

Subalterns and the State: Developments in Colonial and Post-Independence India in a Historical Perspective

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Abstract

India has celebrated seventy five years of its Independence. However, when we take a long term view of the performance of the Indian State we see there are many continuities and departures in the way the post-colonial state continued with the traditions set in the colonial period. The paper makes a modest attempt to discuss and analyse two important facets of ‘subaltern’ experience during the colonial and post-colonial times. Of the two one is much discussed in academic discourse, the other comparatively less. One is about ‘caste’ and the other is about ‘spatial ordering’ of today’s ‘North East India’ in both the colonial and post-independence periods.

Keywords: Colonial, Post-colonial, Subaltern, North East India, Dalit

Introduction

India has celebrated already seventy-five years of Independence. It is a proud moment for all of us. Independence which was the outcome of a century old National Movement has arrived unfortunately with violence, displacement of people and lot of bloodshed. But equally important was the fact that it provided rejoice and an opportunity for the leaders and the people of Independent India to decide the shape of future India in a way that will lead to all-round development and sorting out of pre-existing social, political and economic problems. Seventy five years is a great time to take stock of the developments that had taken place across the country and across this time span.

The discipline of history gives us both the methodological tools, theoretical apparatus and empirical foundation to make an assessment. History as it is taught, read and researched in the twenty first century fortunately does not any longer attempt to assess historical developments in the shades of black and white only; the shade of grey is in fact the emerging hue. Both the positives and the negatives of historical development are to be assessed from the vantage point of critical, scientific and rational understanding.

What I will try to attempt in my short essay is to make a whirlwind tour of the two important facets of ‘subaltern’ experience during the colonial and post-colonial times. Of the two one is much discussed in academic discourse, the other comparatively less. One is about ‘caste’ and the other is about ‘spatial ordering’ of today’s ‘North East India’ in both the colonial and post-independence periods. A brief resume of what I mean by ‘Subaltern experience’ is called for here in order to justify my two choices.

A Theoretical Resume

The concept 'subaltern' has become popular in Indian historiography since the early 1980s through the hands of Ranajit Guha and the collective of great social scientists whom he gathered around him and which included such figures as Partha Chatterjee, Dipesh Chakraborty, Sahid Amin, Gyan Pandey, Gautam Bhadra, David Hardiman and many others. It was truly the first Indian school of historiography that made a global impact influencing historical researches in such far off places as in Latin America.

While the idea of 'subaltern' was a borrowed one from the great Italian Marxist thinker Antonio Gramsci from his 'Prison Notebooks', it was if I may be allowed to conclude, both indigenised and innovated upon by the Subaltern Collective over the two decades of its creative existence. Broadly speaking, the term 'Subaltern', in my understanding, did not only mean subordination and existence of subordinate classes of people/communities in society. It also meant that this class or classes of people has a consciousness of its own to question, challenge and on occasions to topple the systems of hegemonic control- ideological and actual. Because if this was not so, then there would be no social space left for change in society.

It is interesting that in the earlier volumes of Subaltern Studies, mainly in the 1980s, peasant's movements and resistance were given far more focus. Ranajit Guha himself wrote the highly influential text **Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India**. Gradually questions of workers, caste, women, *adivasis* also came to the fore. One interesting aspect of the researches of the subaltern collective was how the so called primordial attachments like caste and religion influenced seemingly capitalist innovations like workers movements in the factories. Dipesh Chakravarti is a pioneer in this field of work.

However, discussions on lower caste movements have been scanty by the subalternists. Moreover, how geographical space itself can be a source of subaltern experience was hardly discussed. The second section of my discussion will particularly look at how the construction of the ideational and material space of 'Northeast' in both the colonial and post-colonial periods gave the region an aura of fuzziness that has hampered the realisation of its full potential as a geographical territory and the people who lived/lives here leading to a subaltern experience of marginalisation.

While I acknowledge the great contribution of the subaltern collective in historical studies, at the same time I will also like to go beyond both empirically and methodically to analyse the nature of social and political changes in colonial and post-independence India to understand as I mentioned already, both the positives and negatives of historical development and not simply valorise the 'subaltern'.

