

Ranajit Guha and Subaltern Studies

Today I'm going to talk about the Indian historian Ranajit Guha and the historiographical project associated with him, *Subaltern Studies*. This took the form of twelve edited volumes of historical scholarship, mainly on the history of colonial India, which were published between 1982 and 2005, the first six volumes being edited by Guha and the remaining volumes by other scholars associated with the project, many of whom he had mentored or influenced. This proved to be one of the more influential currents in historical thought in the last quarter of the twentieth century, and extremely responsive to changes in the prevailing intellectual climate. Initially associated with the 'history from below' current you've heard about in earlier lectures, it also borrowed and developed insights from structuralism, post-structuralism, and most of all post-colonial theory. Edward Said famously endorsed the project; the postcolonial theorist Gayatri Spivak entered into a significant dialogue with it, which many seen as having heralded a wholesale shift towards post-colonial theory in the arsenal of Subaltern Studies. The project can also be seen as a sustained dialogue, at times acrimonious, with the powerful and influential Marxist legacy in South Asian historical scholarship. Many of its leading historians established their reputations in a broadly Marxist scholarly milieu, and the project itself always claimed to be in some sense an internal critique of both Left scholarship and politics. So there are clearly immense political as well as intellectual issues tied up with the development and influence of *Subaltern Studies*.

To begin with, a few comments on Ranajit Guha and his times. Guha was born in 1923, to a family of prosperous landowners in East Bengal. He moved to Calcutta for his university education, and became caught up in the heavily left-wing student milieu of the 1940s, during the last years of British rule. In 1947, upon the attainment of Independence, Guha was sent as a student representative to Europe by the Communist Party of India. He travelled widely in Europe and the Middle East, and also took the Trans-Siberian railway to China shortly after the Communist revolution there. He returned to India in 1953, and taught there till 1959. Between 1959 and 1980 he worked in England, first at the University of Manchester and then at the University of Sussex. It was at Sussex, in the 1970s, that he and a group of his students and like-minded associates would begin to have discussions about radical history that would eventually feed into the Subaltern Studies project.

Two processes – one intellectual and the other political – were decisive in Guha's trajectory in these years. The intellectual process I refer to was the spread of radical historical scholarship, most commonly associated with 'history from below' and the work of figures like Eric Hobsbawm, George Rude, Christopher Hill and E.P. Thompson in the U.K. Here was a movement that urged a study of poor people, principally workers and peasants, on their own terms, and sought to understand the inner logic of their experiences of oppression and resistance – a Marxist history that took issue with some of the dominant ideas of the Marxist tradition. An even deeper influence came from the work of the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci, who had died in a Fascist jail as a political prisoner in the 1930s. To understand the enormous influence Gramsci had upon Guha and other scholars from the ex-colonial world, it is important to note the vast presence of the peasantry in countries like India. Radical activists and scholars like Guha were often drawn to Communist politics because it was seen as unique in its commitment to the exploited, in contrast to the very obvious community of interests between nationalist politics and big business. But the Indian Communists, who included in their ranks some of the country's most influential historians, struggled with the concept of a future revolution led by the industrial working class, living as they did in a country where the industrial proletariat was big in absolute numbers but a small proportion of the population, which was overwhelmingly rural. Gramsci provided the ammunition for many left-wing activists and scholars to theorize about a radical politics that would be based not just or even principally upon workers, but which would seek to mobilize

peasants as revolutionary actors in their own right. Gramsci had been born into an Italy that was still an overwhelmingly peasant society, and was critical of Marx's focus on the industrial working class as the sole agent of radical social change, and his description of peasants as an atomized mass of potatoes in a sack, capable only of primitive and incomplete levels of political awareness. Gramsci, who had been brought up in Sardinia where there was virtually no industrial working class, insisted on the importance of a Marxist politics that based itself not just solely upon the modern working class, but upon the common interests of all subordinated and oppressed fractions of society. The term he used for this was 'subaltern', originally of course a military derivation referring to junior officers. A *bloc* of subaltern classes, rather than a unified working class, constituted the bedrock of revolution in his thought. This allowed for a more flexible interpretation of social oppression and resistance, one which Guha found extremely attractive for an understanding of Indian realities, where social relations and oppositions were far too complex to be understood solely in terms of a dominating bourgeoisie and a resisting proletariat with advanced class consciousness. Increasingly, from the 1970s, Guha and his intellectual associates would point to the gaps in ostensibly radical and Marxist scholarship in India, which had largely ignored the dynamics of peasant resistance to the state and to local relations of domination.

