

PEASANT MOVEMENTS AND CHANGING NATURE OF NATIONALISM UNDER THEME: SUBALTERN HISTORY AND SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION

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ABSTRACT

The history of modern South Asia has long been narrated as a linear progression toward the birth of the nation-state, a story typically told from the vantage point of the urban intelligentsia and the political elite. In this traditional historiography, the nationalist movement is portrayed as a top down phenomenon, where charismatic leaders awakened a dormant, illiterate peasantry to the cause of anti-colonialism. However, the emergence of Subaltern Studies in the late 20th century, spearheaded by historian Ranajit Guha, fundamentally challenged this elitist bias. By shifting the focus from the corridors of power to the fields of agrarian struggle, this perspective reveals that peasant movements were not merely subsets of the nationalist cause. Instead, they represented an autonomous domain of politics with a distinct consciousness, one that played a decisive role in shifting the very definition and trajectory of nationalism.

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INTRODUCTION:

To understand the changing nature of nationalism, one must first recognize the subaltern as an independent political actor. Prior to the subaltern intervention, colonial historians dismissed peasant uprisings as spontaneous or pre-political outbursts of primitive fury, while nationalist historians often viewed them as raw material to be refined by the leadership of the Indian National Congress. Subaltern Studies argues the contrary: peasants possessed a sophisticated political logic rooted in their own lived experiences of “Danda” (authority) and “Bhakti” (devotion/loyalty). Their resistance was not just against the British Raj, but against a triple pillar of oppression the colonial state, the landlord (zamindar), and the moneylender (sahukar). Consequently, peasant nationalism was often more radical and inclusive than the legalistic and constitutional nationalism of the middle class.

As these grassroots movements intensified ranging from the Indigo disturbances to the Mappila rebellion and the Tebhaga movement they forced a transformation in the nationalist discourse. The nature of nationalism evolved from a narrow demand for administrative representation into a broader, more turbulent struggle for social justice and land rights. The subaltern domain frequently overlapped with the elite domain, but it also consistently broke away from it. When the peasantry adopted the name of Gandhi or the slogan of Swaraj, they often reinterpreted these symbols through their own cultural idioms, sometimes engaging in militant actions that the central leadership condemned. This friction highlights a split in the national movement: a struggle for a nation defined by the elites versus a struggle for a community defined by the producers of the soil.

Ultimately, investigating peasant movements through the lens of subaltern studies allows for a more fragmented but authentic history of the nation. It suggests that nationalism was not a singular, unified ideology gifted to the masses, but a contested and multi-layered process. The peasantry did not simply join a pre-existing nation; they actively sought to negotiate their place within it, demanding that the promise of independence include the end of social and economic exploitation. By examining these movements, this paper seeks to demonstrate that the “people” were not just the followers of nationalism, but were, in many ways, its most radical architects.

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES:

- To study Subaltern view of nature of nationalism in 20th century.
- To critically evaluate difference between various historiographies of 20th century writings in context of subaltern history.
- To study peasant movements from point of view of peasants.
- To evaluate changing trends in the peasant movement itself.
- To study patterns of nationalism in 20th century and changes in them in context of peasants groups and movement.
- To study various views regarding this topic.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:

This study adopts an analytical research design. Unlike descriptive research, which aims to provide a narrative of what is occurring, this methodology utilizes existing facts and information to perform a

critical evaluation of Peasant movements and changing nature of nationalism. The analytical framework of this research is grounded in the Resource-Based View. This framework provides the criteria for selecting variables and serves as the benchmark against which the gathered data is critically evaluated. By applying this theory, the study moves beyond mere observation to a critical analysis of the underlying mechanisms of topic.

Subaltern history writings, formalized under the banner of Subaltern Studies, constitute a pivotal movement in modern historiography dedicated to overturning the traditional, elite-centric narratives of the past. Originating primarily among South Asian scholars in the 1980s, the movement sought to shift the historical gaze from the actions of colonial rulers, high-ranking nationalist leaders, and dominant classes to the experiences and political actions of the subaltern a term borrowed from Antonio Gramsci denoting the subordinate, marginalized, and oppressed populations. This includes peasants, workers, tribal groups, lower castes, and women, whose contributions to history were previously rendered invisible or passive within the mainstream historical record. The core philosophy of Subaltern Studies is to execute a history from below, aiming to illuminate the autonomous political consciousness and agency of these marginalized groups.

