

The Limits of Subaltern Studies: Exclusion of Ambedkar and Caste

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ABSTRACT

The subaltern studies have been a significant contribution to the understanding of colonialism, resistance, and subalternity in South Asian history and society. However, the subaltern school's failure to include caste and Ambedkar's contributions has led to a limitation in its ability to understand the complexities of Indian society. This paper critically examines the subaltern school's approach to understand India social reality and highlights the need for a more inclusive approach to subaltern studies. By utilizing a variety of sources, including literature, political theory, and historical accounts, this paper argues that a nuanced understanding of caste and subalternity is crucial to fully appreciate the diversity and complexity of South Asian history and society. The paper discusses the origins and development of subaltern studies, highlighting the scholars who have made significant contributions, such as Ranajit Guha, Gayatri Spivak, and Dipesh Chakrabarty. However, it also critically examines their approach to understand subaltern and their power and resistance, which has been criticized for not adequately addressing the role of caste in Indian society. This paper also critically highlights that subaltern scholars neither follow Marxist method nor include Ambedkar it was more Foucauldian. Therefore, paper focus point on caste, as a form of social stratification, has been central to the experience of subalternity and resistance in India and cannot be ignored. Moreover, the paper explores the significant contribution of Ambedkar, a Dalit leader, and his critique of caste, which has been central to the Dalit movement's struggle for social justice and equality in India. Ambedkar's approach is particularly relevant in the context of subaltern studies, as it highlights the agency of the subaltern and their potential for resistance against oppression.

Keywords : Subaltern, Caste, The Dalitbahujan and Poetry and Subalternity

INTRODUCTION

This paper provides a comprehensive approach to understanding subalternity. It is divided into three sections. The first section offers a cursory review of key works in subaltern studies, critically examining their methodologies and highlighting their limitations. This examination reveals how the subaltern school's focus has often neglected the complexities of caste dynamics and the contributions of significant figures like B.R. Ambedkar.

Following this review, the second section delves into important works that specifically address caste, thereby presenting a more inclusive perspective on subalternity. This section analyzes how caste operates as a critical

form of social stratification, shaping the experiences and identities of marginalized communities in India. In addition to academic literature, the paper includes an exploration of anti-caste poetry, which serves as a powerful medium for expressing the lived realities of lower-caste individuals, particularly in rural settings. These poetic works highlight the socio-economic challenges and cultural nuances faced by these communities, providing a voice to their struggles and aspirations.

The final section emphasizes Ambedkar's dual role as a leader and a theorist in the anti-caste movement. It discusses how his activism not only fought against caste discrimination but also sought to empower the Dalit community through political representation and social

justice. Ambedkar's theoretical contributions are explored in detail, showcasing how his insights into caste and subalternity offer essential frameworks for understanding the systemic inequalities embedded in Indian society. Ultimately, this paper integrates findings from subaltern studies with a critical analysis of caste dynamics, fostering a more inclusive understanding of subalternity that acknowledges the historical and contemporary struggles of marginalized communities. Through this comprehensive approach, the paper contributes to ongoing conversations around caste, identity, and resistance in South Asia.

Subaltern Studies: A Critical Exploration

In the early 1980s, a group of historians launched the Subaltern Studies project, drawing on Gramsci's concept of the subaltern to examine historical struggles within the South Asian context. Inspired by the "history from below" approach of cultural studies scholars like E. P. Thompson, Raymond Williams, and Eric Hobsbawm—who gained prominence in the 1960s—the Subaltern Studies collective sought to highlight the histories of the working class, particularly peasants, in post-colonial and post-imperial South Asia, with a special focus on India. Subordination is central to the study of subalternity, though the concept has evolved and been applied in various ways. Early Indian subalternists aimed to bring attention to the lives and historical significance of marginalized classes, countering the limitations of social and economic history and critiquing the nationalist appropriation of peasant movements (Prakash, 1994: 1479). Later, in works like *The Prose of Counter-Insurgency in Subaltern Studies II*, Ranajit Guha made direct claims about the subaltern subject, illustrating how elite ideologies rooted in colonialist, nationalist, and Marxist narratives have suppressed the agency of subaltern actors in history (Guha, 1983). His aim was to highlight subaltern agency and resistance against elite dominance, offering a critique of elitist historiography that ignored marginalized voices. His goal was to revitalize Indian historiography by applying Gramsci's ideas to the Indian context. Guha focused on revealing colonial historiography's "blind spot"—the erasure of subaltern consciousness and the dismissal of rural insurgency as a deliberate, conscious act (Guha, 1983: 2).