There was, as I mentioned before, a set of more directly political processes which also left a decisive impact upon Guha and similar scholars. The three decades after the Second World War saw a political and intellectual churning on the left which forced many radicals to rethink positions earlier taken for granted. The post-war landscape in the industrialized West seemed to have quite successfully integrated large sections of the organized working class into the bargaining relations of liberal-democratic capitalism. The working class, even where formidably organized, often appeared far less likely than before to engage in a large-scale challenge to ruling regimes and to the capitalist system. In contrast, revolt and revolution were breaking out in large parts of the Third World where the modern industrial working class did not have the weight it did in the West. In China, in Vietnam, in Cuba and many other parts of Latin America, insurgent movements were dominated by peasants and tribal groups. In the late 1960s, as many of you probably know, there was a veritable cult of Mao-Tse-Tung among many radical groups, both in the West and in other parts of the world. This often produced a quite staggeringly crude political rhetoric, and an extremely dogmatic endorsement and even glorification of revolutionary violence as a liberating force. At the same time, in societies where social conditions remained characterized by extremely brutal exploitation by landlords of peasants, by farmers of agricultural labourers, where service obligations of a feudal type still persisted, a Maoist politics often proved extremely attractive, for it actually meant, for all its violence, the political experience of working with the poorest of the poor. This has been a persistent theme in contemporary Indian history, and in 1967 a radical revolutionary movement sprang up in solidarity with villagers engaged in armed resistance against their extremely oppressive landlords at Naxalbari, a village in northern Bengal. The mainly student sympathizers of this struggle went on to form revolutionary groupings in the late 1960s and 1970s against the Indian state, and tried – unsuccessfully – to stir revolution among peasants and agricultural labourers. They came to be known as Naxalites, or Maoists – the terms are often used interchangeably. Armed with an extremely crude glorification of revolutionary violence and a fanatical faith in the Chinese path, this movement nevertheless gained a foothold in large parts of tribal and peasant India, among the poorest of the poor. In the 1970s, the Indian state unleashed a war of terror against the Maoist insurgents, using murder and torture on a scale infinitely greater than the rebels' own. Since the 1970s, this has been a recurring feature of recent Indian history: violent Maoist insurgency, usually in tribal and forested parts of the country, met with brutal repression.

Back to Ranajit Guha: he was in India in 1970-71 for research, and encountered several young Maoist militants whose idealism he was deeply struck by. As a historian, this political experience led him in the direction of peasant studies. Agriculture had long been an interest of his, and his first book,

published in 1959 as *A Rule of Property for Bengal*, had been a classic of its kind, a brilliant survey of the intellectual history of land revenue arrangements in early colonial Bengal, and a study of the evolution of the idea of private property in land as it was imposed upon Indian conditions. Now, in the 1970s, the upsurge of peasant and tribal armed radicalism in his country drove him to study the history of similar movements in the past, and to try and discern some sort of inner logic to them.

This led Guha to the investigation of peasant movements of the past, which he felt had been used by historians only to provide picturesque detail to a historical narrative otherwise dominated by leaders and great men. In particular, through the 1970s he carried out research on the forms of peasant protest in the nineteenth century, as British rule established itself as undisputed on the subcontinent. This study was published in 1983 as *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India*, widely considered his most important work. As Guha acknowledged, the material for such a study was sketchy and scattered. Peasants left no written traces behind themselves; they appeared in the historical record as already interpreted – usually by colonial state authorities, sometimes by independent observers. Guha observed, however, that this did not make historical inquiry redundant. He suggested that there were certain codes of official discourse and language through which the colonial state articulated its relationship with the peasantry, and if one studied the official historical record closely enough one could find patterns. He made an influential suggestion: the records of the colonial state, he argued, had to be understood as an archive of *counter-insurgency*. So if one paid attention to the everyday records of law and order under colonialism, one could read them 'against the grain', i.e. against their own stated intentions. What one needed to do was crack the *codes* through which colonial officials interpreted acts of peasant protest.

Thus, for instance, large-scale rebellions by peasant and forest communities in colonial India were often preceded by sudden spikes in crime figures (quote). Guha offered a striking analysis of this: he suggested that the colonial state in general sought to understand rural unrest as a law and order problem. However, as incidents of banditry or robbery, for instance, escalated, the state was forced at a particular point to 'switch the codes' and recognize elements of political revolt. So official accounts of crime and social disorder could be mined by the historian to find the traces of rebellion. Similarly, among peasants themselves forms of resistance and dissent followed certain codes. Some kinds of rebellion involved an attack upon the material signs of state and social power – the jail, the court-house, the revenue office, or the property of rich landlords. Other kinds of rebellions involved an inversion of the existing social order, as peasant rebels took over a village or district and imitated the ways of their social superiors. Often this happened through the appropriation of religious symbols: during tribal rebellions, for instance, tribals, who were outside the norms and rules of Hindu caste society, often performed religious ceremonies they were forbidden in normal times, in order to assert their power.