The genesis of Subaltern Studies lies in a profound critique of three dominant historical schools that shaped the understanding of South Asia. First, Colonial Historiography attributed all significant social and political change to the British administrators, denying Indian people any active role. Second, Nationalist Historiography, while indigenous, often maintained an “elitist bias” by focusing almost exclusively on the campaigns and ideologies of the urban, educated elite, presenting their political struggles as synonymous with the entire nation’s. Third, even some strands of Marxist Historiography, which focus on class struggle, were criticized for either overlooking non-class forms of oppression like caste and gender or simplifying subaltern resistance as merely a reflex of elite-led movements. The Subaltern Studies Group, spearheaded by figures like Ranajit Guha, argued that the political domain of the people the “subaltern domain” operated independently of and often clashed with the elite domain, possessing its own unique forms of organization, communication, and protest.

A central mission of this historical approach is the recovery of subaltern agency, proving that these groups were not simply the passive objects of history, but active subjects who actively resisted, negotiated, and shaped their own destiny. Subaltern historians meticulously examine events like peasant revolts, local rebellions, and everyday acts of dissent, demonstrating that these actions were driven by an independent, sophisticated political will, rather than being mere localized reactions or derivative movements. Since the subaltern rarely produced formal written records the conventional source material for history these scholars must engage in a rigorous and imaginative methodology. They often employ a reading against the grain of elite and colonial documents, searching for traces of subaltern voices and resistance embedded within the biases of official reports, judicial records, and police accounts. They also rely heavily on sources outside the official archive, such as oral histories, popular folklore, and public memory, to construct a richer, more nuanced understanding of the past.

The movement has since expanded beyond its initial focus on South Asia, influencing various fields globally, including cultural studies, anthropology, and post-colonial theory. However, it has also faced internal theoretical challenges, most famously articulated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in her influential

essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" This essay explores the inherent difficulty—some might say impossibility of truly representing the voice of the absolute subaltern without filtering it through the language and academic structures of the elite historian. Despite these theoretical debates, Subaltern Studies remains a vital, influential school of thought, ensuring that historical scholarship critically interrogates the narratives of power and continuously strives to bring the marginalized, oppressed voices into the central discourse of global history.

The transformation of 20th-century nationalism in India, while conventionally chronicled through the actions of elite leaders and the constitutional struggles of the Indian National Congress (INC), takes on a radically different dimension when viewed through the lens of subaltern history. This perspective, pioneered by historians like Ranajit Guha, consciously shifts focus away from the hegemonic narratives of the state and the educated elite 'bhadralok' to illuminate the autonomous politics, consciousness, and agency of the subordinate classes chiefly, the peasantry. From this vantage point, the nationalist movement was not a seamless, unified campaign but rather a series of parallel and often conflicting struggles, where the peasant domain operated with a political logic separate from, yet intersecting with, the elite domain. In the subaltern analysis, early peasant uprisings of the 19th century, such as the Indigo Revolt or the Moplah outbreaks, were expressions of autonomous peasant consciousness. They were not proto-nationalist; they were resistances rooted in the cultural matrix of their communities and driven by immediate, visceral exploitation dastur and baksheesh. The subaltern historian emphasizes the indigenous, traditional forms of mobilization, such as rumors, secret meetings, and symbolic acts of defiance, which constituted the prose of counter-insurgency the hidden, unwritten history of resistance distinct from the official record. When the Indian elite the nascent nationalists looked upon these events, they saw mere law and order problems or, at best, subjects for humanitarian intervention, failing to grasp the revolutionary potential or the distinct political grammar of the peasant.

The critical phase began when the elite nationalist leadership, particularly under Gandhi, sought to incorporate the subaltern domain to create a mass movement. The subaltern view posits that this incorporation was not a genuine unification but often a failure of the elite to truly integrate the peasant consciousness. While Gandhi's Satyagrahas at Champaran or Kheda undeniably mobilized peasants on an unprecedented scale, the peasant understanding of Swaraj often differed significantly from the elite's constitutional definition. For the peasant, Swaraj was an immediate, utopian vision a Ram Rajya signifying the end of rent, revenue, and local oppression; it was often the license to loot the oppressor's property or to directly confront the landlord. This fundamental divergence in consciousness meant that peasant actions often exceeded the boundaries of the non-violent, controlled program set by the elite, leading to outbreaks of violence as seen during Chauri Chaura which the elite promptly condemned and often sought to suppress.

