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HISTORY

'Subaltern Studies' at Crossroads

David Hardiman

THE second Subaltern Studies conference was held in Calcutta in January 1986, three years after the first such conference in Canberra (for a report see *EPW* February 26, 1983). At the earlier conference the editorial group of the series of books known as "Subaltern Studies" set out and argued a position which is now well known. Themes such as the relative autonomy of subaltern consciousness and action, the need to make the subaltern classes the subject of their own history, the failure of the Indian bourgeoisie to speak for the nation, and the existence of two domains of politics have provided a fresh critical thrust to much recent writing on modern Indian history and society. In this conference, organised by members of the group based in Calcutta, the focus was less clear than it had been in Canberra, in large part because the group had not met together as a whole for the past three years. Individual members have developed their own directions of study and lines of thought, so that it became hard for participants in the conference to discern any very strong unity to the group.

The papers presented were as follows: Gyanendra Pandey, 'The Bare Facts of Colonial Discourse: The Case of a Hindu-Muslim Conflict in Banaras, 1809'; Shahid Amin, 'Approver's Testimony, Judicial Discourse: The Case of Chauri Chaura'; David Arnold, 'Touching the Body: The Political Epidemiology of the Indian Plague, 1896-1900'; Anuradha Kapur, 'Recalling the Ramlila at Ramnagar'; David Hardiman, 'Bhils and Shahukars in Eastern Gujarat'; Shapan Adnan, 'The Enmeshing of Production and Power Relations: Some Evidence from Bangladesh and Its Theoretical Implications'; Julie Stephens, 'Feminist Fictions: A Critique of Feminist Studies of Third World Women, with Special Reference to India'; Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Consuming the Body Politic'; Radha Kumar, 'Workers, Housing and Rent: Bombay 1911-47'; Ranajit Guha, 'Idioms of Domination and Subordination in Colonial India'; and Ashok Sen, 'Subaltern Studies: Capital, Class and Community'.

DOMINATION AND SUBORDINATION

One of the central themes of the conference was that of relationships of domination and subordination in India. Three papers, by Ranajit Guha, David Arnold and David Hardiman, took up this issue in a direct way, while the paper by Anuradha Kapur did so in a rather indirect and unstated manner.

Ranjit Guha sought to analyse the idioms of domination and subordination in colonial India. He argued that elite domina-

tion was carried out essentially through two means, by coercion and through persuasion. Subordination, on the other hand, could be understood as an interplay of the two idioms of collaboration and resistance. Each of these idioms had a dual aspect, being rooted in part in Indian feudal mentalities, but also finding expression in a new language of domination imposed on India by the British. To take an example, in the case of 'persuasion' Indian feudal values stressed the concept of *dharma* in order to exercise a moral hegemony, while the British stressed the concept of 'improvement' in order to justify obedience to state authority. The values of the feudal and colonial elites served to reinforce each other.

In the discussion of this paper there was considerable criticism of Guha's use of essentially elitist texts to try to understand such political idioms. Thus, Dipesh Chakrabarty felt that the paper relied too much on Brahmanical sources for its depiction of feudal values. Barun De said that Islamic sources would have revealed different idioms. Partha Chatterjee and Gautam Bhadra felt that Guha failed to give adequate weight to the relative autonomy of subaltern consciousness, which is one of the chief themes of the project. Sumit Sarkar criticised Guha's use of *bhakti* ideology, arguing that he treated the *bhakti* tradition in a stark and unsubtle manner, seeing only unquestioning devotion to a superior while ignoring the many ambiguities with which *bhakti* is shot through. Guha replied to these points by arguing that there is always a problem about the empirical base to any argument, but he felt that other sources, such as non-Brahmanical and Islamic ones, would bear out his propositions. In reply to Sarkar he said that he was not studying *bhakti* as such, but only its role in compelling obedience to authority. David Hardiman felt that Guha's labelling of the pre-colonial period as 'feudal' begged many questions, as it assumed a certain unchanging quality to medieval Indian society and culture. A contrast of an orientalist variety was thus set up between an 'unchanging past' and the 'dynamic society' brought into being by colonial rule. Such an approach cannot help us to understand the structural role of different ideologies, which have developed in response to particular historical circumstances.

