

Women as Subaltern: A study of Tribal movements from 1757 to 1857

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ABSTRACT

The subaltern studies has created a wave in understanding the historiography of the past since its emergence in 1980s. The major contribution of Subaltern studies has been to revisit the written histories of each and every society. Through their approach they tried to give voice to the unheard, the untold stories of the hidden participants in history. Whose contributions has been overshadowed by the elites of each and every society. This paper tries to evaluate the example of such untold tribal movements in the Indian history, not through the popular descriptive tradition, but through the critical prism. This critical prism would be used to scrutinize the written literature on some of the tribal movements by trying to locate the position of women in these tribal movements. The paper would follow the cursory glance viewpoint of these movements. This paper will try to evaluate the women aspect in the literature written on these tribal movements. The tribal movements such as The Chuar rebellion, the Bhil uprising and the Santhal rebellion would be used as case study. The period of 1757 to 1857 offers us the chance to visit the limited arena in Indian history which has largely been ignored in the Indian historical discourse.

Key Words : Subaltern, Tribal movements, Women, Historiography, Literature

INTRODUCTION

Every country has its own history. A country is known through its past, the things that it faced, the struggles that it went through; the people who made it the country that they wanted. In the making of a country, the contestations that it went through, all these are nothing but the instances of people who continuously are in the process of making history. As stated earlier each country has its own share of experiences from which it went through and through those experiences the country takes its shape. The Indian state is not an exception to this, the Indian state also is shaped by its history, and its past gave it the identity that it presently represents. The Indian state witnessed various invasions, settlements, migrations and other phenomena. The most important of these events, was the event when it was colonized. When it was under the British control, many historians and experts debate on the very nature of control of the British administration, debating on the motives of the British imperialism. Whether it was good for the Indian state where the Indian state got the required western exposure, the scientific way of life, the modern ways of resource utilization or the

modern techniques of using the local resources, the introduction of Industries and the blurring of the caste distinctions. On the other hand, some argue that the British control led to impoverish the Indian state where the capital got transferred from India to Britain through the 'Drain of Wealth', the resource exploitation, which was considered as over exploitation of the resources available in India at that point of time like the Indigo cultivation, cash crop production among other things.

But, one thing that they doesn't debate on is, the impact of the British administration on the Indian state, it acts like an unstated acceptance of the impact of the Britishers in molding the Indian history, whether in a right direction or the wrong direction, that is a different matter of debate.

The Britishers while expanding their foothold in the Indian subcontinent which covers present day India, Pakistan, Myanmar, Bhutan, Nepal and others has its own share of experiences that it witnessed. The colonial power has its own tumultuous past, where it witnessed a number of movements, struggles and the protests while proliferating its existence in the country.

These movements are nothing but the movements of the masses. These movements were not a homogeneous category or were not made up of any one group, Instead it consisted of a number of varying degree of actors like the elites, common masses, the peasants, the tribal, and the workers among many others. These movements are the transcripts of the history of any country and the study of these movements signify some of the most important actors in the struggle against the oppressor.

Revisiting historiography:

In these written historiography, the role of some are prioritized more compared to others; which results in making some actors to be more important than the other, or we can say it results in glorifying some and negligence of others (Chakrabarty, 2000). This is where the politics of glorification comes in, which shapes the country's history through the lenses of some dominant actors. Their historiography got more recognized compared to others. This is where the study of ones who are left out in the process, whose struggles, contributions, the fight they gave to the authorities becomes more important. As Ranajit Guha talks about rewriting or revisiting the historiography through thoroughly revisiting the archives becomes paramount, in order to limelight the voice of the ones which are not represented in the dominant historiography. As Ranajit guha states that the present history neglects the real history which includes the lay persons who were the major chunk of these movements; who made the struggle possible. This is where the study of the struggles becomes supremely important. The study of these movements through the lenses of the masses gives proper understanding of the history and what could said to be the true history signifying the real history on the ground. The thorough study of these movements results in unraveling the real historiography which is the primary source of interest of the subaltern school of thought.

