

Subaltern Studies:

‘from Writing with (Socialist)
Passion to Following the
(Postmodern) Fashion’¹

Hannah Altern
Honours,
Macquarie University

In the almost thirty years since *Subaltern Studies: Writings on South Asian History and Society* (hereafter, *Subaltern Studies*, followed by the volume number) was first published, the journal has shifted from having a focus on the actions of people to one focused on the creation of knowledge and ideas. While it is not my intention to suggest that the broader project of subaltern studies is simply a derivation of other intellectual trends, this change in focus has occurred in the context of a shift in influence from British and Continental Marxism, to American poststructuralism. In the case of the *Subaltern Studies* journal itself, the main factor which has caused this shift has been an evolution in the goals of the journal as both the membership of the editorial collective, and its primary audience have changed.

Just as the subaltern studies project has changed over time, the responses to it have changed too, largely in line with the change in audience, and the audiences’ expectations of how the project should work. While extensive scholarship has developed around the subaltern studies project, in this essay I will be focusing on *Subaltern Studies*, as this journal has remained the core of the broader project. I will work chronologically through the influences on the subaltern studies project and its reception, beginning with the initial development of the project and its early period up until the late 1980s, before moving onto the later period. *Subaltern Studies I* was published in 1982, but this first volume and the project as a whole were the product of intellectual and political influences that extended far into the past. The *Subaltern Studies* journals were, and are, the product of the work of an editorial collective, with Ranajit Guha leading the collective between 1982 and 1989 during the publication of *Subaltern Studies I-VI*.

Although the *Subaltern Studies* journal was written and developed primarily by Indians studying Indian history, the developers of the project were spread across the Commonwealth, and the influences on the project were global. The first planning conference was held at the Australian National University where Ranajit Guha was on secondment from the University of Sussex, and

¹ Ramachandra Guha, ‘Review: Subaltern and Bhadrakok Studies’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 30, No. 33 (1995), 2057.

half of the first editorial collective was working outside of India at the time of publication.² The internationally connected nature of the originators and editorial collective of *Subaltern Studies* means that the journal needs to be understood in relation to contemporary academic trends outside of, as well as within, South Asia.

In the first instance, *Subaltern Studies* was strongly influenced by the English Marxist historical practice of 'histories from below'.³ Some contributors to *Subaltern Studies* had previously been published in the British journal, *Past and Present*, including Dipesh Chakrabarty.⁴ Chakrabarty later described the subaltern studies project as having emerged from within Indian Marxism, with the intention of producing better Marxist histories.⁵ Significant differences between subaltern studies and English Marxism emerged, including the project's rejection of a universal, teleological history, and its focus on stratifications other than class.⁶

The Eurocentric conception of modernity held by Marxists, with its focus on capitalism, urbanisation and secularisation, could not conceive of peasant insurgency in India as being political. Conversely, Guha understood the peasantry to be an essential component of modern Indian politics.⁷ Guha rejected a Marxist teleological history defined by the emergence of class groups and industrialisation, a process which, by the 1970s, had clearly not occurred in India in the same way that it had in Europe. In doing so, Guha was able to conceive of India, and subaltern actions in a way other than as 'pre-political', a term that Eric Hobsbawm used to describe those systems and people that had not integrated modernity (defined in terms of capitalism) into their ways of thinking and acting, and who lacked a sense of political identity to fuel their actions.⁸

Guha and the subaltern studies project were also heavily influenced by the work and theories of Antonio Gramsci, from whom comes both the term 'Subaltern' and the conception of an elite/subaltern split, a concept which allowed Guha to define subordination more broadly than only relating to class.⁹ Building on the theories of Gramsci, Guha radically redefined subordination as 'expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office or in any other way'.¹⁰

These theoretical and intellectual influences worked alongside the specific historiographic and political context of India. By the 1980s a generation of modern, internationally connected scholars from India perceived that Indian historiography sorely needed a review in light of

2 'Special Correspondent', 'The Subaltern in South Asian History and Society: Report of a Conference,' *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol.18, No. 9 (1983). Ranajit Guha, (ed.) *Subaltern Studies No 1: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), ix.

3 Sumit Sarkar, 'The Decline of the Subaltern in *Subaltern Studies*', in *Writing Social History*, (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997), 82-108.

4 Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'Communal Riots and Labour: Bengal's Jute Mill-Hands in the 1890s,' *Past & Present*, No. 91, (May 1981), 140-169.

