, but the history of the Third World as a whole :

'It is that insofar as the academic discourse of history – that is, "history" as a discourse produced at the institutional site of the university – is concerned, "Europe" remains the sovereign, theoretical subject of all histories, including the ones we call "Indian", "Chinese", "Kenyan", and so on. There is a peculiar way in which all these other histories tend to become variations on a master narrative that could be called "the history of Europe". In this sense, "Indian" history itself is in a position of subalternity : one can only articulate subaltern subject positions in the name of this history.'

The second phase of the *Subaltern Studies*, therefore, not only moves away from the earlier emphasis on the exploration of the subaltern consciousness, it also questions the very ground of historical works as such, in line with the postmodernist thinking in the West.

25.4 CRITIQUE

There has been wide-ranging criticism of the *Subaltern Studies* from many quarters. Right from the beginning the project has been critiqued by the Marxist, Nationalist and Cambridge School historians, besides those who were not affiliated to any position. Almost all positions it took, ranging from a search for autonomous subaltern domain to the later shift to discourse analysis, came under scrutiny and criticism.

Some of the earlier critiques were published in the *Social Scientist*. In one of them, Javeed Alam criticised *Subaltern Studies* for its insistence on an autonomous domain of the subaltern. According to Alam, the autonomy of the subaltern politics is predicated on perpetuity of rebellious action, on 'a consistent tendency towards resistance and a propensity to rebellion on the part of the peasant masses'. Whether this autonomous action is positive or negative in its consequences is of not much concern to the subalternists :

'The historical direction of militancy is ... of secondary consideration. What is primary is the spontaneity and an internally located self-generating momentum. Extending the implications of the inherent logic of such a theoretical construction, it is a matter of indifference if it leads to communal rioting or united anti-feudal actions that overcome the initial limitations.'

In another essay, a review essay by Sangeeta Singh and others, Ranajit Guha was criticised for presenting a caricature of the spontaneous action by peasant rebels. In

Guha's understanding, it was alleged, 'spontaneity is synonymous with reflexive action'. Since 'Spontaneity is action on the basis of traditional consciousness', Guha's whole effort is said to 'rehabilitate spontaneity as a political method'. Moreover, Guha, in his assertion about the centrality of religion in rebel's consciousness, approves the British official view which emphasises the irrationality of the rebellion and absolves colonialism of playing any disruptive role in the rural and tribal social and economic structures.

Ranjit Das Gupta points out that there is no precise definition of the subaltern domain. Moreover, the subaltern historians 'have tended to concentrate on moments of conflict and protest, and in their writings the dialectics of collaboration and acquiescence on the part of the subalterns ... have by and large been underplayed'. The rigid distinction between the elite and the subaltern, ignoring all other hierarchical formations, was criticised by others as well. David Ludden, in the Introduction to an edited volume (2001), writes that :

'Even readers who applauded Subaltern Studies found two features troubling. First and foremost, the new substance of subalternity emerged only on the underside of a rigid theoretical barrier between "elite" and "subaltern", which resembles a concrete slab separating upper and lower space in a two-storey building. This hard dichotomy alienated subalternity from social histories that include more than two storeys or which move among them; ... Second, because subaltern politics was confined theoretically to the lower storey, it could not threaten a political structure. This alienated subalternity from political histories of popular movements and alienated subaltern groups from organised, transformative politics....'

Rosalind O'Hanlon offers a comprehensive critique of earlier volumes of *Subaltern Studies* in her article 'Recovering the Subject'. She argues that, despite their claims of surpassing the earlier brands of history-writing, 'the manner in which the subaltern makes his appearance through the work of the contributors is in the form of the classic unitary self-constituting subject-agent of liberal humanism'. Among the Subaltern historians, particularly in the writings of Ranajit Guha, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Stephen Henningham and Sumit Sarkar, there is 'the tendency to attribute timeless primordiality' to the 'collective traditions and culture of subordinated groups'. She finds an essentialism at the core of the project 'arising from an assertion of an irreducibility and autonomy of experience, and a simple-minded voluntarism deriving from the insistence upon a capacity for self-determination'. This leads to an idealism, particularly 'in Guha's drive to posit an originary autonomy in the traditions of peasant insurgency. He does at times appear to be approaching a pure Hegelianism'.

