

HISTORIOGRAPHY OF INDIAN CHRISTIANITY AND CHALLENGES OF SUBALTERN METHODOLOGY

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The attempt in the following essay is to do a brief appraisal of the historiographical developments since 1970s in the history of Indian Christianity, and to highlight some of the pertinent methodological aspects of Subaltern Studies with a view to appreciate its implications for the writing of the history of Christianity in India. It should be stated at the outset that this is not an exhaustive study of the historical writings on Indian Christianity, and the sources cited are picked up as indicators of the general trends.

1. Nationalism

After the 1970s various perspectives have heavily influenced the writings on the history of Christianity in India. One of the most significant developments that emerged was a kind of nationalistic approach. Kaj Baago, a Danish missionary theologian and historian, particularly through the Church History Association of India (CHAI), initiated this move in a big way by his writings on the role of Indian Christians in the formation of Christianity in India. The undergirding nationalistic spirit in Indian participation and ideas was particularly focused upon in these writings. T. V. Philip, D. V. Singh, George Thomas and others have picked up these themes and developed it further. These writings reflected historians' opposition and protest towards the Euro-centred approach to the expansion and development of Christianity in India. The emphasis was on Indian nationalism and Indian contribution. Their task was to demonstrate how Indian Christianity has always been in existence and how an authentically Indian identity for Christianity has been developing over the centuries as a

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result of the interaction between Christianity and its social and religious-cultural contexts.

It is in continuity with these efforts that we have to view CHAI's *History of Christianity in India* series. Although the series is not yet complete, whatever has been published so far maintains a wider and contextual perspective. For the first time in the historical research on Indian Christianity a much larger canvas has been spread out, especially taking into account the socio-economic formative factors that shaped an authentic and particular space for Christianity in India. The strength of this approach was in CHAI's efforts to integrate a nationalistic and contextual perspective. In pursuing this kind of history of Christianity in India the movement stated that, "The History of Christianity in India is viewed as an integral part of the socio-cultural history of the Indian people rather than as separate as of it. The history will, therefore, focus attention upon the Christian people in India; upon who they were and how they understood themselves; upon social, religious, cultural and political encounters, upon the changes which their encounters produced in them and in the appropriation of the Christian Gospel, as well as in the Indian culture and society of which they themselves were a part."¹ While re-examining the history of Christianity in India in this way, historians have succeeded in answering such vexed questions such as how Christianity and Christians have interacted and co-existed with the local milieu and yet keeping alive a unique identity of its and their own.

Dominant groups within Christianity, who were mainly following a Christian version of the Sanskritic strand got the most attention in these historical discourses. Moreover, Indianization and indigenization were some of the major themes of their narration. However, while searching for its own identity and spirit, it was the elite within Christianity who got more attention than others. V. S. Azariah, K. C. Banarjee, K. T. Paul, P. D. Devanandan were, for instance, the heroes of these processes. So it had fallen into the same trap of the secular national histories of the 1960s and 1970s, i.e., glorifying the role of the elites and the dominant groups.

¹A. M. Mundadan, *History of Christianity in India*, Vol. 1, 1984, Bangalore, vii.

If history is an unending dialogue between the past and the present, we should acknowledge that such a nationalistic reading is not necessarily relevant or even desirable today. That is so, not only for its obvious limitations, but also because of the monolithic character and agenda it can acquire. For instance, the Hindutva ideologues, like Arun Shourie, want to read or (re-read, as some of them claim) the history of Christian missionary work and the various movements on the basis of a monolithic understanding of Indian nationalism, integrity, culture and so on. This is the result of a narrow reading of Indian nationalism with an edge towards *Hindutva Vada* and the insistence that, that is the only way we should re-read history of all the movements in India. All histories should be written from this nationalist approach and everything written outside of it as anti-national historical approach, as Arun Shourie's *Missionaries in India: Continuity, Change and Dilemmas* (1994), asserts. The following two points he makes while perusing the history of Christian missions in India, are rather significant in the light of our observation: "... I believe that the essence of the Indian people is their inner quest, and that this quest is and the means by which it is pursued are Hindu first and foremost."² He continues to state the following about Dalits and North-East areas: "... a point that will become evident when we come to missionary work in areas like the North-East and among groups like the 'Dalits': I believe that the interests of India as a whole must take precedence – overriding precedence – over the supposed interests of any part or group, religious, linguistic or secular. I also, believe that, given the fragile condition of the structure of governance at the moment, the movements which are currently afoot ostensibly to 'liberate' and 'empower' these groups may well break India, that they will eventually bring upon even those groups the consequences that Bhindranwale's terrorism – much lauded by the 'Dalit' leadership, which in turn has been much lauded by the Church – brought upon the Sikhs." So re-reading of history is important – but not on the basis of fascist agenda of any religion or political group - but on the basis of all the objectivity that can be derived from the knowledge and experience of the subjectivity of a people; not in a monolithic way, but in a pluralistic manner capturing the particular history of peoples and groups who had been silenced over centuries due to structures of domination.

