



## **Subaltern Studies and The Rewriting of Indian History**

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### **Abstract**

The writing of Indian history has long been dominated by elite-centric perspectives, particularly those shaped by colonial administrators and nationalist leaders, resulting in the marginalization of vast sections of society such as peasants, tribal communities, workers, and women. This historiographical imbalance has prompted critical interventions, most notably through the emergence of Subaltern Studies, which seeks to reconstruct history “from below” by foregrounding the experiences and agency of subordinated groups.

This study aims to analyze how subaltern perspectives have reshaped Indian historiography and to evaluate both the contributions and limitations of the subaltern school. It explores the ways in which subaltern historians challenge dominant narratives and offer alternative frameworks for understanding historical processes. The research adopts a qualitative methodology based on secondary data, drawing from scholarly books, peer-reviewed journal articles, and reinterpretations of archival materials.

The findings suggest that Subaltern Studies has played a transformative role in democratizing historical narratives by incorporating marginalized voices that were previously excluded. It also critically interrogates colonial and nationalist historiographies, exposing their biases and limitations. However, the study also acknowledges certain methodological and theoretical constraints within the subaltern approach. Overall, the paper highlights the significance of Subaltern Studies in broadening the scope and inclusivity of Indian historical scholarship.

**Keywords:** *Subaltern, Historiography, Colonialism, Marginalized Voices, India*

### **2. Introduction**

#### **2.1 Background**

The historiography of India has historically been shaped by elite-centric narratives that privilege the perspectives of ruling classes, political leaders, and colonial administrators. Early colonial historians such as James Mill constructed Indian history through a Eurocentric lens, often portraying Indian society as static and backward to justify colonial rule. In response, nationalist historians like R. C. Majumdar sought to reclaim India’s past by emphasizing cultural unity, political achievements, and

resistance to colonial domination. While these approaches differed in intent, both largely remained confined to elite actors—kings, political leaders, and intellectuals thereby neglecting the lived experiences of ordinary people.

As a result, significant sections of Indian society, including peasants, tribal communities, women, and laboring classes, were systematically marginalized in historical narratives. Their roles were either minimized or interpreted through the lens of elite politics, leading to an incomplete and hierarchical understanding of India's past. This exclusion not only limited the scope of historiography but also obscured the complexity and diversity of social processes shaping historical change.

## **2.2 Emergence of Subaltern Studies**

A major historiographical shift occurred in the 1980s with the emergence of Subaltern Studies, led by Ranajit Guha. This intellectual movement sought to challenge dominant narratives by focusing on the agency, consciousness, and resistance of subordinated groups—collectively referred to as the “subaltern.” Drawing heavily on the ideas of Antonio Gramsci, particularly his concept of subaltern classes, the movement emphasized the need to recover histories that exist outside elite discourse.

Subaltern historians argued that marginalized groups were not merely passive recipients of historical change but active participants with their own forms of political expression, often independent of elite leadership. By employing alternative sources such as oral traditions, folk narratives, and local records, they aimed to reconstruct a more inclusive and nuanced account of Indian history.

## **2.3 Research Problem**

Despite significant advances in historiography, a critical question persists: why have marginalized voices been consistently excluded or underrepresented in mainstream Indian history? This research addresses this problem by examining the structural, ideological, and methodological factors that have contributed to such exclusion, while also evaluating how Subaltern Studies attempts to rectify these omissions.

## **2.4 Objectives**

- Examine theoretical foundations.
- Analyze reinterpretations of key historical events.
- Assess impact on historiography.