Anuradha Kapur's paper was altogether less ambitious, being a description of the month-long Ramlila performance at Ramnagar. Both the performance and the audience reaction provided an excellent field for the study of subaltern consciousness. The paper did not however address itself to the question of relationships of power, and

in the discussion it was generally felt that an opportunity had been missed. Arvind Das felt that the paper could have focused more sharply on this issue if it had seen the Ramlila as an act of worship rather than as a form of theatre. Partha Chatterjee noted the role of the Maharaja of Banaras in the Ramlila and felt that the history of the Maharaja's sponsorship would bring out more clearly its political dimensions. Ranajit Guha stressed the need to analyse the ideology of the play very clearly to bring out how it buttressed feudal values. Gayatri Spivak argued that art forms are not merely ideological, but also provide a sense of self-identity for a society. The crucial question is to ask why a form of worship becomes categorised as 'art' at a particular historical juncture.

David Arnold was not, unfortunately, able to attend the conference, and his paper was presented by Gautam Bhadra. It was a study of the impact of British plague measures on the Indian people during the terrible epidemic of the late 1890s. The British assumed a right to control people's bodies, forcing medical treatment on them, which included compulsory hospitalisation, in a manner which was considered unjustified and even outrageous. In some cases plague operations led to riots. In the discussion Sumit Sarkar appreciated the importance of the theme, but felt that the paper failed to distinguish adequately between the consciousness of the Indian elites and the subaltern classes. There was too much concentration on the attitudes of the Indian middle classes. Was there a reaction which was specific to the subaltern classes? Gautam Bhadra endorsed this, saying that he knew of much material from rural Bengal which could be used to answer this question. Gayatri Spivak defended Arnold, arguing that the colonial state often viewed the Indian people as an undifferentiated native 'other'. The paper showed this well, revealing how the body became a space of politics.

David Hardiman read a paper on the relationship between the Bhil peasants of eastern Gujarat and their shahukars. The question was posed as to why the Bhils allowed the shahukars to expropriate the lion's share of their crop each year, even though they were well aware that the relationship was not economically reciprocal. The paper looked in detail at the annual agricultural cycle and argued that the Bhils did not attempt to act in an economically 'efficient' manner because this would have led to accumulation of capital, an activity which contradicted their egalitarian values. They therefore forged a relationship with a shahukar not of their community who financed the operation of the annual agricultural cycle in return for a large share of the crop. Both parties were expected to operate according to a particular moral code. When this code was broken the Bhils felt justified in rising against their shahukars. One such rising,

during the famine of 1899, was described.

Of all of the papers in the conference, this one dealt most clearly with subaltern consciousness, and it generated a sharp discussion. Amiya Bagchi led the attack on the 'moral economy' assumptions of the argument, holding that the Bhils had risen in 1899 not because they felt that a moral code had been broken, but because they were starving. Hardiman replied that the revolt came right at the start of the famine before there was any actual starvation, and the source material gives a clear impression that the Bhils had risen because the shahukars were hoarding grain and attempting to profiteer in a manner which caused extreme resentment. Ranajit Guha argued that if peasant revolts could be explained in terms of economic deprivation alone one might wonder why there were not peasant revolts in India the whole time. From the discussion it appeared that the real problem was not whether or not the peasants have moral expectations, for clearly they do. The real problem is to define this morality. Existing studies, such as the one by James C Scott on 'the moral economy of the peasant', are very inadequate, merely asserting that there is such a morality without showing how it operates in detail. Unfortunately, the discussion failed to deal with the problem of the Bhil's mental relationship to capital. At most, Amiya Bagchi and Gayatri Spivak felt that more needed to be said on the religious beliefs and practices of the Bhils in this respect.

In general the discussions on the above papers did not shed much fresh light on relationships of domination and subordination and subaltern consciousness. Pranab Basu made several interventions in which he said that the subaltern studies group had raised important questions about subaltern consciousness but seem increasingly to lack interest in answering them. Going by the debate in the conference, the criticism was not unjustified.

EXAMINATION OF TEXTS

The second main theme covered in the conference involved the critical examination of texts. Papers on this theme were read by Gyanendra Pandey, Shahid Amin, Julie Stephens and Gayatri Spivak. The former two analysed colonial texts, often used as source material in the writing of Indian history, while the latter two looked at more recent writings.

Gyanendra Pandey analysed the official gazetteer of Banaras District—published in 1907—showing how it produced a history which ignored mass protests against British rule while emphasising communal conflicts. The history of the people was portrayed falsely as a history of religious convulsions. Communalism was given a timeless quality, being depicted as a latent force always liable to erupt in rioting. Both Arvind Das and Sumit Sarkar asked Pandey to clarify why

his reading of the records—an anti-communalist reading—was necessarily more authentic than that of the compilers of the gazetteer. Pandey replied that his research in archives allowed him a much fuller and richer understanding, and in his view the material had been interpreted in a biased manner by the British. Ranajit Guha argued that it is futile to try to discover the 'real truth' of the past, for our understanding will always reflect the time in which we write and thus be subjective. In historical writing there is always a tension between the historical facts and the manner in which we interpret them.