Gyan Prakash presents a compelling portrayal of peasant rebellion, capturing their consciousness, rumors, mythic visions, religiosity, and community ties. By critically analyzing colonial archives and historical narratives,

Prakash offers a unique and insightful perspective on these dynamics (Prakash, 1994).

Despite his significant contributions to subaltern historiography and Marxist theory, he made key methodological errors. In redefining "the political" by contrasting feudal and capitalist modes of production, he overlooked the "pre-political" nature of peasant insurgency and undermined the anti-caste history of subaltern movements. Adopting a Foucauldian view of power and modernity, he failed to fully address how power, hierarchy, and oppression operated within subaltern classes, particularly in relation to caste struggles.

Gayatri Spivak's influential 1988 essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?* critiques the Subaltern Studies group for neglecting gender issues, particularly the subalternity of women (Spivak, 1988). Drawing on post-structuralist thinkers like Foucault, Spivak challenges the idea of the subaltern as a sovereign subject and argues that subjectivity is shaped by shifting power discourses. She asserts that colonial structures render the subaltern, especially women, voiceless and without history. Like Ranajit Guha, Spivak critiques the Marxist concept of subjectivity, which views individuals as divided by power (Spivak, 1988).

Prominent Subalternist Partha Chatterjee has made significant contributions to subaltern studies, particularly in his work *More on Modes of Power and the Peasantry*, where he explores a methodological approach that links Marxist social theory with Foucault's concept of power (Chatterjee, 1982). Chatterjee examined class relations and conflicts in detail through the lens of power, with "community" serving as the central subject for political mobilization. He argued that applying Foucault's notion of capitalist modes of power to the Indian context not only elucidated elite dominance but also highlighted the role of subaltern classes in both shaping and dismantling these power structures. This analysis provides valuable insights into the complexities of colonial India's political transition (Chatterjee, 1982).

Dipesh Chakrabarty, in his effort to "rethink working-class history," argues that Marxian political economy alone is insufficient to understand India's working class, particularly its cultural consciousness. Using Bengal's jute-mill workers as an example, he highlights how Marx's concept of "capital" overlooks the role of culture in labor history. While Chakrabarty and Chatterjee offer important insights into colonial power and the West/non-West divide, they fall short in addressing the critical role caste plays

in the subaltern's marginalization (Chakrabarty, 2000).

Only Ranajit Guha and Partha Chatterjee have recognized the significant role of caste consciousness and hierarchical practices in shaping subaltern radicalism and political struggles, though they tend to describe these phenomena as modern rather than traditional. Chatterjee argues that caste and subaltern consciousness are primarily concerned with issues of bodily and ritual purity, challenging the dominant social groups' use of dharma to assert authority (Chatterjee, 1989:56). While caste discrimination remains a crucial aspect of daily life in modern India, it has often been marginalized due to how the category of the subaltern subject has been defined. The indiscriminate use of "subaltern" to refer solely to peasants overlooks the experiences of Dalit peasants and laborers in agrarian society, who face exploitation and subjugation by both landlords and other subaltern peasants. Within the subaltern studies project, the subaltern has been treated as an unmarked subject, with caste inequity not recognized as a central element in its cultural and political formation.

Caste Frameworks: A Comprehensive Perspective on Subaltern studies

The previous discussion highlights a significant oversight in the work of subaltern scholars: their insufficient engagement with caste-based discrimination, which has resulted in the exclusion of a critical aspect of everyday life. This omission is closely tied to the initial framing of the subaltern subject category. The indiscriminate use of "subaltern" to refer to peasants has led to the neglect of the experiences of Dalit peasants and laborers within agrarian society, who endure extensive exploitation and subjugation at the hands of both landlords and other subaltern peasants. Within the subaltern studies project, the subaltern subject has often been portrayed as an unmarked entity, with the pervasive existence of caste disparities receiving far less attention than it deserves in cultural and political discussions.

As a result, the subaltern was rarely depicted as a Dalit peasant engaged in conflicts with other caste groups over land and segregation or as a laborer in urban areas facing exclusionary practices primarily enacted by individuals from "lower-caste" backgrounds. The issue of caste or *jati* (regionally defined social groups) in shaping subaltern consciousness has not received the critical attention it requires in any of the volumes of the subaltern studies project.