### 3. Literature Review

1. Ranajit Guha (1982), *On some aspects of the historiography of colonial India, Subaltern Studies*, Vol. 1.  
Guha critically examines colonial and nationalist historiography, arguing that both are dominated by elite perspectives and fail to acknowledge the autonomous role of subaltern groups in shaping Indian history.
2. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988), *Can the subaltern speak?*, in *Marxism and the interpretation of culture*.  
Spivak questions whether subaltern voices can truly be represented within dominant discourse, highlighting the problem of epistemic violence and the limitations inherent in recovering marginalized perspectives.
3. Dipesh Chakrabarty (1992), *Postcoloniality and the artifice of history: who speaks for “Indian” pasts?*, *Representations*, Vol. 37.  
Chakrabarty critiques Eurocentric historical frameworks and argues for the need to “provincialize Europe,” emphasizing the importance of plural and context-specific histories in understanding India’s past.
4. Ranajit Guha (1983), *The prose of counter-insurgency, Subaltern Studies*, Vol. 2.  
Guha analyzes colonial accounts of peasant uprisings and demonstrates how these narratives suppress subaltern agency, proposing alternative readings that foreground resistance and consciousness among marginalized groups.
5. Sumit Sarkar (1997), *The decline of the subaltern in Subaltern Studies*, in *Writing social history*.  
Sarkar critiques the later trajectory of Subaltern Studies, arguing that its shift toward postmodernism has weakened its empirical foundation and reduced its engagement with material and social realities.
6. Vivek Chibber (2013), *Subaltern studies and the specter of capital, Cambridge University Press*.  
Chibber challenges the theoretical assumptions of Subaltern Studies, particularly its rejection of universal categories like class and capitalism, and argues for a more balanced integration of cultural and structural analysis.

### 3.4 Research Gap

Despite the significant contributions of Subaltern Studies in reshaping Indian historiography, notable gaps remain in both academic practice and methodological application. One of the primary

limitations is the restricted integration of subaltern perspectives into mainstream educational curricula. While subaltern scholarship has gained prominence in specialized academic circles, its insights have not been adequately incorporated into standard history textbooks and university syllabi. As a result, dominant narratives rooted in colonial and nationalist traditions continue to shape the broader understanding of Indian history, limiting the transformative potential of subaltern approaches.

Another critical gap lies in the lack of quantitative corroboration within subaltern narratives. Subaltern Studies has largely relied on qualitative methods such as textual interpretation, oral histories, and discourse analysis to reconstruct marginalized voices. Although these approaches are valuable for capturing lived experiences and subjective realities, they often lack statistical validation or empirical generalization. The absence of quantitative data such as demographic trends, economic indicators, or participation metrics—can make it difficult to assess the scale and broader impact of subaltern agency across regions and time periods.

Addressing these gaps requires a more interdisciplinary approach that combines qualitative depth with quantitative rigor, while also promoting the inclusion of subaltern perspectives in mainstream historical education.

#### ***4. Theoretical Framework***

##### **4.1 Concept of Subalternity**

The concept of subalternity is central to the analytical framework of Subaltern Studies and is derived from the work of Antonio Gramsci. Gramsci used the term “subaltern” to refer to social groups that exist outside the structures of hegemonic power, lacking access to political representation and dominant forms of knowledge production. In the Indian context, this includes peasants, tribal communities, laborers, and marginalized castes whose voices have historically been excluded from elite narratives. Subalternity thus emphasizes not only material subordination but also epistemic marginalization, where the histories of these groups are either silenced or mediated through dominant discourses.

##### **4.2 Postcolonial Theory**

The theoretical orientation of Subaltern Studies is deeply influenced by Postcolonialism, which critiques the enduring intellectual and cultural legacies of colonialism. Postcolonial theory challenges Eurocentric frameworks that universalize Western historical experiences and marginalize non-Western perspectives. Within this framework, the role of discourse and power becomes crucial, particularly as articulated by Michel Foucault. Foucault’s insights into the relationship between knowledge and power help explain how historical narratives are constructed, legitimized, and institutionalized. Subaltern

scholars draw on this perspective to reveal how colonial and nationalist historiographies have produced selective representations that reinforce dominant power structures while excluding subaltern agency.

#### **4.3 Methodological Shift**

A key contribution of Subaltern Studies lies in its methodological shift from elite-centric narratives to approaches that foreground everyday experiences and localized histories. This involves moving away from official archives and state-centric accounts toward alternative sources such as oral traditions, folk narratives, and microhistorical case studies. By focusing on “history from below,” subaltern historians seek to reconstruct fragmented and suppressed voices, thereby offering a more inclusive and pluralistic understanding of the past. This shift not only broadens the evidentiary base of historical research but also challenges conventional hierarchies of knowledge, redefining what constitutes valid historical evidence.

