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The stories of people of no importance  
India's history from below

Historical debates generate passionate responses in India, where three disagreements over the past became major headlines stories last year. The historians of subaltern studies have a novel approach: they care about the voices of those who have been traditionally silent.

By Partha Chatterjee

Shri Lal Krishna Advani, then president of the Hindu rightwing Bharatiya Janata party (BJP) and leader of the opposition in the Indian parliament, visited Pakistan last June. He quoted a speech by Pakistan's founder, M A Jinnah, made just before independence in August 1947, in which Jinnah called for equal civic and religious freedoms for all Pakistani citizens, Muslim, Hindu and Christian. Advani said this speech showed Jinnah was at heart a secular politician, a remark that sent shockwaves around the BJP, which has always held Jinnah responsible for the division of the Indian subcontinent along religious lines. As a result Advani had to resign as head of the party, and stepped down in December 2005.

A few days later the prime minister, Manmohan Singh, received an honorary doctorate from Oxford University, and in his acceptance speech said that though British rule in India had been economically exploitative, it had also had beneficial effects: legal institutions, a professional civil service, a free press, modern universities and research laboratories (1). This speech provoked vigorous debate: some claimed that the prime minister had sullied the memory of those who had given their lives for India's freedom; others argued that it was a mark of India's self-confidence as a nation that it could now accept its colonial past without guilt or shame.

There had been another row in July, when the board of trustees for Sunni Muslim places of worship claimed ownership of the Taj Mahal at Agra, which is a historic monument in the care of the Archaeological Survey of India. The Sunni Waqf board claimed that under the Mughal empire, the tomb was an imperial religious trust, and that prayers have been held there every Friday since the 17th century. Therefore it was not a historical monument but a mosque. The claim has been challenged by several historians who are currently delving into the Mughal imperial archive. This controversy about state ownership of religious places of historical importance is likely to continue.

The most burning debate concerns the historical antecedents of the 16th-century Babri mosque in Ayodhya, a small town in northern India. Hindus and Muslims clashed over it as early as 1955. Since then the controversy has led to many violent events across the country, thousands of deaths, the rise and fall of more than one government, and legal and political battles.

There have been many other debates of national and regional significance: over textbooks, monuments, films and novels, festivals, observances, the naming of places or institutions, the national flag

and the national anthem. Indian public life is full of historical controversy.  
Schools of history

Thirty years ago there were two main contending schools of modern historiography. One group, mainly historians based at Cambridge University, argued that Indian nationalism was a bid for power by a few Indian elites who used the traditional bonds of caste and communal ties to mobilise the masses against British rule. Meanwhile Indian nationalist historians believed that the material conditions of colonial exploitation created the ground for an alliance of different classes in Indian society, and that a nationalist leadership inspired and organised the masses to join the struggle for national freedom.

There was a postcolonial intervention in the 1980s from a third group of historians who decided to specialise in what they called "subaltern studies", which became the title of a series of publications (2). Inspired by the writings of the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci, these historians denounced both the Cambridge and the nationalist schools as representing either colonial or nationalist elitism (3), since both assumed that nationalism was wholly a product of elite action, and neither had any place for the independent political actions of the subaltern classes (rural peasants or urban workers).

Since the 1980s debates about modern Indian history have been mostly framed by these three approaches: colonialist, nationalist and postcolonial-subaltern. One set of debates was about the role of the peasant masses in the nationalist movement. Subaltern studies argued that while it was true that the subaltern classes had often entered nationalist politics, it was just as true that in many instances they had refused to join despite the efforts of nationalist leaders, or had withdrawn after they had joined. The goals, strategies and methods of subaltern politics were in every case different from those of the elites. Even within nationalist politics, the nationalism of the elites was different from the nationalism of the subaltern classes.

The first phase of subaltern studies was dominated by peasant revolt (4). Scholars associated with the project wrote about peasant resistance in different regions and periods of South Asian history. They were able to discover sources in which the peasants told his or her own story, but there are few such sources. New strategies for reading the conventional documents on peasant revolts were far more productive. The subaltern historians found several ways in which reports of peasant rebellion prepared by officialdom could be read from the standpoint of the rebel peasant, and used to explore the rebels' consciousness. They also showed that when elite historians, even those sympathetic to the cause of the rebels, sought to ignore or explain rationally what appeared as mythical, illusory, millenarian or utopian in rebel actions, they missed the most powerful and significant elements of subaltern consciousness.