5 Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'Marx after Marxism: A Subaltern Historian's Perspective,' *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 28, No. 22 (1993), 1094.

6 Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Habitations of Modernity: Essays in the Wake of Subaltern Studies* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 8.

7 *Ibid.*, 9.

8 *Ibid.*, 9.

9 Vinayak Chaturvedi, 'Introduction,' in *Mapping Subaltern Studies and the Postcolonial*, ed. Vinayak Chaturvedi, (London: Verso, 2000), viii-xi.

10 Ranajit Guha, 'Preface,' in *Subaltern Studies No 1*, vii.

contemporary politics. Guha referred to this need in first *Subaltern Studies* volume, stating that ‘The historiography of Indian nationalism has for a long time been dominated by elitism – colonialist elitism and bourgeois-nationalist elitism’.¹¹ In this criticism of the existing historiography, Guha was reacting against a historiography of India that had been dominated by a focus on the development of the nation state, where the actions of peasants and other marginalised groups were not acknowledged.¹²

The drive to create a new historiography – one that moved beyond the failings of the existing historiography – was an essential aim of the *Subaltern Studies* journal under Guha. To the subaltern studies project, colonialist and bourgeois-nationalist histories were problematic because they failed to recognise the agency and actions of subaltern people. Instead, the credit for India’s independence and the nationalist movement that preceded it was given to either colonial policies or the altruism of the Indian elite.¹³

The failure of contemporary historiography to acknowledge the agency of the socially and economically marginalised – or subalterns – was highlighted throughout the 1970s and early 1980s by periods of peasant action and demonstration, sparking a broader interest in peasant agency throughout Indian academia.¹⁴ As a Maoist activist Guha had directly engaged in peasant insurgency, and had, perhaps during this period, been witness to ‘the contribution made by people *on their own*’.¹⁵ During Guha’s role as editor of *Subaltern Studies*, he continued to emphasise the need to ‘negate’ this historiography, before a new one could be created.¹⁶

This earlier stage of the subaltern studies project, while relatively united by dissatisfaction with existing Indian historiography and an interest in recovering subaltern politics and voices, utilised many different methodologies in an attempt to find those voices. In *Subaltern Studies II*, for example, a diverse range of techniques were used to find subaltern voices in official material: from Roland Barthes’ linguistic technique of ‘bifurcation’, to a combination of Michel Foucault and Marx’s understanding of power and surveillance.¹⁷

The combination of English Marxism, Gramscian theory, and the political and intellectual context of India on the subaltern studies project meant it represented a major change from the existing historiography of India. Yet, any meaningful response to this drastic change in Indian historiography was confined to India. Although articles from the journal were republished in

11 Ranajit Guha, ‘On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India’, in *Subaltern Studies No 1*, 1.

12 David E. Ludden, ‘Introduction: A Brief History of Subalternity’, in *Reading Subaltern Studies*, 7.

13 *Ibid.*, 1-3.

14 *Ibid.*, 6. Chaturvedi, ‘Introduction’, x. See also articles in *Economic and Political Weekly* on peasant insurgency, both contemporary and historical, for example: Amalendu Guha, ‘Little Nationalism Turned Chauvinist: Assam’s Anti-Foreigner Upsurge, 1979-80’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 15, No. 41/43, (1980), 1699-1720. Kathleen Gough, ‘Indian Peasant Uprisings’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 9, No. 32/34, (1974), 1391-15412.

15 Italics in original, Guha, ‘On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India.’ 3. Chaturvedi, ‘Introduction’, xi.

16 Ranajit Guha, *Dominance without Hegemony: History and Power in Colonial India*, Convergences (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), xii. David Hardiman, ‘“Subaltern Studies” at Crossroads’, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 21, No. 7, (1986), 290.

17 Ranajit Guha, ‘The Prose of Counter-Insurgency’, in *Subaltern Studies No 2: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, ed. R. Guha, (Dehli: Oxford University Press, 1983), 10-11. Dipesh Chakrabarty, ‘Conditions for Knowledge of Working-Class Conditions: Employers, Government and the Jute Workers of Calcutta, 1890-1940’, in *Subaltern Studies No 2*, 259-310.

British Marxist journal *Past and Present*, they excited little to no comment.¹⁸ Explanations for this lack of response are hard to guess at, but perhaps the theoretical departure of *Subaltern Studies* was not apparent to *Past and Present*'s British audience, or the Indian subject matter was something few readers felt able to comment on.