While describing about the movement, we encounter the plethora of movements which happened in India as part of fighting the colonial authorities like the socio-religious movements, the political movements which started by demanding a share in the decision making to ultimately demand for independence.

The Indian history has been dominated by the elitist historiography. This historiography was further subdivided in colonialist elitism and bourgeois nationalist elitism (Guha, 1982). It emphasized on the notions of colonialist elites which consisted of British officials, British industrialists among others. The Bourgeois nationalist elites who were the dominant players during the nationalist phase in the Indian history comprised of elite personalities who had links with the British authorities. This

elitist historiography pre-dominantly focuses upon the political movements which consisted some native elites. These political movements were thought to be the gift of the native elites, which clearly suppressed the important role played by the people or the masses on the ground. They were seen as the movements from the top to bottom. However, this notion down plays the “politics of the people” which led to one-sided blinkered historiography (Guha, 1982).

The problem with this type of one-sided historiography is that it emphasizes more on the some specific movements. Rather than seeing struggle from a broad perspective which included the peasant movements, the tribal movements among others. There is a need to revisit these movements and problematize the very dominance of some specific movement in Indian history which results in making the contribution of other movement to be neglected.

The Subaltern:

The subaltern terminology was firstly used by Antonio Gramsci in his work ‘The Prison notebooks’. He adopted the literal meaning of the term subaltern as someone who is of the ‘inferior rank’. As the inferior rank forms the bulk of any command authority, but the credit is given to the commander of these units. This has been the genesis of the term Subaltern. The one who doesn’t get their due credit or the recognition. Ranajit Guha started this tradition of using the meaning of subaltern in these context. By applying this technique in the Indian historiography to know the real history that has been missing, through his major work ‘prose of Counter Insurgency’ (Guha, 1994). It tries to show the masses behind the real history whose contributions has been marginalized in the Indian historiography. In the Work of “Can the Subaltern Speak?” Gayatri Spivak talks about the subjects whose voices hasn’t been raised. She raises the point that subaltern are the ones whose voices hasn’t been heard, if any moment when we hear the voice of such groups, they cease to be subaltern (Spivak, 2015). According to this thought process the Subaltern is the one who isn’t able to speak for themselves. This framework would be adopted to analyze the tribal movements by locating the position of women in these movements.

The Tribal identity:

The above stated thing certainly happened with the local movements which happened in different parts of the country. These movements are bundled up in broad categorizations. The peasant movements and the tribal movements. The peasants and the tribal were the people who were in the lower ranks of the society. Having their own sustainable life and proper system of livelihood, which was completely destroyed by the British authorities through their taxation and forced administration system. The identity of tribal and the peasant are assimilated into each other. As the tribal people also practiced cultivation, they were also the part of British taxation. Thus, the tribal-peasant identity is sometime intermingled in the literatures on the Indian history. No clear cut distinction has been formulated. For the convenience of identity, this essay stresses upon the tribal identity whose contributions has been sidelined in the making of the Indian history. They act as Subaltern within the Indian history. They were the first ones who were impacted the most. As the Britishers took control over their land in the regions of Bengal after the battle of Plassey that happened in 1757 (Singh, 1998). Extending their control over Bihar, Orissa subsequently by the battle of Buxar, 1764. The British authority got the right to collect Diwani *i.e* tax collection right in these regions. The major struggle started with it and till the next hundred years *i.e* till 1857; the battle against the Britishers were from this section of the society. This is not to downgrade the movement those were simultaneously taking place, based on socio-religious background. This phase in Indian history

which is from 1757 to 1857 did not get its true representation in the Indian political history. As they set the base for the upcoming movements. They started to fight the Britishers through their own techniques and forms which haven't received a deep glance.