Consider the title of Guha's major work: *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency*. The use of the word 'elementary' has a specific meaning, which becomes clear if you consider the table of contents (slide). Peasant protest is broken down into certain formal constituents or 'elements': negation, ambiguity, solidarity, etc. Guha was suggesting a very original approach to the history of peasant protest here, one without precedent in Indian history-writing. He did not want to offer a sequential narrative of events; he wanted, rather, to be able to make certain generalizations about the relationship between colonialism and peasant protest. How could one do this? Guha's method was to identify and isolate particular modes of rural revolt and dissent, and illustrate these with examples that ranged freely between different periods of colonial rule. So the first chapter, for instance, considers the peasant's negation – or his reversal – of all the outward signs of social authority and submission as a key 'element' of peasant insurgency, and fills this out with examples from various points in colonial history.

The following chapters follow a similar pattern, each identifying a particular 'code' of peasant resistance over the decades and trying to decipher it. A substantially new picture of colonialism itself emerged from this. In contrast to earlier stereotypes about a passive peasantry, easily manipulated by elites, Guha offered a colonial state perpetually struggling with and limited by the real and potential force of peasant insurgency. What all this amounted to was nothing less than a very ambitious reinterpretation of the colonial period, seen through the lens of the persistent patterns of rural social conflict.

Guha was, then, the central figure in the emergence of an alternative account of popular protest in colonial India. But he was far from the only figure. In 1977, the group of scholars who would come to constitute the Subaltern Studies collective started meeting – over the next three years there was intense discussion among them, mainly in Sussex, London and Oxford. The group consisted of Guha at the centre, several of his students, and several independent historians with similar concerns, also influenced by encounters with Gramsci, Thompson, and 'history from below'. By the early 1980s, some elements of a common perspective had been sketched out, a perspective we might call 'subalternist'. What were these elements? First, this group of scholars argued that there were *two* separate domains of politics in colonial India: 'elite' and 'subaltern'. The first domain was characterized by forms of activity that were recognized as 'political': it consisted of an engagement by educated elites with the structures of power established by the colonial state. So elites interacted with the state through petitions, public meetings, journalism, lobbying, etc. The other domain, that of the 'subaltern', was very different in its composition. It was generally regarded by historians as 'pre-political', since it articulated no clear demands and seemed not to follow the established rules of politics. Very often, the violent protests of peasants and tribals were ascribed to purely economic motives: agrarian distress, it was argued, accounted for unrest. Guha and his colleagues argued that, on the contrary, this was an eminently political domain. Peasants, tribes and forest-dwellers did not rebel out of primordial urges, nor purely out of hunger; their movements staked very specific claims against colonial authority, and the authority of landlords and moneylenders. This was frequently expressed in a *religious* idiom, and organized along community lines such as caste or tribe. So, for instance, peasants frequently claimed to have been inspired by a local god who ordered them to rebel. Earlier generations of historians would have dismissed this as mere superstition: the Subaltern Studies scholars, on the contrary, mined deep into popular beliefs, folklore, and rumours to explain the political logic of such religious assertions.

An influential line of enquiry in the early work of these scholars was the relationship of subaltern groups to the anti-colonial nationalist movement in the twentieth century. Dominant explanations of the nationalist movement focused either on the interest-group politics of educated Indian elites who sought a greater share of political power in late colonial India, or on the skilful political leadership of figures like Gandhi and Nehru and the role they played in 'inspiring' the masses. The Subaltern Studies scholars reversed this explanation. Nationalism, they argued, was in its origins a middle-class affair, which was however constantly driven beyond its chosen limits by the persistence of popular participation. Subaltern groups were constantly engaged in resistance both to the authority exercised by the colonial state and to the local oppressions of landlords, moneylenders and capitalists – many of whom were closely associated with the nationalist movement. The leadership of the nationalist movement was often pushed in radical directions by the strength of mass mobilization, and so nationalism needed to be understood both as a movement by Indians against colonialism *and* as a political project on the part of Indian elites to keep subaltern militancy in check.

