

Ranajit Guha (1923–2023)

Renowned Historian Who Pioneered *Subaltern Studies*

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The historiographical interventions of Ranajit Guha proved to be immensely consequential towards heralding a radical change in the study of modern Indian history. Guha's foundational contributions towards the project of *Subaltern Studies* conceived of new methods and ways of reading conventional sources of historiography, recovering the voices of the oppressed and the marginalised within it.

During the last three decades of the 20th century, there was a radical change in the field of modern Indian history, and it is associated above all with Ranajit Guha, who died on 28 April 2023, a few weeks short of his centenary (he was born on 23 May 1923). Hitherto, historians of the subcontinent had focused largely on the affairs of the elites, whether imperial officials, indigenous rulers, or nationalist leaders, with the mass of the people appearing as little more than a backdrop. Now, Guha urged, we could make the people the subject of an alternative history. He put this into practice by forging new ways of writing this history. Although the poor and oppressed left almost no records of their own, they were described in often scornful and condescending ways in the official archives. Guha found ways to use these accounts to understand their feelings, beliefs, and forms of political organisation and action in more credible ways. This became known as reading the records created by the elites “against the grain.”

Who and What Are the Subaltern?

Although this new emphasis was inspired in part by “history from below,” as pioneered by Marxist historians in post-World War II period, it had significant differences. The Marxist historians had sought to show how a “modern” class consciousness had been forged through struggle over time. The premodern forms of popular belief and consciousness were seen as “backward,” “false,” or “primitive” (as with the “primitive rebels” of Eric Hobsbawm’s well-known study of banditry in Europe). Guha urged us to accept the consciousness of the poor and powerless as legitimate in its context, arguing that it was as valid a form of political understanding in the

light of their lived experience as was the politics of an advanced working class. To escape the problem of having to try to delineate the degree of class consciousness in any popular social movement or act of resistance—which could be difficult when dealing with a predominantly peasant society such as India—Guha focused on relationships of domination and subordination. He took the term “subaltern” from the Italian Marxist theorist Antonio Gramsci who had found it analytically useful when describing the predominantly peasant society of Italy of his time. Gramsci saw that while class struggle would be important in the industrialised cities, the predominant focus for socialist leaders in the much more extensive rural areas had to be that of the subordination of the people who largely accepted the hegemony, or right to rule, of the elites. This hegemony had to be broken through struggle. He deployed the term “subaltern,” meaning people who were in a position of subordination. Guha took this up, noting that this was indeed one of the existing meanings of “subaltern” in English (though, in practice, the word was used mainly to describe junior army officers). By popularising this alternative meaning of the term through the series of volumes titled *Subaltern Studies*, Guha managed to gain a place in the Oxford English Dictionary, which now notes that this usage is commonly associated with “critical and cultural theory, esp. post-colonial theory,” meaning “a member of a marginalised or oppressed group.” In this respect, Guha found a distinct place in the English language for his particular usage.

This focus proved popular not only in India, but in many other parts of the world. The emphasis on the hierarchy of power, with its interplay of domination and subordination and the way that this denied a voice to those in a subjugated position, as well as the analysis of its impact on popular politics and resistance, accorded with a common lived experience in areas such as Latin America. It allowed for an analysis of forms of exploitation based not just on economic class, but also on gender, race, and caste. Marxists and liberal thinkers had alike tended to emphasise the economic as the

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prime driver of popular action, while *Subaltern Studies* sought to highlight a range of social, political, economic, and cultural forms of oppression that braided together in different ways in different historical situations, and which provided the focus for action by subaltern groups. Many groups were subjected to multiple layers of oppression. This broad idea could be applied regardless of the specific cultures of oppression of a given society.

Beginnings of *Subaltern Studies*

Guha was born in 1923 in a village in East Bengal (now Bangladesh). His family were landlords, and he witnessed at first hand the way domination and subordination operated in a particularly blatant form in such a setting. He went to Calcutta for his schooling at the age of 10, entering the elite Presidency College in 1938, where he studied history. He became an active member of the Communist Party of India (CPI) and neglected his studies, only scraping a pass without honours in his degree in 1942. In 1946, he was selected to represent the CPI internationally. He lived in Paris and travelled widely in Eastern Europe, Russia, and China. He returned to India in 1953 and took employment as a college teacher in Calcutta. In 1956, disgusted at the Soviet suppression of the popular rising in Hungary, he resigned from the CPI. In 1958, he joined the newly established University of Jadavpur and began writing a book on the history of the permanent settlement in Bengal in the late 18th century. He argued that a measure that was devised by the British to establish an order of benevolent and improving landlords along English lines in practice consolidated a system of feudal oppression by an exploitative landlord class. His ideas on the subject did not prove popular in Calcutta, and in 1959, he took up an invitation for a fellowship at Manchester University. He was given crucial support in this by the noted British historian Asa Briggs, who had been highly impressed by Guha's intellectual brilliance on a visit to Calcutta. Guha's book, *A Rule of Property for Bengal: An Essay on the Idea of Permanent Settlement*, was published in 1963 and is now seen as a classic.

Briggs, now vice chancellor of Sussex University, persuaded Guha to join its new faculty of African and Asian studies. While on a research sabbatical in India in 1970–71, Guha was impressed by the way the Naxalites were actively struggling to create a more egalitarian society in India through rural insurgency, unlike the other Indian communist parties that were compromising, he felt, with an oppressive system. He decided to study the history of peasant uprisings in 19th-century India, in the process devising the new tools and methods described earlier. During the late 1970s, he gathered a group of like-minded younger historians and social scientists around him, with intense discussions that lasted long into the evening either in his house in Brighton or in Oxford, London, and Calcutta. In this, he proved a charismatic figure—being intensely learned, deeply cultured, and brimming with ideas. Under his inspiration, a core group was established who researched and wrote up their own contributions and then worked with Guha in the publication of the *Subaltern Studies* series, the first volume of which appeared in 1982. By this time, Guha had left Sussex to take up a fellowship at the Australian National University, which gave him more time to focus on both his own writing and editing the series.