Shahid Amin examined the proceedings of the famous Chauri Chaura trial of 1922, in which 225 Congress volunteers were accused of rioting and murdering 22 policemen. He showed how the political content to the riot was downplayed in the trial, while its supposed 'criminal' nature was emphasised. It was in the interests of the accused to go along with this, for the political act of 'waging war against the state' was liable to a more severe punishment than a merely 'criminal' act. The accused were careful to avoid making political speeches in the courtroom and economic motives for the riot were stressed so as to paint a picture of a confused and hungry peasantry acting in a spontaneous and unreflecting manner. The importance of this, according to Amin, lies in the fact that subsequent historians have largely accepted this interpretation of Chauri Chaura. After independence the rioters were not even recognised initially as freedom fighters, and thus entitled to pensions; the reason given being that the trial proceedings offered no evidence of political motivation. In this way the trial produced an understanding of the event which came to be accepted by both the bureaucracy and intelligentsia of independent India.

In the discussion Rudrangshu Mukherjee praised Amin for the sophisticated way in which he had used his evidence; historians too often use such sources uncritically. David Hardiman said that although the critical analysis of colonial knowledge is an important element in the subaltern studies programme, he was disturbed to find that in some cases it seemed to be taking precedence over the more fundamental theme of subaltern consciousness and action. Amin, for instance, could have tried to see how the subaltern classes viewed the whole colonial judicial process. Amin replied that he would have liked to have carried out such a study, but that the data was inadequate. Gayatri Spivak defended Amin, arguing that "Subaltern Studies" does not deal only with subaltern consciousness and action; it is just as important to see how the subaltern are fixed in their subalternity by the elites. She stressed the importance of using sophisticated techniques to analyse the writings of the elites as well as the discourse of the subaltern classes. In particular she felt that

the tools provided by the theorists of deconstruction, seen best in the writings of Jaques Derrida, could be used to great advantage by the subaltern studies group.

It was perhaps appropriate that the next exercise in textual analysis, that by Julie Stephens, provided an exercise in the deconstruction of contemporary feminist writings about Indian women. She was not herself present, and the paper was presented by Dipesh Chakrabarty. The paper examined various attempts made by feminist writers to portray the 'real' Indian woman. Nationalist feminists have tried to construct an ideal 'Indian woman' who, in her purity and chastity, stands in contrast to the liberated but corrupted 'western woman'. Stephens criticised the lack of reality of this construct. She went on to look at attempts made by recent left-wing feminist writers to construct an image of the 'Indian woman' by reporting in detail the harrowing experiences of women in India. This is often done through interviews in which the direct speech of the women is recorded. Such 'experience' is seen in itself to be a form of truth. Stephens accuses these feminist writers of acting in bad faith, for by acting as interviewers, reporters and translators in the dialogue with lower-class women they manage to mould the reported 'experience' to conform to their ideal of 'true feminist consciousness'. Stephens questions whether Indian women are really so militant as they are often portrayed in such writings.

Parita reacted strongly, arguing that Julie Stephens was trying to take the politics out of feminist writing. Feminism was not merely a discourse to be analysed, but a method for bringing about social change. She felt furthermore that Stephens had a very simplistic understanding of feminist writings on India, believing that there is a unity of approach where there is none. She was deeply disturbed by the tone of the paper, for it criticised in a destructive, blanket fashion which left no room to go forward. She felt saddened that this was likely to be the first feminist study to appear in "Subaltern Studies". Parita found support in her stand from Susie Tharu, Radha Kumar and other women present. Susie Tharu argued that the experience of the subjugated is central to any feminist writing, the problem being to reveal it in as valid a manner as possible. Stephens failed even to pose such a problematic. Gayatri Spivak argued that feminism is a young movement and it was wrong for such a debate to be carried on before a largely male audience, as it made it appear that women lacked solidarity and men could thus ignore the issue. Josodhara Bagchi commented on this that subaltern studies is a much 'younger' exercise than feminism, and that this was not a reason to suppress self-criticism before others. In fact, Gayatri Spivak was hardly justified in her intervention, for the women present rejected Julie Stephens' paper in a

remarkably united way.