I'd like to mention two outstanding instances of early subalternist scholarship. An early volume of *Subaltern Studies* contained an essay by Shahid Amin named 'Gandhi as Mahatma'. This is an essay that is widely acknowledged to have broken new ground in the analysis of the relationship between

Gandhian nationalism and the insurgency of local subaltern groups. Amin studies an area in north India which saw an efflorescence of self-styled Gandhian protest in the early 1920s. Gandhi visited this district for one day as part of an ongoing mass campaign, and made a speech, to which thousands of villagers and townsfolk flocked. Amin researched the rumours that circulated around the figure of Gandhi – some ascribing magical properties to him, others seeing him as a herald of an overthrow of existing social relations, and still others using his injunctions to enforce specific kinds of moral regulation upon deviant practices in local society. Amin's essay is a classic instance of research that shows how the *figure* of a major nationalist leader, once subjected to popular appropriation, contained all sorts of political charges and possibilities that went well beyond the control or the comfort of the nationalist leadership. In this case, the appropriation of Gandhian messages and their reinterpretation eventually led local subaltern groups to acts of anti-colonial violence, upon which Gandhi was forced to call off the campaign. Another instance is the work carried out by David Hardiman, who recently retired from this department, on a movement of tribal assertion in western India, again in the early 1920s. This pitted tribals against liquor dealers who had been given monopoly rights over the supply of alcohol. The movement, as Hardiman shows, was closely connected with popular religion: a local goddess was supposed to have taken possession of spirit mediums and instructed the tribals to give up alcohol, abjure witchcraft, and obey Gandhi. Once again, we see an interlacing of the codes of subaltern protest with a deep substratum of popular ideologies, which earlier generations of scholars would simply have dismissed as archaic and superstitious.

By the mid-1980s, *Subaltern Studies* had established itself as a compelling, if controversial, new set of voices in the field of Indian history. It received a divided response. In India, it proved influential among younger scholars, but also provoked a lot of criticism – nationalists attacked it for downplaying the heroism of the national movement; Marxists attacked it for neglecting the structures of class and the economy. In Britain, the reaction was initially strongly negative – British studies of Indian history were at this time heavily dominated by a group of scholars popularly known as the Cambridge School, which focused on the interest-group politics and patron-client networks in order to explain Indian nationalism. In North America, however, matters were very different. Here, by the mid-1980s, post-colonial studies, inspired originally by the work of Edward Said, had established a strong presence in the academy. Said himself wrote in immensely laudatory terms about the Subaltern Studies project. Even more influential was the response of the post-structuralist and post-colonial theorist Gayatri Spivak, whose essay 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' is widely regarded as one of the foundational texts of postcolonial theory. Spivak strongly endorsed the project, but had some serious criticisms to make. First, she criticized what she saw as a simplistic celebration of popular resistance by the historians associated with the project. In their justified search for popular subaltern consciousness, she argued, these historians had assumed that all forms of resistance and popular action had an emancipatory potential. Drawing upon a broadly Foucauldian notion that the traditional leftist notion of emancipation – as the act through which the oppressed seize power from the oppressors – was mistaken and incomplete, she criticized what she saw as an unjustified optimism about the struggles of the past. Second, and this is what made her critique famous and controversial, Spivak argued that the historian's attempt to *represent* subaltern resistance was itself an act of discursive power – what was made visible in this effort was not the actual experience of the oppressed, but the subaltern historian's assumption of the right to speak 'for' the oppressed. Third, and perhaps more productively, Spivak pointed to the male bias of subalternist research: the leading members of the collective were all men, who often ignored the life experiences of subaltern women, while celebrating the often macho exploits of male peasant rebels. Finally, at the Subaltern Studies conference at Calcutta in 1986, Spivak argued that historians needed to pay much more attention to the ways in which subaltern groups had been understood – and 'constructed' in the discourses of social and political elites. This was a plea for a more post-structuralist scholarship, attentive to the *textual* construction of power, and the *discourses* of domination.

In one sense, these interventions marked an Indian version of a wider shift in radical academia. Broadly Marxist, class-based forms of social analysis were, in the 1980s, rapidly displaced by a more varied and diffuse notion of social power. This was a notion that acknowledged the centrality of gender and race (and, in the Indian context, caste). This, as many radical historians acknowledged, was a welcome widening of focus, and a recognition of the multilayered and difficult nature of social power and resistance. At the same time, Spivak's interventions also marked the growing ascendancy of post-structuralist and post-colonial theory in radical academic circles. This was to be both influential and controversial. Ranajit Guha himself took Spivak's criticisms on board, and wrote a dazzling essay called 'Chandra's Death', which focused on the death of an obscure lower-caste peasant Bengali woman in the mid-nineteenth century. I don't have time to go into the argument now; all I'll say is that Guha, in contrast to his earlier celebrations of public mass resistance by peasants, now focused on the ways in which caste and gender combined to render women's solidarity invisible. This is a particularly interesting text because it can be argued that it marks the bridge between the 'old' and the 'new' Subaltern Studies. From this point on, the collective's earlier preoccupation with peasant resistance and subaltern insurgency was slowly transformed into something else.