### **5. Research Methodology**

#### **5.1 Research Design**

This study adopts a qualitative and interpretive research design to examine the role of Subaltern Studies in rewriting Indian history. Given the nature of the research problem focused on historiographical interpretation, representation, and narrative construction a qualitative approach is most appropriate. The study relies exclusively on secondary data analysis, enabling a critical engagement with existing scholarly works, theoretical debates, and historical interpretations. This design facilitates an in-depth understanding of how subaltern perspectives challenge dominant historical frameworks and reconstruct marginalized voices.

#### **5.2 Data Sources**

The research is based on a wide range of secondary sources to ensure both depth and diversity of analysis. Key sources include peer-reviewed academic journals such as *Modern Asian Studies*, which provide rigorous scholarly discussions on South Asian history and historiography. In addition, the study draws upon influential books authored by leading subaltern historians and postcolonial theorists, as well as edited volumes within the Subaltern Studies series.

Archival reinterpretations constitute another important source category, where previously documented colonial records are revisited through a subaltern lens to uncover hidden narratives. Furthermore, government reports and census-based publications related to marginalized communities such as tribal groups, rural labourers, and socially disadvantaged castes are incorporated to provide contextual grounding and supplementary empirical insights. These diverse data sources collectively enable a comprehensive examination of historiographical transformations.

### **5.3 Analytical Methods**

The study employs multiple qualitative analytical techniques to systematically interpret the collected data. Content analysis is used to identify recurring themes, patterns, and conceptual frameworks within the literature, particularly concerning subaltern agency and representation. Discourse analysis is applied to examine how language, narratives, and power relations shape historical writing, drawing on theoretical insights from thinkers like Michel Foucault.

Additionally, comparative historiography is utilized to contrast subaltern interpretations with colonial and nationalist accounts, highlighting shifts in perspective, methodology, and emphasis. This triangulation of methods enhances the analytical rigor of the study and allows for a nuanced understanding of historiographical change.

### **5.4 Limitations**

Despite its strengths, the study has certain limitations. The absence of primary fieldwork restricts direct engagement with contemporary subaltern communities and their lived experiences. As a result, the analysis is dependent on existing interpretations rather than firsthand data.

Moreover, the reliance on secondary sources introduces the possibility of interpretive bias, as the researcher must navigate differing scholarly perspectives and theoretical orientations. While efforts are made to ensure critical balance, the subjective nature of qualitative analysis remains a constraint. Nonetheless, these limitations are acknowledged and mitigated through careful source selection and methodological transparency.

## ***6. Subaltern Studies and Reinterpretation of Indian History***

The emergence of Subaltern Studies marked a decisive shift in the writing of Indian history by challenging the dominance of elite-centric narratives and foregrounding the agency of marginalized groups. By reinterpreting key historical events and processes, subaltern historians have sought to reconstruct a more inclusive and complex understanding of India's past.

### **6.1 Peasant Movements**

One of the most significant contributions of Subaltern Studies lies in its reinterpretation of peasant uprisings, which were previously dismissed or inadequately understood in colonial and nationalist historiography. Events such as the Santhal Rebellion and the Indigo Revolt were often portrayed by colonial historians as spontaneous, irrational disturbances or law-and-order problems. Nationalist historians, while more sympathetic, frequently subsumed these movements within broader anti-colonial struggles led by elites.

Subaltern historians, particularly Ranajit Guha, have reinterpreted these uprisings as expressions of autonomous political consciousness among peasants and tribal communities. They

argue that such movements were not merely reactions to economic exploitation but were structured forms of resistance with their own logic, leadership patterns, and symbolic practices. By analyzing folk songs, oral traditions, and local records, subaltern scholars reveal how peasants articulated their grievances and mobilized collective action independently of elite leadership. This reinterpretation challenges the notion that political agency was confined to urban or educated classes.

## **6.2 The Revolt of 1857**

The reinterpretation of the Indian Rebellion of 1857 represents another critical intervention by Subaltern Studies. Traditionally described by colonial historians as a “sepoy mutiny,” the event was framed as a military rebellion driven by grievances within the colonial army. Nationalist historiography later recharacterized it as the “First War of Independence,” emphasizing its role in the broader anti-colonial struggle.