Christopher Bayly, in 'Rallying around the Subaltern', questions the project's claim to originality. According to him, the Subaltern historians have not made use of 'new statistical material and indigenous records' which could substantiate their claim of writing a new history. Their main contribution seems to be re-reading the official records and 'mounting an internal critique'. Thus, the only distinguishing mark which separates the Subaltern Studies from the earlier and contemporary 'history from below' is 'a rhetorical device, the term 'subaltern' itself, and a populist idiom'. Bayly thinks that 'the greatest weakness of the Subaltern orientation' is that 'it tends to frustrate the writing of rounded history as effectively as did "elitism"'.

Sumit Sarkar, who was earlier associated with the project, later on criticised it for moving towards postcolonialism. In his two essays, 'The Decline of the Subaltern in Subaltern Studies' and 'Orientalism Revisited', he argues that this shift may have been occasioned due to various reasons, but, intellectually, there is an 'attempt to have the best of both

worlds : critiquing others for essentialism, teleology and related sins, while claiming a special immunity from doing the same oneself.' Moreover, such works in Indian history have not produced any spectacular results. In fact, 'the critique of colonial discourse, despite vast claims to total originality, quite often is no more than a restatement in new language of old nationalist positions – and fairly crude restatements, at that.' The later subaltern project became some sort of 'Third World nationalism, followed by post-modernistic valorisations of "fragments"'. In fact, the later *Subaltern Studies* 'comes close to positions of neo-traditionalist anti-modernism, notably advocated ... by Ashish Nandy'. Even earlier, according to Sarkar, there was a tendency 'towards essentialising the categories of 'subaltern' and 'autonomy', in the sense of assigning to them more or less absolute, fixed, decontextualised meanings and qualities'. Sarkar argues that there are many problems with the histories produced by the subaltern writers and these arise due to their 'restrictive analytical frameworks, as Subaltern Studies swings from a rather simple emphasis on subaltern autonomy to an even more simplistic thesis of Western colonial cultural domination'.

Such criticism of the *Subaltern Studies* is still continuing and the Subaltern historians have responded to it with their own justification of the project and counter-attacks on critics.

25.5 REJOINDER

The subalternists took some time before reacting to the critiques. In vol. IV, Dipesh Chakrabarty's reply to some of the critiques was published. But before that, in the Preface of the same volume, Ranajit Guha railed against the criticism by those whom he called 'the vendors of readymade answers' and academic 'old rods' who supposedly posed as the 'custodians of official truth entrenched within their liberal and leftist stockades'. He peremptorily dismissed the criticism by those scholars 'who have lived too long with well-rehearsed ideas and methodologies'. He also derisively referred to what he termed as 'the manic reaction' of a 'Delhi critic who, on the publication of each volume, has gone round the block waving his review copy and shouting, like the mad watchman in Tagore's story, "sab jhuta hai! Sab jhuta hai!"'

Chakrabarty's reply was more detailed and well-argued. He questioned the intentions of some reviewers. For example, the charge of both Hegelianism and positivism against Guha seemed contradictory. It was because, he says, '“Idealism”, “positivism”, etc. are not used in the essay as simple, descriptive terms; they are terms of condemnation as well'. In reply to the charge of ignoring the colonial contexts or any outside influences on the politics and consciousness of the subalterns, he said that 'this alleged "failure" is actually our conscious refusal to subordinate the internal logic of a "consciousness" to the logic of so-called "objective" or "material" conditions'. He further asserted that :

'The central aim of the Subaltern Studies project is to understand the consciousness that informed and still informs political actions taken by the subaltern classes on their own, independently of any elite initiative.'

It was because, as shown by subaltern historians, 'in the course of nationalist struggles involving popular mobilization the masses often put their own interpretations on the aims of these movements and proceeded to act them out'.

Besides Dipesh Chakrabarty, Gyan Prakash has been a most vocal defender of the project. He praises the project as part of the 'post-foundational' and 'post-Orientalist' historiography of India. He argues that the Subaltern historians have been able to rescue their writings from the clutches of elite historiography :

‘the significance of their project lies in the writing of histories freed from the will of the colonial and nationalist elites. It is this project of resisting colonial and nationalist discursive hegemonies, through histories of the subaltern whose identity resides in difference, which makes the work of these scholars a significant intervention in third-world historiography’.

In another article, Gyan Prakash outlines the reason for a shift in the position as the *Subaltern Studies* project developed and he defends this change. He supports the later developments as it ‘has turned into a sharp critique of the discipline of history’.