In the later 1980s, and throughout the 1990s, it has been argued by many left-wing scholars, *Subaltern Studies* seemed to move away from its original remit – the reconstruction of the worlds of subaltern experience – to a deconstruction of the ways of colonial power. It can also be argued that it was this shift which gave Subaltern Studies its global reach and influence in the 1980s and 1990s, decades when post-colonial studies acquired a new centrality in academic discourse in various parts of the world. At the heart of this was the analysis of 'colonial discourse' – the politics of the colonizer as expressed through linguistic codes and practices, the exercise of political domination through cultural means, the silencing of other voices and practices, which did not conform to the norms set by colonial culture. In Indian studies, for instance, some elements of this post-colonial approach became absolutely hegemonic among younger, radically-minded scholars. Two other elements emerged parallel to this in the scholarship of the later Subaltern Studies. First, historians like Partha Chatterjee and Gyan Pandey argued for a new understanding of subaltern history, as something other than a unified process of subordination and resistance which could be comprehended through the lens of universal categories like class struggle or capitalist development. Rather, argued Pandey in particular, the *resistance* of subaltern history to big conceptual categories and historical processes needed to be respected. In other words, the experience of subaltern groups needed to be understood as a series of self-enclosed 'fragments' which possessed their own integrity and needed to be understood on their own terms, without having to place them within larger historical narratives and processes. Second, Subaltern Studies – and historians associated with it – increasingly moved towards a new dominant concern: the critique of Eurocentrism in history-writing. Historical scholarship, whether liberal or radical, they argued, characteristically used tropes and methods which implicitly recognized Western historical development as the norm against which other historical experiences needed to be measured.#

In all of this, Subaltern Studies continued to be extremely influential – though the project itself increasingly flowed into separate streams, and the earlier sense of cohesion was lost. Acrimonious arguments developed around the new turns Subaltern Studies had taken. A leading member of the original collective, Sumit Sarkar, left the group because he felt it had moved too far from its original commitment to a non-dogmatic Marxism and 'history from below'. Criticisms and controversy abounded through the 1990s. I won't analyse this now; instead, I'll end with a series of critical remarks that have been made, in various quarters, about Subaltern Studies, and have washed about in scholarly discourses.

1. The post-colonial turn in Subaltern Studies, it has been argued, marked in one sense a giving up of the effort to strenuously reconstruct the life-worlds and experiences of the poor and

oppressed, substituting for it an overriding concern with what the state and elites did and said. However critical the approach to elite discourse, this can be seen as marking a 'history from above'.

2. In place of a complex picture of many-sided social tension and conflict in colonial-era India, the Subalternists from the late 1980s onwards tended to view history through a neat colonizer/colonized binary. This was in its turn seen as basically unchanging: the study of the categories through which colonial power was constructed allowed no place for change and process in social relations under colonialism. So, in the case of India, Subaltern Studies had originally paid much attention to the nuances of local social relations, and the divisions between elite and subaltern groups *within* Indian society. The displacement of this by a focus on a unified 'colonial discourse of power' served to obscure the real dynamics of social relations. At the same time, it tended to deny any agency to subaltern groups to radically transform their existence and challenge their oppression.

I'd like to add one point to these observations. Subaltern Studies is today known as perhaps the most famous branch of post-colonial studies. However, this can mean very different things in different contexts. In Western academic settings where the problem of colonial power has traditionally been marginalized in history-writing, post-colonialism could produce a new and radical challenge to the academic Establishment, forcing it to take empire and its forms of oppression on board. However, in India, the original home of Subaltern Studies, the effects could often be very different. Here a focus on colonial authority had long been a staple of historical scholarship, well before the advent of post-colonialism. Subaltern Studies had originated as a move against a view of history that saw the colonial state as the creator of history and subaltern Indians as merely reactive to it. However, the new focus on colonial discourse could, ironically, reinforce the centrality of Europe and of the colonizer.

Nevertheless, it is impossible to deny that *Subaltern Studies* was perhaps the first sustained academic project from the Third World to attain global influence, and in doing so it helped crack the structures of academic orthodoxy wide open. Here was a major historical initiative that did not emerge from the study of either European or American history, but rather from the heart of what had once been Empire. *Subaltern Studies* thus became a way for ex-colonial and currently exploited parts of the world to assert their own historical integrity: subalternist scholarship, for instance, has come to be influential in some Middle Eastern studies, and quite strongly in Latin American scholarship. As such, it is perhaps best comprehended as a powerful challenge to existing models of historical research.