Conversely, the Indian Marxist publication, *Social Scientist*, provided a critical reception to the first few volumes of *Subaltern Studies*. *Social Scientist*'s critique focused on the subaltern studies project's departure from Marxist theories and methodologies. In terms of the project's rejection of an approach to history determined by class stratification, critics felt that too many reductions and simplifications were necessary to make a society (particularly one as complex as India) fit into a dichotomy of either being subaltern or being elite.¹⁹ Reviewers suggested that the subaltern studies group were failing to recognise the diversity of Indian society, and were ignoring differences in power and status that were present prior to colonisation rather than produced by it, choosing instead to attribute inequality to colonisation.²⁰ Some of these critiques were a result of attempting to synthesise class structures with the subaltern/elite dichotomy, for instance Suneet Chopra suggested that Guha had misinterpreted the theories of Gramsci, and had subsequently wrongly attributed elite rather than subaltern status to the Indian middle class.²¹ Marxist reviewers also strongly resented the suggestion that their existing historiography was as guilty as bourgeois-nationalist or colonial histories of denying subaltern action. In *Social Scientist* reviewers suggested that Guha was creating a caricature of the historiography by simplifying it to the point that there was no resemblance to the histories being discussed.²²

More significantly, all reviewers shared questions about the realistic possibility of an autonomous space where subaltern consciousness and action could develop, completely separate from any influence from the elite group. Given that the subaltern studies project had been an initiative to recognise the agency of subaltern people, and to rescue such acts of agency from never being recorded, this question of whether such a thing was possible went to the heart of the subaltern studies project.²³ According to Javeed Alam, the subaltern studies practice of looking for subaltern autonomy wherever it could be found resulted in resistance being seen in all situations, including contradictory ones.²⁴ Alam points to the contributions of Partha Chatterjee and Gyan Pandley as examples of this: where Chatterjee found autonomous consciousness in the divisions between Hindu and Muslim communities, Pandley found the same in an instance of religious unity.²⁵ In Chakrabarty's response to these criticisms in *Subaltern Studies IV*, he reframes these critiques as

18 Chakrabarty and Partha Chatterjee had their work from *Subaltern Studies* re-printed in *Past and Present*, for example Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'On Deifying and Defying Authority: Managers and Workers in the Jute Mills of Bengal Circa 1890-1940,' *Past & Present*, No. 100, (1983), 124-146. Partha Chatterjee, 'The Colonial State and Peasant Resistance in Bengal 1920-1947,' *Past & Present*, No. 110, (1986), 169-204.

19 Javeed Alam, 'Peasantry, Politics and Historiography: Critique of New Trend in Relation to Marxism,' in *Reading Subaltern Studies*, 51.

20 Sangeeta Singh et al., 'Subaltern Studies II: A Review Article,' in *Reading Subaltern Studies*, 77.

21 Suneet Chopra, 'Review: Missing Correct Perspective,' *Social Scientist*, Vol. 10, No. 8, (1982), 55.

22 *Ibid.*, 58. Singh et. al., 'Subaltern Studies II: A Review Article,' 59, 61. Alam, 'Peasantry, Politics and Historiography,' 45.

23 Ranajit Das Gupta, 'Significance of Non-Subaltern Mediation,' in *Reading Subaltern Studies*, 109-110. Alam, 'Peasantry, Politics and Historiography,' 44, 47. Binay Bhushan Chaudhuri, 'Subaltern Autonomy and the National Movement,' in *Reading Subaltern Studies*, 132.

24 Alam, 'Peasantry, Politics and Historiography,' 46, 48.

25 *Ibid.*, 46.

either a misunderstanding of the goals of the subaltern studies project, or a result of the limitations of the Marxist ideologies of the reviewers.²⁶

If Chakrabarty's response is indicative of general feeling amongst subaltern studies scholars, these critiques did not create a significant impact on the project at all. The evolution of the project from its beginnings can instead be attributed to internal dialogue and change; internal critiques, changes in the membership of the project and in the audience of the journal resulted in a shift towards American cultural and literary studies, and away from the legacy of Marxist historians.²⁷ This meant an increasing focus on literary analysis and the way colonial knowledge of India was created, fitting in with trends in American postcolonial studies.