The often unintended consequence of this was to fit the unruly facts of subaltern politics into the rationalist grid of elite consciousness. The autonomous history of the subaltern classes - distinctive traces of subaltern action in history - were lost in this historiography.  
Distanced from politics

The subaltern studies analysis of peasant resistance in colonial India made a strong critique of bourgeois-nationalist politics: it argued that the postcolonial nation-state had included the subaltern classes within the imagined space of the nation, but distanced them from the actual political space of the state. Subaltern historians were at first compared to the "history from below" approach popularised by British Marxist historians, and it was obvious that they eagerly borrowed from the work of Christopher Hill, EP Thompson, Eric Hobsbawm or the History Workshop writers their methodological clues to popular history.

But they refused to subscribe to the historicist orthodoxy that what had happened in the West was bound to be repeated in India. They rejected the framework of modernisation as the necessary plot of history in those countries that had been colonised. And they were sceptical about the established orthodoxies of both liberal-nationalist and Marxist historiographies. In their writings they resisted the tendency to construct the story of modernity in India as an actualisation of the modernity imagined by the great theorists of the western world. This resistance, apparent even in early subaltern studies, was later expressed in arguments about other modernities.

With the publication of the fifth and sixth volumes of Subaltern Studies in 1987 and 1989, the approach changed. It now acknowledged, with far greater seriousness than before, that subaltern histories were fragmentary, disconnected and incomplete: subaltern consciousness was split within itself, made of elements from the experiences of both dominant and subordinate classes.

The subjects of inquiry became the autonomy shown by subalterns at moments of rebellion, and the forms of their consciousness of everyday experiences of subordination. After that, subaltern history could not be restricted to the study of peasant revolts. The question was no longer what was the true form of the subaltern, but how was the subaltern represented ("represent" meaning both "present again" and "in place of"). Both the subjects and the methods of research changed.

The new research began a critical analysis of texts. Once "the representation of the subaltern" came to the fore, it opened the entire field of the spread of modern knowledge in colonial India. Subaltern studies historians investigated in new ways such much-studied subjects as the expansion of colonial governance, English education, movements of religious and social reform, and the rise of nationalism. A product of its conditions

Other fresh directions were the modern state and public institutions, through which modern ideas of rationality, science and the regime of power were disseminated in colonial and postcolonial India. Subaltern studies tackled such institutions as schools and universities, newspapers and publishing houses, hospitals, doctors, medical systems, censuses, the industrial labour process, scientific institutions and museums.

In more recent subaltern studies, a major argument has been developed about alternative or hybrid modernities, focusing on the dissemination of the ideas, practices and institutions of western modernity under colonial conditions. Modernisation theory invariably turns the history of modernity in colonial countries into a narrative of catching up; as

Dipesh Chakrabarty said, such societies seem to have been consigned for ever to "the waiting room of history".

The universalist pretensions of western modernity erase the fact that, like all histories, it is a product of local conditions. What happens when the products of western modernity are domesticated in other places?

Do they take on new and different shapes that do not belong to the original? If they do, should we treat the changes as corruptions, deviations from an ideal? Or are they examples of a different modernity?

To argue the latter is to provincialise Europe and assert the identity of other cultures, even as they participate in the presumed universality of modernity. Dipesh Chakrabarty, Gyan Prakash and Gayatri Spivak have explored aspects of this process of translation of modern knowledge, technologies and institutions (5), and tried to show that the encounter between western forms of modernity and colonised non-western cultures was not a simple imposition of the one upon the other. Nor did it lead to corrupt or failed forms of modernity. Rather, it produced different forms of modernity whose marks of difference still remain subject to unresolved contestations of power. Different strategies, same goal

The postcolonial interventions of subaltern history have often provided a different perspective on contemporary historical debates in India. The political debate on the place of religious minorities has usually been between two opposed groups: Hindu chauvinists versus secularists. The research of subaltern historians has shown that the debate between secularism and communalism (as represented by Hindu chauvinists) is in no way a struggle between modernity and backwardness. The rival political positions are both firmly planted in the soil of modern government and politics.