The Caste Conundrum

A. The Colonial Experience: It is not at all surprising that the English East India Company which laid the foundation of British rule in Bengal and later in other parts of South Asia initially did not try to disturb the existing social institutions. It did not want any social disturbance to put it in any trouble in the very beginning of its political rule. Whether in revenue management, or in administrative matters or in the sphere of social customs it wanted status quo to continue. The late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were considered the golden period of Orientalist discourse on Indian society in general and caste system in particular. Caste was considered a unique institution of India that bonded the Hindu society, gave it social coherence and laid down normative principles for its adherents. It was a period when learning of Sanskrit and Persian by English officials like Thomas Jones and others and setting up

of institutions like the Asiatic Society, Banaras Sankrit College and Calcutta Madrasah had taken place. Because of the influence of Sanskrit pundits and Persian maulavis, a great trend had set in to study classical texts in Sanskrit and Persian which provided a book view of Indian society for the English officials to understand. And therefore Caste emerged as a natural and divinely ordained institution and therefore it was not to be disturbed at any cost as it would result in social disharmony and trouble for the English in a far way land.

However, by the late 1820s and 1830s, that is, after more than fifty years of the beginning of its political dominance we find that the terms of imperialist discourse on India started to change. We find that the Company was becoming more assertive and confident in interfering in India's social institutions. The new urban centres like Calcutta had emerged by that time to be the hotspots of intellectual discussion about the social institutions like sati, widow remarriage etc. A very small section of western educated Indians in collaboration with their European masters in these urban centres began the task of so called reforming those social institutions which they thought to be anathema to a modern society. The era of 'colonial modernity' had truly set in. Thus Lord Bentinck with collaboration from Rammohun Roy banned sati, introduced English as official language and so on and so forth. Brahmo movement was initiated that emphasised monotheism. This phase continued till the 1850s and virtually came to an end with the Widow Remarriage Act of 1856.

But, interestingly, the institution of caste was left unchallenged. Even in the Brahmo Samaj, it was the representatives of the educated upper castes who dominated. The hold of caste system was so strong that it virtually derailed the widow remarriage Act. The fear of losing caste by marrying a widow was so paramount in the minds of the so called enlightened and progressive Bengalis that even after the Widow Remarriage was officially allowed, it basically remained a piece of paper for many years to come.

On the other hand, we find that many among the so called lower castes which slowly but definitively started receiving western education gradually began voicing their own demands and concerns. It was the Bombay Presidency that took the lead. By the 1870s in Maharashtra, Jotiba Phule, himself belonging to the lower caste emphasised through his writings and activities three major issues: firstly, that the caste system was introduced by the Aryans to oppress the *shudras* and *ati sudras* and to keep them under subordination of the Brahmins; secondly that freedom from the caste system is possibly by a united fight by the *sudras* and *ati sudras* and if necessary by adopting a new religious principle going beyond the Brahmanical religion and thirdly, the Indian National Congress was a political organisation of the upper castes that is Brahmins.

These three ideas from Phule, according to Gail Omvedt, influenced the lower caste movements across India throughout the colonial period from the 1870s to the 1940s. B.R. Ambedkar was influenced by it, Periyar was influenced by it. At the same time, the Imperial State of the British also played its part in igniting the lower caste aspirations and imaginations by the late 1920s and 1930s. The developments during the Civil Disobedience Movement with the Mac Donald Award, Poona Pact and the acrimonious debate between Gandhi and Ambedkar set the trend for future pattern of lower caste movement and discourse that became more assertive and vocal from then on.

Thus by the time India became independent in August 1947, the lower castes or Dalits are already on the process of realising their political potential through empowerment. The colonial state encouraged it. But most importantly the Dalits themselves realised and achieved it. The subalterns have finally arrived. Post-Independence Indian state will have to deal with it which is discussed in the next section.

B. Post- Colonial Experience: Independence ushered in new hopes and aspirations for all sections of society. Concurrently, India faced a large number of problems at the time of independence. Poverty, under development, lack of industrial infrastructure, stagnation of agriculture, refugee influx and their rehabilitation, integration of princely states, boundary dispute and conflict with Pakistan, setting up a viable administrative and democratic structure were just a few to mention. In the circumstances one guiding principle was required and that was the Constitution which was adopted on 26th January, 1950. The Constitution of India was not only the largest in the world in terms of content but also is a revolutionary document. In one stroke it got rid of caste inequality legally. However, how would it affect the fortunes of the lower castes or Dalits in post independent India remained to be seen? The Dalits still continued to suffer from a lot of disabilities. Legal equality did not guarantee social equality. There was illiteracy, lack of political leadership and participation in the decision making, poverty and many other forms of social inequalities. In such a situation how and in what way the new Indian independent state and the subalterns negotiated with each other is an interesting area of study.