Therefore, this phase could be stated as the Subaltern phase in the Indian political history. These tribal movements started from the eastern part of India which presently covers the regions of Jharkhand, Bengal and others. From there it started and created a wave of movement across the regions by instigating and motivating other movements in the north-eastern part of India as well.

As stated above, these movements have been sidelined from the historical study of Indian political struggle. The Indian historiography offers a cursory look. There is a male dominance in these movements that resonates in the complete history of these tribal movements. It falls short of offering the insights into the lives of the masses who were the part of these movements.

Were these movements the gift of tribal men?:

This question needs to be stressed as Gayatri Spivak talks about the male bias in the subalternist approach (Spivak, 2014). These movements must be scrutinized through a holistic prism of understanding, which also finds a place of women in these movements. As tribal women, in contemporary India are said to be the equal partner in terms of contribution to the family in comparison to the tribal men. Many a times, even surpassing the males' contribution in the tribal family. This very fact raises doubt as to how these movements are signified as male given gift.

This essay tries to uncover some of the tribal movements in a holistic manner. To show one-sided understanding of these movements. Simultaneously highlighting the content of the literature that is written on these movements.

Tribal movement through the subaltern angle:

This section would try to cover some of the tribal movements through the secondary literature written on the tribal movements of the period from 1757-1857. It would try to visit the written material through the subaltern.

Chuar rebellion (1765-1803):

Chuar rebellion is considered as the earliest instance of adivasi led peasant resistance which took place during the years spanning from 1765-1803 in the region of South-west Bengal. The term 'Chuar' denoted someone who was 'ferocious, wild and ill-mannered' in Bengali. As J.C. Price, the settlement officer of Midnapore stated that the chuar rebellion was "the result of the evil passions of the angered paiks and sardars" (Guha, 2011). It was basically the combined revolt of Chuars. Paiks and the Adivasi peasants who were dismissed in large numbers during the company's raj. Here the identity of tribe and peasant was amalgamated as one. Suprakash Roy, identified it as a peasant led adivasi resistance against the colonial raj. The Raja of Dhalbhum was considered one of the main protagonist of this movement who restored the state of Jagannath through these rebellions. The other prominent leaders associated with it are Subla Singh and Kuilapal Jaghirdar and many others. One finds the name of Rani Shironmani who also played an important part in this movement. However, the literature deals with their contribution as just one liner description historical representation of these women. Mostly, signifying the position of women as under domination which required the help of other prominent leaders to help bail them out of danger. Another name was of Rani Sumitra Day, who was the widow of late Raja Damoodah Bunge, led an attack at Dehmorah in the southern Bengal region (Chaudhari, 1955). These rebellions adopted the guerilla

warfare techniques to avoid any direct clashes with the troops. These warfare weren't isolated from the women contribution, which didn't find any mention in the literature written on these rebellions.

Bhil uprising (1818-1831)

The Bhil tribe did not belong to any specific state if we see it through the current status of Indian state in the contemporary setting. They transversed across the regions of the present day Maharashtra, Rajasthan, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh and other. These tribal were considered as one of the most dominant tribal in central India. The Bhils enjoyed a relatively autonomous state in their regions, enjoying the tributes from the plains and establishing their authority spate from the British state. Ranajit Guha stated that the Bhil tribes and its chiefdoms were deeply integrated in the political economy of the medieval India (Nilsen, 2015). Their authority transversed from Khandesh lying in northwestern Maharashtra, Anglo-Sisodian regime in Mewar lying in the southern Rajasthan to the Dangs which was situated in Southeastern Gujarat and ultimately to Nimad which lies in Madhya Pradesh (Nilsen, 2015). The nature of administration varied from region to region. They raided the caste hindu villages in the plains if they did not received their tributes in the region of khandesh to having enjoyed power and sovereignty to some extent in the Rajasthan region accepted by the Rajput kingdoms (Nilsen, 2015). They started their mobilization against the Britishers when their relatively autonomous status came into danger combined with other oppression meted out on them by the agents of the Company's raj. The literature on the history of Bhil revolts and movements could be seen the lenses of the British Raj. The British records consists of Kaniya naik, who channelized the tribal movement in the eastern part of Satpura range and others. The names those are to be found in the literature are male dominated. Signifying the ignorance of the historical literature to provide significance to the contribution of women in these movements. The rebellion was written as ballad of the male warriors.