The two groups simply use different strategies to pursue the same goal: consolidating the regime of the modern nation-state. Both strategies are elitist, but involve different modes of representation and appropriation of the subaltern. Faced with these rival elitist strategies, subaltern groups in India are devising their own independent strategies for coping with communal as well as secularist politics.

The second question on which there has been recent discussion is caste. The politics of caste in India has been transformed since the 1990s. It is clear that the supposedly religious basis of caste divisions has completely disappeared from public debate. The conflicts are now mostly centred on the relative positions of caste groups in relation to the state. The debate over whether to recognise caste as a criterion for affirmative action by the state reflects two different elitist strategies of representation and appropriation of the subaltern, one insisting on equality of opportunity and selection by merit, the other arguing that a phase of affirmative action is needed to compensate for centuries of deprivation suffered by the lower castes.

Subaltern groups, in their efforts to establish social justice and self-respect, also devise strategies of resisting the state and using the opportunities offered by its electoral and developmental functions

(6). Alliances between castes at the middle and bottom rungs of the ritual hierarchy and other oppressed groups, such as tribal and religious minorities, have produced significant electoral successes. But with the creation of fresh political elites from subaltern groups, the questions of "who represents" and "to what end" are being asked with a new urgency.

Another debate is about the social position of women. In one sense, all women living in patriarchal societies are subalterns. Yet they are also identified by class, race, caste and community. Just as it is valid to analyse the subordination of women in a society ruled by men, so it is necessary to identify the way that the social construction of gender is made more complex by the intervention of class, caste and communal identities. Recent discussions on this have focused on the Indian social reform movements of the 19th century, especially the legal reforms to protect the rights of women, in the context of the colonial state and nationalist politics. Subaltern feminist writings have questioned the adequacy of an agenda of legal reform from the top when the challenge of reforming structures of patriarchal power within local communities that flourish outside the reach of the law (7) has not been faced.

Recent subaltern history writings from India have been productively referenced in the history of modernity in other parts of the formerly colonised world, including nationalism and gender in the Middle East and the politics of peasant and indigenous groups in Latin America. Having migrated from Italy to India, the idea of subaltern history has produced a widely available methodological and stylistic approach to modern historiography. It could be used anywhere, a welcome means of rethinking such old modernist ideas as nation, citizenship and democracy.

Original text in English

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(1) See Seumas Milne, "Britain: imperial nostalgia", *Le Monde diplomatique*, English language edition, May 2005.

(2) Postcolonial studies aim to re-evaluate the histories of countries that were once colonies, outside conventional conceptual frameworks inherited from the colonial powers. India's subaltern studies researchers are part of this movement, focusing on the histories of people of no importance.

(3) The Subaltern Studies series has so far published 12 volumes of essays: Ranajit Guha, ed, I-VI, 1982-89; Partha Chatterjee and Gyanendra Pandey, eds, VII, 1992; David Arnold and David Hardiman, eds, VIII, 1992; Shahid Amin and Dipesh Chakrabarty, eds, IX, 1996; Gautam Bhadra, Gyan Prakash and Susie Tharu, eds, X, 1999, all at Oxford University Press, Delhi; Partha Chatterjee and Pradeep Jeganathan, eds, XI, Columbia University Press, New York, 2001; and Shail Mayaram, MSS Pandian and Ajay Skaria, eds, XII, Permanent Black, Delhi, 2005.

(4) A key text is by Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1983.

(5) Gyan Prakash, *Another Reason*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1999; Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass, 1999; Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincialising Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*, Princeton University Press, 2000.

(6) Shail Mayaram, MSS Pandian and Ajay Skaria, eds, *Subaltern Studies XII*, Permanent Black, Delhi, 2005.

(7) Nivedita Menon, ed, *Gender and Politics in India*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1999; Flavia Agnes, *Law and Gender Inequality: The Politics of Women's Rights in India*, Oxford University Press, Delhi 2001; Nivedita Menon, *Recovering Subversion: Feminist Politics Beyond the Law*, Permanent Black, Delhi, 2004.

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