Gail Omvedt's work, *particularly Dalits and the Democratic Revolution: Dr. Ambedkar and the Dalit Movement in Colonial India*, aims to develop a theory of caste that transcends its portrayal as a mere cultural or super structural issue, highlighting its material significance within Indian social formation. While Marxist scholarship has traditionally focused on India's agrarian economy, history, and politics, it often demonstrates a notable blind spot regarding the complexities of caste, treating it as just one variable in a broader class framework. Omvedt contends that a comprehensive understanding of Indian society, particularly rural life, requires grounding in the caste system. In agrarian debates, subalternists and Marxists have tended to prioritize class, relegating caste to a secondary role. However, given the agrarian character of colonial India, caste should be central to understanding the dynamics of domination and subordination in society (Omvedt, 1994).

Although Marxist theorists have conceptualized subalternity primarily through the lenses of class and power relations, they often overlook the significant structural and experiential dimensions of caste. Omvedt's analysis of figures like Phule and Ambedkar underscores their roles as organic intellectuals who educated, influenced, and organized the Dalit and Bahujan masses during colonial India, positioning them as crucial elements of anti-colonial politics. Their contributions offer critical insights into the elite-subaltern, insider-outsider, and internal-external dialectics. Given the Subaltern Studies project's aim to construct narratives of Indian nationalism "from below," it is imperative to address the foundational issues of caste to fully understand the obstacles to nation-building in India (Omvedt, 1994).

In his work *Productive Labour, Consciousness and History: The Dalitbahujan Alternative*, Kancha Ilaiah critiques the failure of subaltern historiography to incorporate the *Dalitbahujan* perspective into Indian historical narratives. While acknowledging the significant contributions of the Subaltern Studies project to India's historiography, Ilaiah argues that it has overlooked the *Dalitbahujan* viewpoint. He asserts that the Subaltern Studies scholars have not politically or culturally engaged with the concerns of Dalits, who have been marginalized and excluded from mainstream Indian society for centuries (Ilaiah, 1996). Although the Subaltern Studies project has focused on caste, it has failed to address the issue within the context of the *Dalitbahujan* experience. Ilaiah further criticizes the project for underestimating

the power dynamics in Indian society rooted in caste. He contends that caste is not merely a social or cultural phenomenon but a fundamental aspect of the economic and political structures in India (Ilaiah, 1996). This oversight has prevented the Subaltern Studies project from fully engaging with power relations in society.

Ilaiah offers an alternative perspective that emphasizes the importance of recognizing the *Dalitbahujan* experience and the role of caste in shaping power dynamics. He highlights the significance of productive labor in the struggle for social and economic justice, arguing that raising consciousness among Dalits is crucial for creating a more just and equitable society (Ilaiah, 1996).

Chinnaiah Jangam's influential work, *Politics of Identity and the Project of Writing History in Postcolonial India: A Dalit Critique*, critically examines the significant impact of Dalit identity politics on the historiography of postcolonial India. He argues that Subaltern Studies has inadequately addressed the effects of caste-based oppression in its historical analyses. Jangam explores the evolution of Dalit identity through two key dimensions: the internal and external struggles within the Dalit community against the Hindu Brahmanical tradition and their unique historical experiences of colonial modernity. For centuries, Dalits remained largely invisible to caste Hindus, but the advent of modernity offered them a platform to voice their grievances (Jangam, 2015).

Jangam underscores the historical significance of precolonial anti-caste traditions among Dalits, which form the foundation for their rightful place in contemporary society. His work highlights the complexity of Dalit identity, history, and social dynamics in postcolonial India. In his historical analysis of Dalit movements, including those led by B. R. Ambedkar, Jangam reveals their non-violent strategies and approaches (Jangam 2015).

Jangam critiques Dipesh Chakrabarty's views on identity politics in Indian history, arguing that they reinforce existing prejudices. He points out that some subaltern scholars perceive the demands of marginalized communities as a threat to Indian unity, reflecting a limited historical perspective. Jangam emphasizes the reluctance among scholars to acknowledge non-Brahmin historical narratives, asserting that Chakrabarty's stance on Dalit representation in history is counterproductive and fails to recognize the legitimacy of the Dalit perspective in shaping historical narratives (Jangam 2015).