One of the significant developments in the field of agrarian reforms in the post-independence period were the land reforms and redistribution of lands held in excess through a process of land ceiling mechanism. The castes which benefitted the most were the middle ranking castes such as the Yadavas and Jats. However, the Dalits or the *ati sudras* or the Scheduled Castes hardly benefitted from such redistribution. Its impact was to be seen in the political arena. The middle ranking castes emerged as important and powerful actors in the political process. One such important leader was Choudhry Charan Singh who later defected from the Congress. Particularly in the northern cow belt this process had a huge impact on the shift of power balance in the 1960s from the upper castes to middle ranking castes. The perpetuation of atrocities and social discrimination on the Dalits however, continued unabated. At the same time nevertheless, by the late 1960s and 1970s a small section of the educated Dalits became vocal about their rights and started movements for greater participation in and share of the political space. These movements were both political and social at the same time. It was a time for the different lower castes to redesignate themselves with a new identity. During the colonial period the British introduced terms such as ‘Depressed Classes’, ‘Scheduled Castes’ in 1935 and on the other hand the Congress through Gandhian intervention called them the ‘Harijans’.

While the term Scheduled Castes remained as a constitutional category used for protective discrimination policies by the new Indian State, the term ‘Harijan’ became increasingly unpopular and in fact aroused strong aversion. Ultimately through an executive order the term Harijan was banned in 1991. On the other hand, Dalit became the catchword for signifying a new assertive identity as well as to encapsulate the real state of things in Hindu society. One of the earliest political party of the Dalits called the Dalit Panthers in their 1972 manifesto defined Dalits broadly in class terms as “ a member of SC and tribes, neo Budhists (i.e. the Dalit converts to Budhism), the working people, the landless and poor peasants, women, and all those who are being exploited politically, economically and in the name of religion’. So the term Dalit became much broad based and a revolutionary concept indicative of resistance to existing norms of the society.

However, a pan Indian united political party or front of the Dalits was and is still to emerge. What we find in the twenty first century is that the Dalit issues have been taken up by mainstream political parties such as the INC, BJP and the Left parties. As Sudha Pai argues since the 1990s the rise of a Dalit middle class activism has changed the course of Dalit politics. Now there is more emphasis on economic empowerment then political empowerment which was the core idea of Dalit activism during the first

fifty years of independence. The protective discriminatory policies of the state have no doubt benefitted the Dalits but the need of the hour as is asserted by this new Dalit middle class is better integration to the Indian polity, society and economy without any caste distinction at all.

Thus, this brief survey of lower caste or Dalit movements starting from the time of Phule in the late 19th century to the third decade of the twenty first century indicate how through different stages they have acquired not only visibility in the body politic of the country but also how they are now in a much better position to challenge the core ideologies of caste system and caste discrimination. It will be wrong to say that caste oppression has ceased to exist but caste as a system of normative structure has definitely seen an erosion beyond repair. Indian society in its seventy five years of journey after independence has become much more equitable. And this has become possible not through any violent revolution or overthrowing of the traditional social structure but through gradual, slow and what Gramsci has called a process of 'Passive Revolution'.

The North East Entanglement

A. The Colonial Experience: When the English East India Company acquired Bengal and started consolidating its position in the late eighteenth century, one of its important task was to secure an established 'frontier' that would be unbreachable. The very concept of frontier with a fixed boundary demarcating a political space from other similar political spaces was a modernist innovation with the coming of capitalist age. Such fixity of boundary was unheard of in pre-colonial times both in the west and in the east. It was the Treaty of Westphalia of 1648 which generated this concept. The idea came to India through the hands of the British.

However, in Bengal itself, its eastern most boundaries bordering the states of Tripura, Cachar, Arakan, Mizo Hills, Khasi and Jaintia States and Garo Hills remained very inchoate. The Company was unsure of the peoples and territories of these bordering regions. But what they knew for sure was that there was another great Empire in the East and that was the Burmese empire. At the same time, the Burmese were equally imperialistic in nature and since the eighteenth century had shown much interest in extending their dominion to the west.