Gyan Pandey, writing ‘In Defense of the Fragment’, argues against most of the writings on communal riots in India. He states that in these versions, ‘The “fragments of Indian society – the smaller religious and caste communities, tribal sections, industrial workers, and activist women’s groups, all of which might be said to represent “minority” cultures and practices – have been expected to fall in line with the “mainstream” ... national culture’. It is because since the nineteenth century the state and the nation have been the ‘central organizing principles of human society’. Similarly, Ranajit Guha, in ‘The Small Voice of History’, accused the modern historiographical tradition of being statist. He argues that,

‘the common sense of history may be said generally to be guided by a sort of statism which thematizes and evaluates the past for it. This is a tradition which goes back to the beginnings of modern historical thinking in the Italian Renaissance.’

Dipesh Chakrabarty, in his ‘Radical Histories and Question of Enlightenment Rationalism’, criticises the Marxist historiography for being influenced by ‘a certain form of hyper-rationalism characteristic of colonial modernity’. He further argues that now ‘post-structuralist and deconstructionist philosophies are useful in developing approaches suited to studying subaltern histories under conditions of colonial modernities’. The fact that there was a shift in the position is also sometimes denied. Dipesh Chakrabarty argues that from the very beginning, the *Subaltern Studies* was different and ‘raised questions about history writing that made a radical departure from English Marxist historiographical tradition inescapable’. He says that right since its inception the *Subaltern Studies* followed the postcolonial agenda and was not in tune with the ‘history from below’ approach :

‘With hindsight it could be said that there were broadly three areas in which Subaltern Studies differed from the “history from below” approach of Hobsbawm or Thompson. ... Subaltern historiography necessarily entailed (a) a relative separation of the history of power from any universalist histories of capital, (b) a critique of the nation-form, and (c) an interrogation of the relationship between power and knowledge.... In these differences ... lay the beginnings of a new way of theorizing the intellectual agenda for postcolonial histories.’

Thus, in their responses to the critics, the writers associated with the Subaltern project sought to defend their works as part of the post-Marxist, post-colonial and post-structuralist streams of historical thinking.

25.6 SUMMARY

The *Subaltern Studies* began in the early 1980s as a critique of the existing historiography which was accused by its initiators for ignoring the voice of the people. The writers associated with the project promised to offer a completely new kind of history in the

field of Indian studies. Judging from the reactions from the scholars and students in the early years, it seemed to have fulfilled this promise to some extent. It soon received international recognition. In the early years, encompassing six volumes, edited by Ranajit Guha, the *Subaltern Studies* made efforts to explore the consciousness and actions of the oppressed groups in the Indian society. However, there was another trend discernible in some of the essays published in it. This trend was influenced by the increasingly important postmodernist and postcolonialist writings in the Western academic circles. In the later years, this trend came to dominate the works of the writers associated with the *Subaltern Studies*. This trend was marked by a shift from the earlier emphasis on the subaltern themes. Sometimes the scepticism became so extreme that it questioned the need for the writing of history itself.

25.7 EXERCISES

- 1) What do you understand by the term 'subaltern'? How did the *Subaltern Studies* begin in India?
- 2) Discuss the two phases in the development of the project of the *Subaltern Studies*. Do you think the differences between the two phases are fundamental in nature? Answer with examples.
- 3) What are the basic points of criticism directed towards the *Subaltern Studies*? What is the response of the Subalternist historians?

25.8 SUGGESTED READINGS

Subaltern Studies, 11 volumes (1982-2000).

David Ludden (ed.), *Reading Subaltern Studies : Critical History, Contested Meaning, and the Globalisation of South Asia* (Delhi, Permanent Black, 2001).

Vinayak Chaturvedi (ed.), *Mapping Subaltern Studies and the Postcolonial* (London and New York, Verso, 2000).

Vinay Lal, 'Walking with the Subalterns, Riding with the Academy : The Curious Ascendancy of Indian History', *Studies in History*, 17, 1 (2001).

Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History', in Ranajit Guha (ed.), *A Subaltern Studies Reader, 1986-1995* (Delhi, OUP, 1998).

Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'Subaltern Studies and Postcolonial Historiography', *Nepantla : Views from South*, 1:1, 2000.

Gyanendra Pandey, 'In Defense of the Fragment', in Ranajit Guha (ed.), *A Subaltern Studies Reader, 1986-1995* (Delhi, OUP, 1998).

Gyan Prakash, 'Subaltern Studies as Postcolonial Criticism', *The American Historical Review*, December, 1994 (99, 5).