In the field of subaltern studies, the contributions of Dalit poets and their poetry provide a deep insight into caste and subaltern experiences, while also critiquing the dominant culture. This perspective challenges the contributions of upper-caste academics in subaltern historiography, who often lack the lived experiences of marginalized communities. By exploring Dalit intellectual perspectives and experiences—particularly through the works of poets like Omprakash Valmiki, known for *Joothan*, and Tulsi Ram *Murdahiya*—we gain a richer understanding of the complexities surrounding caste and subaltern identities. Their literary representations vividly capture the everyday lives of lower-caste individuals, illuminating the intricacies of their struggles within a dominant cultural framework (Kumar, 2009).

Joothan is a powerful expression of the oppression inflicted by Brahminical and feudal mindsets in western Uttar Pradesh, India. The term “Joothan” refers to food left on a plate that is considered ritually impure and is designated as such only when consumed by someone from a lower caste. Omprakash Valmiki, a member of the untouchable *Chuhra* (sweeper) community, shares his experiences of living in a village marked by caste-based feudalism. The Dalit community faces a harsh existence characterized by poverty, landlessness, and limited access to water. Valmiki recounts the stigma of untouchability he faced in school, detailing the discrimination and derogatory name-calling he endured from both upper-caste peers and teachers. Through his personal memoir, Valmiki seeks to contribute to the broader Dalit literary movement, which is defined by its unique ideology, well-articulated agenda, and distinct aesthetic—an essential part of the ongoing struggle for equality and justice (Valmiki, 2008).

Similarly, Tulsi Ram *Murdahiya*'s writings provide insight into caste-based discrimination in society, reflecting on his experiences in a Dalit *basti* (hut). He portrays how village life is influenced by social, economic, and superstitious factors, often exacerbated by illiteracy. *Murdahiya* illustrates how pervasive superstitions, likened to an infectious disease, affect the community's perception of even minor ailments like chickenpox, which are seen as severe due to deeply ingrained beliefs linked to deities like Mata. This culture of superstition traps the Dalit community, hindering their access to literacy and progress (Ram, 2016).

The experiences and narratives of Dalit poets illuminate the realities of a caste-feudal society and

underscore the importance of personal perspectives in subaltern studies. In response to these challenges, Dalit scholars have effectively utilized strategies of cultural resistance. Dalit literature envisions a future where, under the right circumstances, subaltern individuals can achieve socio-political empowerment. This body of work serves as a compelling alternative to passivity, empowering individuals to break free from the constraints of the dominant caste-oriented ideology. Ultimately, this literature challenges prevailing discourses through a strategic process of “self-fashioning” and employs a nuanced yet confrontational mode of self-representation (Janagm, 2015).

Ambedkar’s Insights: A Key to Understanding Subaltern Realities

Integrating Ambedkar’s perspective into subaltern studies can effectively address the shortcomings of the Marxist approach to understanding subalternity. Ambedkar offers a distinctive epistemological framework for analyzing Indian society, one that has been largely overlooked by subaltern Marxist scholars. His approach to subalternity and resistance is informed by his personal experiences, highlighting not only the centrality of caste in India but also the agency and diversity present within caste groups. His thought emphasizes the significance of historical and cultural specificity and recognizes the intersectionality of various forms of oppression, particularly caste-based discrimination. Ambedkar’s work reflects a profound engagement with Indian society, history, and political economy, as well as a critical examination of Western political theory and philosophy. Without grappling with the complexities of caste, subaltern Marxist scholars are constrained in their ability to analyze and interpret the struggles faced by subaltern groups in India. Often, they regard subalternity as a homogeneous category, neglecting the internal hierarchies and power dynamics within these groups. Moreover, their emphasis on peasant and working-class resistance frequently excludes the experiences and struggles of Dalits, who have historically been marginalized from such movements.

Ambedkar’s early work, *Castes in India*, critically challenges traditional sociological and anthropological theories on caste put forth by scholars like Senart, Nesfield, Risley, and Ketkar (Ambedkar, 1979, Vol. 1: 7). He argued that caste is not simply a matter of behavior and that the mechanical explanations for its origins are

inadequate in addressing the current degraded state of Hindu society, where women and lower castes are treated with contempt. Ambedkar’s analysis of the mechanism and genesis of caste transcends the simplistic notion of the four varnas being hierarchically arranged for societal efficiency. His groundbreaking conclusion was that patriarchy and caste are deeply intertwined, forming the very foundation upon which the caste system is built (Ambedkar, 1979, Vol. 1: 14).