Hence, from the very beginning of colonial rule in Bengal this vast tract of land with multiple states, chiefdoms and communities of people, was in the colonial imagination a buffer zone between its own fixed territory of Bengal and the Burmese territory on the other side further towards the east. Even after the expulsion of the Burmese after the First Anglo Burmese war (1824-1826), they were unsure of what to do with this region. In addition, by this time the realisation came that the Chinese empire and Tibet were both approachable through the northern reaches of this region.

So, the strategic importance of the region increased and it therefore cannot be left behind for others to exploit. By the 1830s tea and petroleum were discovered. Therefore, economic interests became now added to strategic interests. So, the whole area in the colonial administrative parlance came to be referred to as the 'Eastern Frontier of Bengal'. It was frontier that was to be administered by the British, for the British and would be beyond the reach of other Indians. Thus, the seed of the idea of 'mainland' India was sown and a discursive attempt was made to categorise this Eastern Frontier as segregated, differentiated and isolated from the core Gangetic valley of Indian civilisation and in due time as a result it became marginalised in both colonial and nationalist imaginations. This despite the fact that David Scott who became the first Agent to the Governor General for the management of the Eastern Frontier of Bengal made a very influential intervention when he said that the plains of the Brahmaputra valley could

be brought under the so called regular administration of the British. However, the basic ideology of the colonial administration in the region was already put in place. In the plains, they made all arrangements ready for the exploitation of its agrarian and mineral resources and by ensuring its amalgamation to the regular system of British administration whereas, for the hills surrounding the plains an indirect system of administration was introduced. Till the very end of the British rule, the British innovated such concepts as Excluded Areas, Partially Excluded Areas, Inner Line –Outer Line etc. to loosely administer these areas.

The result of such policies was that the so called ‘Eastern Frontier of Bengal’ always remained a frontier ideationally and materially. The people of Assam felt exploited because it felt that its resources –tea and petroleum to be more precise were being extracted out of the province and a sense of deprivation gradually emerged. On the other hand, the tribes in the Hills felt that they were never part of India. This sense of marginalisation, deprivation and separateness was the result of how the eastern frontier of Bengal was spatially ordered and managed in the scheme of imperial system of governance. These very features of spatial ordering made it look like a neglected territory in the British empire of India and consequently gave birth to a feeling of marginalisation and subalternisation among the people of the region in the colonial times and it continues even now to a certain extent which is discussed in the next section.

B. The Post-Colonial Experience: One of the earliest instances of challenging this discourse of marginalisation and subalternisation was the emergence and assertion of a distinctive Naga identity movement in the form of insurgency which still continues. The post-colonial state also for a quite a long period of time continued a policy of neglect in the region. During the Indo- Chinese War of 1962 this became very apparent with disastrous consequences. Interestingly, the North East Frontier Agency which presently is known as the Arunachal Pradesh remained under the administrative control of the Ministry of External Affairs till the Chinese War. It shows how even the postcolonial Indian state continued the practices of the colonial state and was unsure how to negotiate the spatial ordering of the region left undecided by the British.

The post-colonial state still continues the system of Inner Line in the states of Arunachal Pradesh, Nagaland and Mizoram and in fact it was extended to the state of Manipur recently. All these states except the Arunachal Pradesh have seen insurgency at some point of time. The feeling of deprivation and being isolated is very strong among the people of this region.

Even in Assam, insurgency and ethnic assertions by different communities and tribes against marginalisation, deprivation and subalternisation still continues. This is a legacy of the policy of segregation followed in the Colonial rule and the failure of the post-colonial state to come to terms with it and to overcome it. North East India continues to be marginal in the scheme of things of post independent state in India till recently. It has been a frontier and still continues to be so. The partition of the country have further accentuated its frontier status and feeling of deprivation and distance from the so called mainland India, a conceptual gift of the British as discussed earlier. What is required is a proper integration of the North East in the body politic of the country. The Act East policy of the Government of India in the last few years and more proactive development measures have definitely brought about a change and slowly but gradually the North East as Frontier is shifting towards better integration. But more efforts are required.

In my deliberation, I have attempted to show how both institutions and geographical spaces can be sources of subaltern experience. In Indian history the colonial state has been a major factor in creating

new subaltern categories by its policies. Spatial ordering or cartographic experimentation is one such measure for creating new subaltern categories. The post independent state has to break the barriers of colonial discourse to free up these categories and spaces so that when we celebrate the centenary of Indian independence, the very concept of ‘subaltern’ disappears and a more equitable and just social, economic and political system emerges. Neither any section of populace nor any territory should have the feeling of being marginalised or being subaltern.

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