Gayatri Spivak then presented her own paper, an analysis of Brecht's 'Threepenny Opera' and Mahasweta Devi's Bengali short story 'Stanadayini'. She related the two texts to Marxist concepts. In the discussion various questions were raised as to the utility of her Marxist analysis. Mahasweta Devi happened to be in the audience, and she gave her own interpretation of the story which was, not unsurprisingly, greatly at variance with Gayatri Spivak's. Her down-to-earth style made for excellent theatre, with Gayatri being upstaged. Ranajit Guha commented that Mahasweta had shown how 'Stanadayini' was a parable of feudal India. Our interpretation of any text should have a political intent, and Mahasweta's politics had been shown to be far more vibrant than those of Gayatri. Could Gayatri's analysis reinforce the revolutionary potential of 'Stanadayini' and help to bring about change? Gayatri replied that Mahasweta's understanding of the story was hardly a revolutionary one. She did not presume to match Mahasweta in her political commitment; her trade was to analyse texts in particular ways and it was disingenuous of Guha to criticise her for doing this. He would not accept such a criticism about himself.

TWO POSSIBILITIES

The debate on all of these papers revealed that the subaltern studies project is standing at something of a crossroads, and that it could go in either of two directions. One road leads towards greater concentration on textual analysis and a stress on the relativity of all knowledge; another towards the study of subaltern consciousness and action so as to forward the struggle for a socialist society. Sudipto Kaviraj argued strongly for the first path. He felt that the chief value of the project so far had been to deconstruct existing historical theories. As yet this had not been carried out in a sufficiently rigorous or sophisticated manner. He felt that subaltern studies had to go beyond Marxism, for Marxism is not compatible with the thorough-going relativism of such an exercise. Ranajit Guha tended to agree with this, saying that subaltern studies had to seek first to attack and break down existing historical paradigms. In this respect subaltern studies was born under a sign of negation—'negation' is inscribed on the subaltern banner. Only after a prolonged critical exercise can attempts be made to construct an alternative paradigm.

Against this there is the Marxist argument that the value of subaltern studies lies in its contribution towards the struggle for a socialist society in India. Ashok Sen, in his paper, felt that this was the most valuable contribution which subaltern studies can make. From such a standpoint, the prime task of the project must be to identify those elements in subaltern society and consciousness which stand against feudal and bour-

geois hegemony and on which socialism in India may build its base. Such an approach requires that we accord a central importance to the experience of the subaltern classes. Some detractors have labelled this as a search for a Marxist Hind Swaraj. This label can, however, be taken as a complimentary one, representing a commendable quest for new ways forward. The approach also requires that we concentrate on the actual workings of the political process, seeing how the elite and subaltern domains of politics braid together and react against each other over time.

From such a perspective the analysis of texts for their own sake can be seen as a clever but ultimately empty exercise. At best, methods such as deconstruction can be used as a critical tool, bringing greater rigour to argument and analysis. It is however wrong to believe that it can be used in a politically neutral way; one has to choose the target of attack with political aims in mind. It can furthermore be argued that subaltern studies sets out with a constructive rather than deconstructive aim, for it seeks first of all to make the subaltern classes the subject of their own history. From this flows the critique of existing historiography. Deconstruction for its own sake leads down a slippery path to pure relativism.

Other cross-currents amongst the members of the group were apparent, and it would be wrong to try to label each of them as an adherent of one or the other position. Ranajit Guha's position, for instance, showed

some ambiguities; for while on the one hand he said that the project was based on negation, on the other hand he asserted very strongly his sentiment for not merely interpreting, but above all for changing the world, and that his quest was essentially a political one. He himself was not over-concerned with differences within the group. Until now the project had provided a forum for debate amongst like-minded scholars. The lack of any clear 'subaltern theory' was a strength rather than weakness. Hitherto, historians have busied themselves with constructing historical models which are only too easily demolished on empirical grounds. 'Subaltern Studies' lacks a clear-cut model and it is not attempting to set one up. Only after considerable work has been done can we even begin to construct an alternative historical paradigm which can replace the older paradigms. Commentators on subaltern studies may try to build such models on the basis of existing writings, but as yet they will be incomplete.

Although this was fair enough, and although it would be wrong to expect all of the members of the group to speak with one voice, there were indications that if the as yet embryonic bifurcation on the lines mentioned above develops any pronounced manner the project could be subject to severe internal strains. Unfortunately, the debate during the conference served more to reveal these differences rather than work towards their resolution.

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