In his introduction to Volume 1 of *Subaltern Studies*, Guha wrote of how the study of Indian nationalism had focused largely on elites, whether British imperial rulers or middle-class nationalists. British-oriented histories had emphasised the achievements of the imperial rulers and the response by Indians, while Indian elite-oriented histories had valorised the role of those elites, who

were depicted as “awakening,” “educating,” “morally improving,” and “mobilising” a “passive” majority and leading them firmly towards a golden future. The masses were not seen to have a valid political will of their own, being merely guided and led towards this “freedom” by the nationalist elite. The movement became “a sort of spiritual biography of the Indian elite.” Neither approach provided a convincing explanation for the phenomenon, for they failed to acknowledge “the contribution made by the people *on their own*, that is, *independent of the elite* to the making and development of this nationalism.” Hundreds of thousands, at times millions, of peasants and workers had participated in the movement, and they had done so on their own terms.

Guha thus called for a focus on “the politics of the people,” whom he characterised as being marked by their subalternity. The subaltern domain of politics operated relatively independently of elite politics, with its own rules and trajectories. It could be characterised by, among other things, the way that the subaltern organised itself along the lines of community, territory, and workplace, and by its methods of protest and insurgency. It was infused with the experience of various forms of exploitation by both the imperial and Indian elites and represented a strong rejection of such oppression. Although the Indian elites led the nationalist movement, they spoke for the masses only partially, and often failed to either address or rectify their many grievances. While they managed to mobilise the subaltern in support of some of the great agitations, producing some “some splendid results,” they often ended by compromising with the British in

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ways that betrayed the interests of the masses. In this, the elites failed to “speak for the nation.”

Studying Subaltern Mobilisation

This set the agenda for the volumes that followed. Each contained chapters on various aspects of subaltern life and struggle in South Asia written in many cases by core members of the group such as Gyanendra Pandey, David Arnold, Shahid Amin, Dipesh Chakrabarty, and Partha Chatterjee. In time, they all became leading intellectual figures, with global reputations. At the same time, Guha published his own research as a major book: *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (1983). Guha himself edited a further five volumes of *Subaltern Studies*. He published a series of seminal articles in these volumes that added to the depth and complexity of his ideas. He developed several main themes. He, for example, emphasised the different objectives of the elite and the subaltern. The elite focused on gaining constitutional power and deployed agitation to this end. They were not committed to giving the subaltern any real authority, often withdrawing protests when they were seen to pose a challenge to the indigenous elites, such as landlords, the business classes, industrialists, and other vested interests. The elites wanted only limited social transformation. Campaigns were thus halted, even if many of the demands of the subaltern classes had not been conceded. A contrast was drawn up between this liberal-constitutional approach in which agitation was deployed to gain concessions from the state, and the more radical objectives of the masses, who were fighting above all for their own social and political self-determination. In this, they sought to overturn oppressive structures of power and bring into being a very different type of society.

While the elites sought to link themselves with such subaltern mobilisation when it was in their interest, subaltern groups in turn sought elite support and leadership in their struggles, which gave rise to a series of temporary alliances between the two. Guha characterised this tendency as the “braiding” of the two

streams. This coming together was strongest during protests, tending to unravel thereafter. Subaltern groups that had supported elite-led campaigns at one juncture might become disillusioned by the failure of the elites to redress their grievances and refuse to join with them in the future.

Guha also theorised on the forms that subaltern mobilisation took. In general, it was based on horizontal linkages, typically those of community. It could be conceived in terms of class, caste, territory, or religion, and the boundaries could shift dramatically at different junctures. He also noted how the consciousness of the subaltern was rooted typically in a mindset that blended understanding of their material life with a belief in supernatural powers. During the early 20th century, for example, Gandhi was often perceived to possess miraculous powers. While from one perspective, this represented a form of “false consciousness,” their faith in such higher realities allowed the subaltern to resist with great courage.

Concluding Remarks

The project raised the heckles of many historians in both India and the United Kingdom, who felt that their own work was being too easily dismissed as either “elitist” or “economistic,” while receiving an enthusiastic reception from many historians and social scientists in the United States, Latin America, and Australia.

Some of the criticisms were based on misunderstandings. For example, it was often argued that Guha had sought to delineate an entirely autonomous domain of subaltern mentality and politics. In fact, he had constantly emphasised how the different political streams had interacted—braiding, and then unravelling each other. These interactions left their mark on both streams, so that they were always evolving.

Guha’s younger associates took over the editing of the series in 1992. The project evolved and changed considerably over the years, with new members joining the core group. The final volume came out in 2005. Guha’s last contribution was to Volume 9, published in 1996, on “The Small Voice of History.” In this, he called for a radically different way of writing history so that it was able to validate the experience and emotions of the most oppressed groups in society. He did not claim to have any easy answers but suggested that it might mean abandoning many of the accepted ways of writing history in favour of very different notions of causality and time. This set the tone for his later writings—increasingly, and then exclusively in Bengali—which became more and more literary and philosophical rather than historical in the conventional sense. During his final years, he lived with his Austrian wife Mechthild Guha in Vienna, and she survives him.

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