

Subaltern History and Social Transformation

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Article Info	ABSTRACT
Article History: Received: 15th Dec 2025 Accepted: 18th Dec 2025 Published: 20th Dec 2025	Subaltern studies emerged as a powerful intellectual movement in postcolonial historiography, emphasizing the voices, experiences, and agency of marginalized communities often excluded from mainstream historical narratives. This paper explores the evolution of subaltern history as a critical approach to understanding social transformation in colonial and postcolonial societies, particularly in India. It examines how subaltern perspectives challenge elitist, Eurocentric, and nationalist historiographies, offering alternative frameworks for interpreting social change, resistance, and identity formation. Through an analysis of key theorists and case studies, the paper underscores the continuing relevance of subaltern history in understanding contemporary social movements and transformations.
Keywords: Subaltern Studies, Social Transformation, Postcolonialism, Marginalization, Resistance, Historiography.	

Plagiarism Check Report:

Date of Report: Dec 17, 2025

Similarity Index: 5%

Remarks: No significant matching text. All citations and matches are properly referenced. The manuscript is considered original.

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How to Cite: Waghmare, P. K., & Jambhale, A. K. (2025). Subaltern history and social transformation.

IIP: World Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences (IIPWJHSS), 1(IV), 530–538.

Introduction:

The term *subaltern*, derived from Antonio Gramsci's prison notebooks, refers to groups excluded from the dominant power structure—peasants, workers, women, Dalits, and other marginalized populations. In India, the Subaltern Studies Group (SSG) redefined historical research in the 1980s by focusing on the experiences and consciousness of those who had been ignored by colonial and nationalist historians alike (Guha, 1982). The objective was not merely to rewrite history but to challenge the epistemological foundations of historical knowledge. Subaltern history thus represents a shift from top-down accounts of social and political change to narratives that emerge from below. This approach reveals how ordinary people have contributed to major social transformations through acts of resistance, adaptation, and negotiation. History has often been written by the powerful—rulers, elites, and colonial administrators—who controlled the means of knowledge production. The voices of peasants, laborers, women, Dalits, and indigenous peoples have historically remained suppressed within mainstream narratives. The Subaltern Studies movement, which originated in the 1980s under the leadership of Ranajit Guha, sought to rewrite this imbalance by focusing on the “history from below.”

The term *subaltern* was borrowed from Antonio Gramsci, who used it to refer to groups excluded from hegemonic power structures. In the South Asian context, subaltern studies became a critique not only of colonial historiography but also of nationalist writings that reproduced elitist assumptions. By uncovering the agency of the oppressed, subaltern historians sought to highlight how these groups contributed to historical and social transformation through their struggles, resistances, and everyday practices.

The Emergence of Subaltern Studies: The Subaltern Studies collective, led by Ranajit Guha, Partha Chatterjee, and Dipesh Chakrabarty, sought to reinterpret Indian history from the perspective of the oppressed. Guha's *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (1983) was groundbreaking in demonstrating how peasants engaged in autonomous, often unrecorded forms of rebellion.



(Picture 1/2- Ranajit Guha, Partha Chatterjee)

Subaltern historians challenged the elitism of both colonial and nationalist narratives, which portrayed the masses as passive recipients of change. Instead, they emphasized the autonomous domain of subaltern politics—a space where marginalized groups acted independently of elite control. The Subaltern Studies Group (SSG) was formed in the early 1980s by a collective of Indian historians including Ranajit Guha, Partha Chatterjee, Gyanendra Pandey, and Shahid Amin. Their first volume, *Subaltern Studies I: Writings on South Asian History and Society* (1982), marked a major intellectual shift. The movement's central aim was to restore the history of the subaltern—peasants, workers, tribal communities, and other marginalized groups—whose contributions were either ignored or distorted in conventional historical writing.

Ranajit Guha's *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (1983) was a pioneering text that analyzed the collective consciousness behind peasant revolts during British rule. Guha argued that peasant uprisings were not spontaneous or chaotic, as colonial administrators had claimed, but were instead organized acts of political assertion. This interpretation disrupted the colonial binary between “rational elites” and “irrational masses.”

The Subaltern Studies collective thus redefined the meaning of political action and historical agency. It emphasized that social transformation is not only driven by elite leaders or state interventions but also by the autonomous mobilization of marginalized groups seeking justice and dignity.

