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RESEARCH ARTICLE

RANAJIT GUHA'S CONTRIBUTION TO SUBALTERN HISTORY

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Abstract

Ranjit Guha is a prominent historian known for his pioneering approach to the study of subaltern classes, inspired by Antonio Gramsci and Mao Zedong. The subaltern approach of sociology looks at historical sociology from below, focusing on the history of subaltern people rather than the elitist perspective in history, which often ignores their contributions. According to Guha, subaltern historiography focuses on the peasants and tribal movements during the colonial period in India, as these have been overlooked by mainstream elitist historiography. Guha's interventions in historiography have had a significant impact on the study of modern Indian history. His foundational contributions to the project of Subaltern Studies have introduced new methods of reading conventional sources of historiography, allowing for the recovery of the voices of the oppressed and marginalized.

Keywords: ranji guhas, subaltern studies

Introduction

The term 'subaltern' was coined by Antonio Gramsci. Initially it was widely used to denote inferior rank in army, but nowadays, the term subaltern implies people of inferior rank for his/her various attributes such as economic condition, race, ethnicity, gender, caste, sexual orientation and people are marginalised for such attributes. Thus, subaltern perspective is the way to understand society from the below. The people who are marginalized for various reasons in a stratified society produce knowledge and have politics of their own. The dominant

historiography or writing of history and study however excludes them from their concerns. Subaltern perspective looks into those who are neglected and marginalized and contrasts it with the elite perspective.

Subaltern Studies in India

The emergence of subaltern studies in India as a post-colonial theory focuses on rewriting the history of the people. Ranajit Guha and his colleagues, including Partha Chatterjee, David Hardiman, Shahid Amin, Gyanendra Pandey, David Arnold, Sumit

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Sarkar, and Dipesh Chakrabarty, are credited with this project. Subaltern historiography, which involves studying history, is concerned with the "history of the subaltern people." The main idea behind subaltern history is to examine history from the perspective of the subaltern people, rather than from an elitist viewpoint that overlooks their role in shaping history. Dhanagare (1988) points out that subaltern historiography aims to redress the balance by highlighting the role of the politics of the people, as opposed to the elite politics that has traditionally been emphasized in Indian history. Guha focuses on the peasant and tribal movements during the colonial period in India, which have been neglected by mainstream elitist historiography. He argues that neglecting the politics of the people and the contributions of the subaltern classes to the nationalist movement results in an incomplete understanding of Indian history. Furthermore, he believes that elitist historiography tends to view Indian nationalism and the freedom struggle as an idealistic endeavour led by indigenous elites, ignoring the contributions of the subaltern classes. Dhanagare (1988) asserts that proponents of this approach argue that elitist historiography, whether neo-colonialist or neo-nationalist, has always overstated the role of the elite in building Indian nationalism.

In his 2013 article titled "Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India," Guha argues that the historiography of Indian nationalism was dominated by elitists, who were colonial and bourgeois nationalists. This type of historical writing gives the impression that the Indian nation and the consciousness of nationalism were achievements of only the elites, with no relevance given to the contributions made by the people during the freedom struggle. Guha suggests that the elitist perspective of history writing portrays the contributions of the people as a law-and-order problem, overlooking the politics of the subaltern classes in the nationalist movement. The subaltern historiographers argue that the politics of the subaltern classes existed parallel to the politics of the dominant elites and did not depend on elite politics.

Thus, subaltern approach in studying the peasants and tribal movements in India is an important milestone because it examines the politics

of the people and in opposition to the politics of the elites. Dhanagare (1988) argues for and constructed a twofold division between the 'people' and the 'elite'. Both are viewed as two domains of the nationalist movement. He constructs structural dichotomy or the divisions in the structure of society. The politics of the people did not come from the politics of the dominant groups. They are the indigenous people, marginalised groups and classes of the labouring population and the intermediate strata in town and country. They are diverse groups of people who do not share common or uniform ideology but the interesting common feature among them was a notion of resistance to elite domination. The divisions and diversions among them create the problem of alliance which was not possible among them. Guha argues that many a times the elitist historiography of Indian nationalism tends to provide a personal account of the "goodness of the native elite who had antagonistic relations with the colonial regime. Although, they had the tendency as collaborationist exploiters and oppressors, with no interest to promote the cause of the people

The resistance of peasants, tribal, and marginalized groups against colonial powers during the colonial period varied in intensity. Their mobilization and resistance were independent of the elite and stemmed from the people themselves. Subaltern historiography distinguishes between the elite and the people. Elite mobilization in politics was achieved from the top down, while subaltern mobilization was achieved from the bottom up. Subaltern politics and mobilization were guided more by traditional institutions such as clans, castes, kinships, territoriality, family networks, and experiences of deprivation. Elite politics and mobilization were governed more by legalistic and constitutional considerations. Subaltern mobilization was more violent, aggressive, and spontaneous, while elite mobilization was cautious, controlled, and moderate. The subaltern studies project aimed to create an alternative history, known as 'the history of the people'. In his study of the 19th century peasant's insurgency in colonial India, Guha discusses an interesting account of the peasants' assertions, consciousness, mystic visions, religiosity, and the social bonds of their communities in his work

"Elementary Aspects of the Peasants Insurgency in Colonial India" (1983).

Conclusion

Ranajit Guha, a distinguished historian who made a lasting impact on the field of Indian history, sadly passed away in April 2023. He was renowned for his significant contributions and was particularly influential within the Subaltern Studies group. The Subaltern perspective aims to understand society through the conditions of subordination experienced by people of different castes, classes, ages, genders, races, and so on. It seeks to present an alternative view of society from the perspective of the often unrepresented masses, aiming to restore a balance by highlighting the role of the masses in political and social movements as opposed to the elites.

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