The radical peasant movements of the 1930s and 1940s such as the All India Kisan Sabha (AIKS) campaigns, the Tebhaga Movement, and the Telangana Struggle represent the high point of subaltern autonomy. While ostensibly aligned with the anti-colonial struggle, these movements, frequently led by Communist or Socialist groups, had clear anti-feudal and class-conscious agendas that often directly clashed with the vested interests of many elite Congress members who were often landlords or held ties to landowning classes. The subaltern perspective highlights how these movements were not merely

supporting players in the Congress-led freedom fight; they were engaged in a two-front battle: against the foreign imperial power and against indigenous feudal oppression. The failure of the mainstream nationalist leadership to wholeheartedly endorse immediate and radical land reform preferring to postpone it until after independence is seen as proof of the elite's limited vision and their ultimate goal of securing power transfer while preserving existing class hierarchies.

A subaltern reading drastically alters the narrative of 20th-century nationalism. It foregrounds the autonomous domain of subaltern politics, demonstrating that the peasant contribution was not a passive resource utilized by the elite, but a distinct political force with its own goals, methods, and understanding of liberation. The final form of Indian nationalism that achieved independence was not a homogenous entity, but a compromise a hegemonic structure successfully asserting its leadership, yet only after being forced to incorporate, though imperfectly, the radical demands and the undeniable mass power generated by the subaltern peasantry. The history of peasant movements is thus the history of the tension, convergence, and ultimate differentiation between the politics of the elite and the politics of the people.

CONCLUSION:

Political spectrum of 28 century pre independent India saw emerging various trends in politics. By the emergence of the strings concept of nationalism also changed according to it. It saw constitutional nationalism, militant nationalism, revolutionary nationalism, mass movements, radical movements, various workers - peasants groups, non-bramahanical groups working in their strata for various demands. As there were many trends and forms of nationalism, the medium through which it came towards us was also different. It reached to us by nationalist, Marxist writings, colonialist writings. In past recent years there are two more types of writings and studies they are Subaltern and feminist. These both trends emerged because other studies and writings had not made justice with these two groups. So critically it was challenge to contemporary trends in studies.

Subaltern studies and writings gave new way and voice to those sections or modules of society who were set aside, or had been kept to that level from where there voice would not reach the mainstream. But subaltern studies gave them that voice. As mention earlier term Subaltern include many components of society, but here only peasants has been discussed. In the freedom struggle various modules of society had participated. Though they were all under the common banner independence, but the definitions of the Independence for them were different. As like it the definition of Independence for peasants was freedom from money lenders, freedom from feudal land owners, freedom from injusticeable tax system, freedom to keep their demand. But through the writings other than Subaltern these all demands were covered under one single banner independence. So in these context the importance of subaltern writing is been highlighted.

The 20th century marked a paradigm shift in the character of nationalism, primarily due to the entry of the peasantry into the political arena. From a subaltern perspective, this was not a simple act of top-down mobilization by elite leaders, but a complex intersection of two distinct political domains: the elite and the autonomous subaltern. While the nationalist leadership sought a controlled, non-violent transition of power, the peasantry brought an independent consciousness driven by a radical, anti-feudal vision of Swaraj.

This interaction fundamentally altered the nature of nationalism, shifting it from a narrow constitutional demand for political representation into a profound social contract. The “nation” was redefined to include the material realities of the rural poor—specifically issues of land rights, debt abolition, and the destruction of feudal exploitation. This period revealed a nationalism that was fundamentally contested, characterized by a constant tension between elite hegemony and subaltern radicalism. Ultimately, the peasantry ensured that the post-colonial state could not be built solely on bourgeois interests; it had to be founded on the promises of agrarian justice. Their participation transformed nationalism into a pluralistic and revolutionary discourse, proving that the subaltern voice was the primary engine that radicalized the identity and social depth of the modern nation.

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