Ambedkar argued that the real cause of the caste system’s origin lies in the practice of endogamy initiated by Brahmins. He explained that caste is not simply a division of occupations but a division of laborers. Castes persist in Indian society due to intermarriages within the same groups, while exogamy, the ancient practice of marrying outside one’s bloodline or class, still exists. Ambedkar highlighted the contradiction between these systems, suggesting that for caste to survive, both endogamy and exogamy must coexist. He concluded that Brahmins later introduced endogamy, which was foreign to India (Ambedkar, 1979, Vol. 1: 8-9).

Ambedkar’s critique of Spivak’s analysis of Sati can be understood through his focus on endogamy as a key factor in perpetuating both caste and gender oppression. While Spivak views Sati as an example of patriarchal violence, Ambedkar highlights how endogamous practices not only restrict inter-caste relationships but also reinforce the subjugation of women. He argues that traditions like child marriage, Sati, and enforced widowhood are designed to preserve caste purity, prioritizing it over women’s autonomy. This underscores the need for feminist discourse to more deeply integrate caste dynamics to fully address the inequalities faced by Dalit women (Ambedkar, 1979, Vol. 1: 13-14).

In his seminal work, *Annihilation of Caste*, Ambedkar delivers a powerful critique of the caste system, arguing that it is not merely a religious institution but also a political and social one. He posits that caste constitutes a system of graded inequality, where those at the top enjoy privileges and power, while those at the bottom face oppression and discrimination. Ambedkar contends that the caste system transcends Hinduism, permeating Indian society as a whole. He asserts that this system is a source of division and conflict that hinders social and political progress, calling for its complete eradication in favor of a society founded on equality and justice. Ambedkar’s vision of social justice and emancipation provides an alternative framework for

understanding subalternity in India that diverges from the Marxist perspective prevalent in subaltern studies. By incorporating Ambedkar's insights, scholars can cultivate a more nuanced understanding of subaltern agency and resistance in Indian society, accounting for the complexities of caste and the unique experiences of Dalits (Ambedkar, 1979, Vol. 1: 23).

Ambedkar's efforts to politically empower the oppressed expose the limitations of Subaltern scholars, who often neglect the anti-caste movement. Ambedkar aimed to provide political representation for marginalized groups made invisible by dominant culture. Beyond education and agitation, he organized the oppressed through key events like the Round Table Conferences and the Government of India Act, 1935, eventually enshrining protections in the Indian Constitution. He believed in self-representation for the oppressed, challenging caste hierarchies as immoral. Ambedkar saw reservations not just as resistance, but as a means to help the marginalized build social, economic, and political capital, challenging dominant norms and sensitizing democratic structures (Ambedkar, 1979, Vol. 17, Part 1: 70-140).

Conclusion:

Ambedkar's epistemology and vision offer a valuable perspective for subaltern studies in India, providing a framework for understanding the experiences and struggles of Dalits and other marginalized groups. By incorporating Ambedkar's ideas and activism into their work, scholars in subaltern studies can achieve a more comprehensive understanding of subaltern agency and resistance, and work towards a more just and equitable society.

Ambedkar's critical analysis of the caste system exposes the intricate social structures that reinforce hierarchical divisions within Hindu society. His examination of caste relations highlights the inherent challenges posed by these institutionalized hierarchies, offering a lens through which the specific struggles of marginalized groups can be better understood. Through this prism, Ambedkar illuminates the deep-rooted inequalities that continue to shape the experiences of those oppressed by the caste system.

In conclusion, as discussed above, the methodological limitations of subaltern studies lie in the failure of scholars to fully engage with the Dalit-Bahujan experience and the critical role of caste-based power

dynamics in Indian society. While they eventually recognized caste as more than just a cultural or social element, acknowledging its deep roots in India's economic and political structures, they continued to overlook the longstanding traditions of anti-Brahmanism and anti-casteism. In response, Dalit historiographers have emerged in recent academic discourse, offering a more critical and nuanced understanding of the Dalit experience. These scholars extend their analysis beyond the colonial era, incorporating pre-colonial anti-caste traditions as central to Dalit politics and identity. By doing so, they challenge dominant narratives, shedding light on the complex and diverse origins of Dalit politics, while working to recover suppressed histories and forge an emancipatory identity.

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