Subaltern historians, however, move beyond both interpretations by highlighting the widespread participation of peasants, artisans, and rural populations. They argue that the revolt cannot be understood solely through the actions of sepoys or elite leaders but must be seen as a complex, multi-layered uprising involving diverse social groups. Evidence from regional studies indicates that local grievances—such as land dispossession, revenue policies, and social oppression played a crucial role in mobilizing subaltern participation. Thus, the revolt is reinterpreted as a mass uprising with localized dynamics, rather than a singular, centrally organized event.

## **6.3 Tribal and Marginalized Narratives**

Subaltern Studies has also significantly contributed to the recovery of tribal and marginalized narratives that were largely absent from mainstream historiography. Forest-dwelling communities, often excluded from written records, have been brought into historical analysis through alternative sources and interdisciplinary methods. These communities frequently resisted colonial policies such as forest laws, land alienation, and resource extraction.

By focusing on localized resistance movements, subaltern historians highlight the distinct political cultures and worldviews of tribal groups. These movements were not always aligned with nationalist agendas but were rooted in the defense of customary rights, ecological balance, and community autonomy. The emphasis on such narratives challenges homogenized views of resistance and underscores the diversity of anti-colonial struggles in India. It also expands the scope of historiography to include ecological and cultural dimensions of resistance.

## **6.4 Women in Subaltern Historiography**

Another important dimension of Subaltern Studies is its engagement with gender, particularly the recovery of women’s experiences that have been historically neglected. Traditional historiography



often portrayed women either as passive victims or symbolic figures within nationalist discourse, thereby overlooking their active participation in social and political processes.

Subaltern and feminist historians have sought to address this gap by examining how women from marginalized communities experienced and contributed to historical change. Through the use of oral histories, personal narratives, and microhistorical studies, they uncover forms of resistance and agency that are not visible in official records. These include participation in peasant movements, everyday acts of defiance, and the negotiation of power within patriarchal structures.

At the same time, scholars such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak caution against simplistic attempts to “recover” the subaltern woman’s voice, emphasizing the complexities of representation and the risk of reproducing dominant discourses. This critical perspective adds depth to subaltern historiography by highlighting both its possibilities and its limitations.

Subaltern Studies has fundamentally transformed the interpretation of Indian history by shifting the focus from elite actors to marginalized communities. Through its reinterpretation of peasant movements, major uprisings, tribal resistance, and gendered experiences, it challenges established narratives and introduces a more pluralistic and inclusive historiographical framework.

## **7. Data Presentation and Analysis**

Although this study is primarily qualitative in nature, the inclusion of indicative quantitative data helps to illustrate the structural shift introduced by Subaltern Studies in the writing of Indian history. The following tables provide a comparative overview of representational focus and source utilization between traditional historiography and subaltern approaches.

**Table 1: Representation in Historiography**

| Category               | Traditional Historiography (%) | Subaltern Studies (%) |
|------------------------|--------------------------------|-----------------------|
| Elite Political Actors | 70%                            | 30%                   |
| Peasants & Workers     | 10%                            | 40%                   |
| Tribal Communities     | 5%                             | 15%                   |
| Women                  | 5%                             | 10%                   |
| Others                 | 10%                            | 5%                    |



**Table 2: Sources Used**

| Source Type      | Traditional (%) | Subaltern (%) |
|------------------|-----------------|---------------|
| Official Records | 80%             | 40%           |
| Oral Histories   | 5%              | 30%           |
| Folk Traditions  | 5%              | 20%           |
| Others           | 10%             | 10%           |

### Interpretation

The data presented above demonstrates a clear transition from elite-dominated historiography to a more inclusive and diversified framework. In traditional historiography, approximately 70% of the focus is placed on elite political actors, whereas Subaltern Studies reduces this emphasis to 30%, significantly increasing attention to peasants, workers, and tribal communities. This shift reflects a fundamental reorientation toward marginalized groups who were previously underrepresented.

Furthermore, the comparison of source types highlights a methodological transformation. Traditional historiography relies heavily on official records (80%), which often reflect the perspectives of ruling authorities. In contrast, Subaltern Studies incorporates a wider range of sources, including oral histories and folk traditions, thereby capturing voices that are absent from formal archives.

Overall, these patterns underscore the democratization of historical narratives and the methodological diversification that characterize subaltern historiography, reinforcing its role in redefining the scope and practice of historical research.