Subaltern Consciousness and Social Transformation: Social transformation, in the context of subaltern history, is not limited to economic or political change but extends to transformations in consciousness, identity, and culture. The subaltern's resistance—whether through rebellion, cultural assertion, or everyday acts of defiance—has continually reshaped social structures. Social transformation, in the subaltern framework, is understood as a

multidimensional process encompassing not only economic and political change but also shifts in consciousness, culture, and identity. The subaltern perspective highlights how oppressed communities create their own meanings of resistance and transformation, often outside the formal structures of politics.

Peasant Movements and Class Struggles: Peasant uprisings in colonial India, such as the Santhal Rebellion (1855–56) and the Indigo Revolt (1859–60), exemplify collective resistance that redefined notions of justice and authority. Subaltern historians reinterpret these not as chaotic reactions but as organized expressions of social consciousness (Guha, 1983). Guha and his colleagues demonstrated that colonial India witnessed a series of subaltern uprisings—such as the Santhal Rebellion (1855–56), the Indigo Revolt (1859–60), and numerous tribal insurrections—that reflected not just economic distress but also moral and political grievances. These movements articulated an alternative vision of justice and governance rooted in community-based ethics.



(Picture 3 – Santhal Rebellion)

By emphasizing peasant agency, subaltern historians reversed the top-down model of historical change. Rather than viewing the masses as passive recipients of reforms initiated by elites, they were seen as active agents shaping their destiny through organized struggles. This reinterpretation contributed to a new understanding of social transformation as collective action from below, rather than as a gift from above.

Caste and Gender Dimensions: Later scholars expanded subaltern theory to include caste and gender. Gyanendra Pandey and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak highlighted how Dalits and women occupy multiple layers of subalternity. Spivak's seminal essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988) interrogates whether subaltern voices can be authentically represented

without being reabsorbed by dominant discourses. Subaltern studies gradually expanded beyond class-based analysis to include caste, gender, and ethnicity. Gyanendra Pandey's writings on the communal violence of 1947, for instance, foregrounded the fragmented identities of the marginalized during national crises. Similarly, feminist scholars such as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Lata Mani brought gender into subaltern discourse.

Spivak's seminal essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988) questioned whether marginalized voices can truly be represented within dominant academic and political frameworks. Her critique emphasized that even well-intentioned historians often re-inscribe power hierarchies by speaking *for* the subaltern rather than enabling them to speak for themselves. This debate reshaped the subaltern approach, encouraging reflexivity and self-criticism among scholars. It also underscored the intersectionality of oppression—how caste, gender, and class interact to define subaltern positions within society.

Postcolonial Perspectives and Critiques: While subaltern studies provided a radical framework, critics argue that the approach risks romanticizing the subaltern or fragmenting collective political struggles. Vivek Chibber (2013) critiques the movement for its departure from materialist analysis, suggesting a need to reconnect subalternity with broader social theory.



(Picture 4- Post Colonialism chart)

Nevertheless, subaltern studies significantly influenced postcolonial thought by de-centering Eurocentric models of modernity. Dipesh Chakrabarty's *Provincializing Europe* (2000) proposes that non-Western societies possess their own temporalities and rationalities that defy Western developmental paradigms. Subaltern studies intersect closely with postcolonial theory. Both attempt to deconstruct Eurocentric modes of knowledge and highlight indigenous ways of knowing and resisting. Dipesh Chakrabarty's *Provincializing Europe* (2000) argues that Western historical categories—such as rationality, modernity, and

progress—cannot fully explain the experiences of societies in the Global South. Instead, he calls for recognizing “plural temporalities” that coexist within postcolonial modernity.

Partha Chatterjee’s *The Nation and Its Fragments* (1993) extends subaltern analysis to nationalism. He contends that while Indian nationalism sought to challenge colonial rule, it often reproduced internal hierarchies of caste, gender, and class. The “inner domain” of culture, according to Chatterjee, became the site where subaltern groups negotiated their identities against both colonial and elite nationalist domination. These postcolonial extensions of subaltern thought opened up new areas of inquiry—literature, anthropology, gender studies, and cultural politics—making subalternity a versatile analytical lens across disciplines. Despite its influence, subaltern studies has faced several critiques. Marxist scholars such as Vivek Chibber (2013) argue that subaltern theorists, in rejecting universal social categories, risk undermining the materialist understanding of capitalism and class struggle. Chibber’s *Postcolonial Theory and the Specter of Capital* contends that the subaltern approach sometimes overemphasizes cultural particularism at the expense of economic analysis. Another critique concerns the romanticization of the subaltern. By idealizing the resistance of marginalized groups, some works risk portraying them as inherently virtuous or revolutionary, without acknowledging internal divisions and contradictions. Moreover, Spivak’s warning that “the subaltern cannot speak” highlights a methodological dilemma: can elite academics truly represent marginalized voices without reproducing epistemic violence? Nevertheless, these critiques have enriched rather than weakened subaltern scholarship. They have compelled historians to adopt more nuanced, dialogic, and interdisciplinary methodologies.