The project's second planning meeting, held in Calcutta in 1986, marked a turning point for the project. Tensions within the group, spurred by differing approaches to elite sources and the purpose of subaltern studies, were so marked that one long established member of the editorial collective, David Arnold, considered the project to be at a 'crossroads'.²⁸ One faction desired to continue its pursuit of moments of subaltern agency, while the other wished to focus on the way that colonial knowledge was created. Ultimately, the project took the direction focusing on colonial knowledge, joining the path, in part established by Edward Said's *Orientalism*, and dominant in postcolonial literary studies in America.²⁹

The change in methodology over this period represented the changes in approach and theory the group was undergoing, and changes in the audience of the journal. As the contents of *Subaltern Studies* shifted from a Marxist influenced focus on the relationship between dominant and marginalised group to a poststructuralist focus on the way that colonial knowledge was generated, its audience also changed. Increasingly, the journal was departing from an Indian audience towards a more global one. As well, in the mid-1980s a number of academics joined the editorial collective who were not historians, and the literary studies specialist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak was one of them.³⁰ The work of Spivak was both indicative and instrumental in these changes, first through her contributions to *Subaltern Studies*, then through her critique of the project, also published in the journal, and finally through her introduction of the project to a United States audience.³¹

Spivak supported the pursuit of a better understanding of the formation of colonial knowledge at the 1986 conference, and her contributions to the journal strongly reflected her literary studies background, as did her critique of the possibility of reclaiming the subaltern subject.³² In 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' Spivak argued for the inaccessibility of subaltern consciousness through an

26 Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'Discussion: Invitation to a Dialogue,' in *Subaltern Studies No 4: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, ed. Ranajit Guha, (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1985), 364-376.

27 Chaturvedi, 'Introduction,' x-xii.

28 Hardiman, "'Subaltern Studies' at Crossroads,' 288.

29 Sarkar, 'The Decline of the Subaltern in *Subaltern Studies*,' 409.

30 Ludden, 'Introduction: A Brief History of Subalternity,' 16.

31 Spivak's first text published in *Subaltern Studies* was Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography,' *Subaltern Studies No 4*, 330-363. She co-edited: Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, eds., *Selected Subaltern Studies*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

32 G. C. Spivak, "'Can the Subaltern Speak?"; in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988).

analysis of an instance of sati, arguing that in the process of writing and analysing, the subaltern voice was appropriated and destroyed.³³ This critique seriously challenged the subaltern studies goal of reclaiming subaltern voices and autonomy from the past.

In 1988 the collection *Selected Subaltern Studies* was released, providing an accessible introduction to new audiences, particularly those in the United States. This volume was jointly edited by Guha and Spivak, with Spivak's first contribution to the journal – 'Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography' – republished as the introduction to the volume, and setting the tone by which *Subaltern Studies* was received in the United States.³⁴ Edward Said wrote the foreword to this collection, demonstrating a closer association between the subaltern studies project and postcolonial studies, and it was through Spivak that the connection with Said was made.³⁵ Said and Spivak had a long-standing professional relationship dating to the mid-1970s, and together they, along with Homi Bhaba, were key in developing and establishing postcolonial studies in the United States.³⁶

The shift away from the influence of Marxism and the political goals of the project can largely be attributed to the role of Spivak's critique of *Subaltern Studies*, her role in the editorial collective, and the connection she forged between subaltern studies and postcolonial studies. Yet, while the change in the direction of the project represented by *Selected Subaltern Studies* may have made subaltern studies important in postcolonial studies, historians were less than enamoured with the change in the direction of the project, particularly those who had valued the subaltern studies project for its politicised alternative to Marxism.

As one critic put it, the focus of *Subaltern Studies* had 'moved from documenting subaltern dissent, to dissecting elite discourse, from writing with (socialist) passion to following the (postmodern) fashion'.³⁷ As noted by Sumit Sarkar, all of the articles in *Subaltern Studies I* and *II* were about subaltern people, but by *VII* and *VIII* the topic was confined to a mere third of the articles. Instead, articles were increasingly concerned with the creation of discourses, both historiographic and colonial.³⁸ In the reviews of the later *Subaltern Studies* volumes, many reviewers commented on the dense, sometimes incomprehensible jargon used, particularly in the work of Spivak.³⁹ Her work posed a challenge to those untrained in, or unfamiliar with literary studies, and while John Beverley's claim that 'most of them [historians] would rather be tortured than have to read Spivak' was extreme, there was also some truth in his statement.⁴⁰

The shift in intellectual focus and in the membership of the editorial collective also increasingly separated the subaltern studies project from its South Asian, particularly Indian, roots. This shift

33 *Ibid.*, 307.