The Santhal rebellion (1855):

Santhal were the peace loving people for whom the agriculture was one of the main occupation and the great significance is given to forest land and the sacred grove, for them it symbolized their guardian spirit or their protector (Sengupta and Lochan, 2015). The Santhal tribe is one of the earlier tribes in India and they are by nature very simple and very innocent. They practiced agriculture as their main occupation and other important areas where they focused was the dance, music and the paintings. They lived near the regions of the Rajmahal hills which are located in the present day Jharkhand region in India. They used to enjoy autonomy in their regions of functioning. However, their functioning was affected by the coming of the East India Company (EIC). The revered leaders of this group was Sidhu and Kanhu who were treated as Gods, they ordered to remove the outsiders from their lands who were said to be 'dikus' in their local parlance (Dasgupta, 2013). The East India Company gave the power to mahajan and the zamindars in these territories taking away the autonomous governing of the santhal tribe. The Christian missionaries imposed their own culture in their territory. It has stressed by the British official through his official letters. To control the Santhal, the East India Company tried various methods which led to trigger the anger of the santhal tribe. Stripped of their ownership rights through the implemented policies of the British. It led to a series of violent rebellion against the authority. The Major cause of the Santhal rebellion was the oppression of the mahajans, The Darogas and the corruption of the Amlas" (Sengupta and Lochan, 2015). They were harassed on the day to day basis. The Santhal started

using violent techniques against these outsiders who they stated as 'Dikus'. Bir singh Manjhi, Bir singh and Doman Manjhi were considered one of the major contributor to this rebellion. They robbed the houses of the mahajans and others whom they considered as corrupt. They started raiding the market with bow and poisoned arrows, axes and swords. In order to protect their lives the non-Santhali fled the region. The British responded violently to suppress these uprising through the use of guns and cannons. The British was finally able to crush the uprising through violent techniques. The Santhal rebellion in the local tradition has been signified through the heroic ballad of some of the prominent names associated with the movement. This written literature documents the same, without highlighting the role of the women members of the community. As Ranajit Guha states in his 'Prose of Counter Insurgency' that primary discourse that is the ground reality is modified by the secondary discourse by changing the nature of something by the set narratives (Guha, 1994). This model could rightly be implied on the study of the above movement where the ground reality is broader than the one written in the literature.

Conclusion:

The subaltern studies has been one of the important sources of Postcolonial school of thought. The term subaltern has been defined variously in different literature written over the years on the subject of subaltern. It still remains the area of contestation within the subaltern scholars over the years. The relevance of this subaltern study has been utilized to put the limelight on some of the tribal movements in India that took place between the years of 1757-1857. This phase in the Indian history is in itself acts as a Subaltern phase, as the literature found on these years is very few in number. Representing Subalternity in the Indian historiography. As the tribal movements have been scrutinized through the glancing approach which highlights that these tribal movements has been diffused in the terms of identity where they were also considered the peasants in some regions. These movements in the local tradition and the literature written on them shows or personify these movements as male given gifts. They act as the ballads of hero worship. This neglects the contribution that has been given by the women in these movements. After scrutinizing these movements one can find the one liner mentions about the woman who also stood to defy the company's rule. Through this paper, I have tried to highlight the position of women in these movements by scrutinizing the above movements. This shows that the women as actor became 'the subaltern within the subaltern'. This highlighted fact needs further revisiting through the archival literature on these movements to cover the complete historiography. Otherwise, we would again be interpreting our historiography through loop sided understanding.

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