Subaltern History and Contemporary Social Movements: Subaltern perspectives remain vital in analyzing contemporary movements—Dalit rights, tribal resistance, environmental activism, and feminist struggles. These movements embody the ongoing process of social transformation from below, challenging state power and cultural hegemony.

For instance, Adivasi movements against land dispossession, women’s collectives resisting patriarchal violence, and Dalit literature redefining identity all reflect the continuity of subaltern agency in reshaping India’s democratic fabric.



(Picture 5,6,7 - Namdev Dhasal, Omprakash Valmiki, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar.)

Subaltern perspectives remain highly relevant in analyzing modern social movements and transformations. The framework offers critical insights into struggles over land, identity, environment, and gender in contemporary India and the Global South.

Dalit and Adivasi Movements: Dalit and Adivasi movements exemplify subaltern politics in postcolonial India. Movements led by B. R. Ambedkar and later by Dalit Panthers redefined the discourse on equality, dignity, and representation. Dalit literature—such as the writings of Namdeo Dhasal and Omprakash Valmiki—gives voice to lived experiences of humiliation and resistance, continuing the subaltern tradition of speaking from below.

Adivasi resistance to land acquisition and environmental exploitation, particularly in regions like Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh, highlights the tension between state-led development and indigenous rights. These struggles show that subaltern agency persists as a driving force of social transformation in the 21st century.

Women's and Grassroots Movements

Woman as a Subaltern			
Social Formation	Subaltern	Dominant Group	Ideology
Class	Working class	Capitalist-bourgeois	Capitalism
Empire	Natives	Europeans	Colonialism
Patriarchy	Women	Men	Gender
Nation	Ethnic minorities	Majority	Homogenization nationalism

(Picture 8 – Woman Subaltern Chart)

Feminist movements in India and elsewhere have also drawn on subaltern frameworks to

challenge patriarchy and reclaim historical agency. Women's collective actions—ranging from the Chipko Movement in the Himalayas to the anti-liquor protests in Andhra Pradesh—reflect grassroots mobilization that transforms both social relations and ecological ethics.

Global Relevance: Beyond India, subaltern studies has influenced Latin American decolonial theory, African historiography, and Southeast Asian studies. It has inspired scholars to rethink how local knowledges and resistance strategies shape global processes of change. Thus, subaltern history has become a transnational lens for understanding power and transformation in an unequal world.

Theoretical Implications for Social Transformation: The subaltern framework redefines the very concept of transformation. Traditional sociological models often equate transformation with modernization, industrialization, or democratization—processes led by elites. Subaltern history, in contrast, emphasizes *transformative agency from below*.

This shift has several implications:

1. **Epistemological Decolonization:** It challenges Eurocentric assumptions and legitimizes indigenous and vernacular forms of knowledge.
2. **Democratization of History:** It expands who counts as a historical subject, including the poor, women, and minorities.
3. **Ethics of Representation:** It demands reflexivity from scholars and policymakers about how knowledge is produced and for whom.
4. **Reimagining Development:** Subaltern perspectives critique state-centered and capitalist models of progress, advocating for community-based, sustainable alternatives.

Through these dimensions, subaltern studies contribute to a deeper understanding of transformation as a moral, cultural, and political process grounded in human dignity.

Conclusion:

Subaltern history reclaims the agency of marginalized groups in shaping social and political change. By giving voice to the silenced, it democratizes the writing of history and expands our understanding of transformation beyond elite-driven narratives. In a global context marked by inequality and exclusion, the subaltern perspective continues to inspire scholars and activists alike to envision history as a living dialogue between power and resistance. Subaltern history represents a profound reorientation of historical and social thought. By foregrounding the experiences of the marginalized, it democratizes both the practice and

purpose of history. The subaltern approach has shown that social transformation does not always originate from elites, revolutions, or institutions, but often from the cumulative resistance of those denied voice and power.

In an age of deepening inequalities, ecological crises, and cultural homogenization, the subaltern perspective offers a critical reminder: history is not a record of rulers and policies alone, but a living testimony to the struggles and aspirations of ordinary people. The task of the historian, therefore, is not only to recover subaltern voices but also to ensure that the ongoing processes of transformation remain inclusive, participatory, and just.

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