34 Guha and Spivak, eds., *Selected Subaltern Studies*.

35 Edward Said, 'Foreword', in *Selected Subaltern Studies*, x. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Foreword', in *A Companion to Postcolonial Studies*, ed. Henry Schwarz and Sangeeta Ray, (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2000), xxi.

36 Ben Conisbee Baer, 'A Conversation with Gayatri Spivak', in *Edward Said: A Legacy of Emancipation and Representation*, ed. Adel Iskander and Hakem Rustom, (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 2010), 55, 56.

37 Ramachandra Guha, 'Review: Subaltern and Bhadrakok Studies,' *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 30, No. 33, (1995), 2057.

38 Sarkar, 'The Decline of the Subaltern in *Subaltern Studies*,' 400.

39 Walter Hauser, 'Review,' *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 96, No. 1, (1991), 242.

40 John Beverley and James Sanders, 'Negotiating with the Disciplines. A Conversation on Latin American Subaltern Studies,' *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies: Travesia*, Vol. 6, No. 2, (1997), 240.

in the project away from its relevance to India was the cause of considerable criticism by Sumit Sarkar, a member of the editorial collective in the latter half of the 1980s.⁴¹ Sarkar's criticisms were a product of the political and intellectual context of India in which he was writing. While the subaltern studies project initially fitted in with the Indian political context, political and social concerns had changed by the 1990s. The rise of the conservative Hindutva movement particularly caused Sarkar concern.

By the mid-1990s an increasingly conservative government, aligned with the Hindutva movement, had been willing to censor academic work, including Sarkar's.⁴² Sarkar's main criticism of the project, particularly since its turn toward cultural studies, was the dichotomy between colonial and pre-colonial India, and the journal's tendency to criticise power relations and exploitation in the former, whilst the latter was absolved.⁴³ He argued that in a context in which so-called 'traditional' Indian values, namely culture and religion, were being used to justify violence and destruction (such as the razing of the sixteenth-century Babri Mosque by Hindu extremists), it was dangerous for even those not aligned with the Hindutva movement to promote ideas that could give strength to the Hindutva model of 'traditional India'.⁴⁴

The goals of the *Subaltern Studies* project have changed as its membership, readership, and intellectual and political contexts have changed. Individuals like Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak have been key in shaping the focus and direction of the editorial collective, but the project also needs to be understood in relation to much broader changes, such as the decline of Marxism and the growth of postcolonial, cultural, and literary studies. The reception of the project too, needs to be understood in relation to these contextual factors, with the reactions of many reviewers determined by their understanding of what they thought the project *should be like* (in relation to the early Marxist reviewers), or what they remembered the project of *having been like* in the case of historians or ex-members, such as Sumit Sarkar.

The changes in focus and methodologies of the project are perhaps made clearest by the fact that by the publication of *Subaltern Studies XI*, in 2000, none of the contributors were members of a history department.⁴⁵ The evolution of the project from having a Marxist influenced focus on the relationship between the elite and the subaltern, to a postcolonial focus on the creation of knowledge, has also then, been a shift in the home of *Subaltern Studies* from the discipline of history, to an interdisciplinary project grounded in literary and cultural studies.

41 Sumit Sarkar, 'Orientalism Revisited: Saidian Frameworks in the Writing of Modern Indian History,' *Oxford Literary Review*, Vol. 16, No. 1-2, (1994), 205-224. Sarkar, 'The Decline of the Subaltern in *Subaltern Studies*,' 82-108.

42 Ann Ninan, 'Righting or Rewriting Hindu History,' *Asia Times Online*, 23 February 2000. David E. Ludden, 'Ayodhya: A Window on the World,' in *Contesting the Nation: Religion, Community, and the Politics of Democracy in India*, ed. David E. Ludden, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996), 1.

43 Sarkar makes the point with regard to the treatment of women that: "Indian men" hardly required the help of British officials to essentialize feminine nature as dangerous ... They had two thousand years or more of indigenous, highly patriarchal and oppressive, traditions and texts.' Sarkar, 'Orientalism Revisited: Saidian Frameworks in the Writing of Modern Indian History,' 216.

44 *Ibid.*, 209, 213, 214.

45 Simona Sawhney, 'Subaltern Studies XI (Review),' *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History*, Vol. 3, No. 3, (2002).