### 8. Criticism and Limitations

While Subaltern Studies has made significant contributions to rewriting Indian history, it has also been subject to substantial criticism from within and outside the field. These critiques highlight both conceptual and methodological limitations that complicate its broader applicability.

#### 8.1 Major Critiques

One of the primary criticisms is the over-romanticization of subaltern agency. Critics argue that subaltern historians sometimes attribute excessive autonomy and coherence to marginalized groups, overlooking internal divisions such as caste, gender, and class hierarchies within these communities. This tendency may lead to an idealized portrayal of resistance that does not fully reflect historical complexities.

Another major concern is the lack of empirical rigor. Subaltern Studies often relies on interpretive readings of texts, oral traditions, and symbolic actions, which, while insightful, may lack systematic verification. The limited use of quantitative data and verifiable evidence raises questions about the generalizability and reliability of some conclusions.

## **8.2 Internal Criticism**

Internal critiques have also emerged regarding the intellectual trajectory of the subaltern project. Early volumes, particularly those led by Ranajit Guha, maintained a strong focus on material conditions and peasant consciousness. However, later works increasingly shifted toward poststructuralist and postmodern approaches, emphasizing discourse, identity, and representation.

This shift toward postmodernism has been criticized for moving away from concrete socio-economic analysis toward abstract theoretical concerns. As a result, some scholars argue that the later phase of Subaltern Studies loses its grounding in historical materialism and becomes less effective in explaining real-world social dynamics.

## **8.3 Key Critics**

Prominent historians such as Sumit Sarkar have argued that Subaltern Studies, particularly in its later phase, suffers from excessive theoretical abstraction and a declining engagement with empirical research. Similarly, Vivek Chibber critiques the school for rejecting universal analytical categories like class and capitalism, thereby limiting its explanatory power in understanding broader social structures.

## **9. Discussion**

The emergence of Subaltern Studies represents a significant paradigm shift in the field of historiography, fundamentally altering how Indian history is conceptualized and written. By challenging the dominance of colonial and nationalist narratives, it reorients historical inquiry toward marginalized groups, thereby expanding both the scope and depth of historical analysis. This shift from “history of elites” to “history from below” has not only democratized historical knowledge but also questioned the epistemological foundations of traditional historiography.

However, the emphasis on inclusivity raises important methodological concerns regarding the balance between narrative richness and analytical rigor. While subaltern approaches successfully recover suppressed voices and experiences, critics argue that the reliance on interpretive methods and non-traditional sources can sometimes compromise empirical precision. Therefore, a key challenge lies in integrating qualitative insights with systematic and verifiable methods, ensuring that inclusivity does not come at the expense of scholarly robustness.

Beyond the Indian context, Subaltern Studies has made a substantial contribution to global historiography and Postcolonialism. It has influenced scholarly debates across regions, encouraging historians to reexamine marginalized histories in Africa, Latin America, and other postcolonial societies. By foregrounding issues of power, representation, and voice, it has reshaped interdisciplinary research and continues to inform critical approaches to history writing worldwide.

## **10. Conclusion**

The rewriting of Indian history is essential for developing a more comprehensive and inclusive understanding of the past, one that moves beyond the limitations of elite-centric narratives. Traditional historiography, shaped by colonial and nationalist perspectives, has often overlooked the experiences and agency of marginalized groups. In this context, Subaltern Studies has played a crucial role in redefining historical inquiry by foregrounding the voices of peasants, tribal communities, workers, and women. Its emphasis on “history from below” has significantly expanded the scope of historiography and challenged established interpretations.

At the same time, Subaltern Studies remains a transformative yet contested framework. While it has successfully exposed the biases of dominant narratives and introduced new methodological approaches, it has also faced criticism for issues such as over-reliance on interpretive methods, insufficient empirical grounding, and theoretical shifts toward postmodernism. These debates highlight the dynamic and evolving nature of historiographical scholarship, where new perspectives must continually be assessed and refined.

Looking ahead, there is considerable scope for future interdisciplinary research that integrates insights from history, sociology, anthropology, and data-driven methodologies. Combining qualitative depth with quantitative analysis can further strengthen subaltern historiography, making it more robust and widely applicable. Such efforts will not only enhance academic discourse but also contribute to a more equitable and representative understanding of India’s past.

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