²Shourie, *Missionaries in India*, 2.

It is against the background of such apprehensions about ethnic and particular local histories that we have to evaluate the histories written during 1980s and 90s on Dalit and Tribal Christian conversion movements in India. Thus, for the first time in the history of Christianity in India, focus has shifted from the Christian elite and the dominant to the people who were really involved in the historical formation of Christianity in India. Dalits and Tribals, especially the leading figures involved in mass conversions became the heroes of the narratives on Christianity. It was Geoff Oddie, a 'secular' socio-religious historian from the University of Sydney who pioneered this kind of people-oriented approach in understanding and explaining Christianity in India. A wave of Christian conversion studies appeared on the scene. The names of John C. B. Webster, J. W. Gladstone, Rajamanickam, Dick Kooiman, Ficher, may be mentioned here. These studies were the outcome of the people's perspective and "history from below approach" of the history writings. Thus, Dalits and Tribals found a significant space in the mainstream historical discourses of Christianity in an unprecedented way.³

However, this shift to people and masses was the result of the oppositional reading to the nationalistic, elitistic approach the historians of Christianity in India held. Issues related to ethnicity, caste, and the socio-economic factors which made people to move to Christianity, were discussed extensively in this strand. Growth of Colonial Economy, Hindu Renaissance, Caste and Neo-Hindu Reform movements, were perceived as the contexts within which these were taking shape. However, the most interesting aspect of this historiography of this period is the re-instatement of European missionaries as the major co-actors in the whole Christian people's movements and was seen by many as a positive process set in motion by colonization resulting in the humanization and liberation of these peoples. Moreover, studies on North-East Indian Tribal Christianity,

³See for details, G. A. Oddie, "Christian Conversion in Telugu Country, 1860-1900: A Case Study of One Protestant Movement in the Godavary-Krishna Delta," *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 12, 1 (January-March, 1975); John C. B. Webster, *The Christian Community and Change in Nineteenth Century North India*, Delhi, 1976; D. Forrester, *Caste and Christianity*, London, 1970; S. Manickam, *The Social Setting of Christian Conversion in South India*, Wiesbaden, 1977; J. W. Gladstone, *Protestant Christianity and People's Movement in Kerala*, Trivandrum, 1984.

especially those of F. S. Downs,⁴ particularly depicted the identity-restoring processes involved in such *en masse* movement of Tribals into Christianity. Removal of social disabilities and the humanizing effects it had on these people got the historians' attention during this time, and, consequently, missionaries were seen as important actors in the whole process. But the class affiliation of radical missionaries and the ideologies, which drove them, were subjected to close scrutiny during this time. Thus, while Indianization was the major emphasis of Christian historians in the 60s and 70s, during the 80s humanization and liberation processes were projected.

Both the above-discussed streams of historical approaches had taken the changing socio-economic context as one factor, which determines change and continuity in the ideas, events, processes, etc. Beyond doubt, one can say that class ideology seems to have influenced historians' subjectivity in this analysis. While caste factors were seen as significantly formative, class factors were not at all sidelined in these approaches. Thus, a creative tension between caste and class analytical tools seems to have helped the construction of history of Christianity in India in an unprecedented way. Further this has closed the traditional perception of a dichotomy between sacred and 'secular history'. The fact that historical processes, whether religious or otherwise, were deeply embedded in the socio-economic structures and that the past cannot be constructed apart from these were explicitly accepted by the historians. This acceptance has affected the very basic doing of history of Christianity and methodological tools were seen in a different light altogether. In other words, it has come to be accepted that it is not historians' theological position which ultimately decides the quality of the historical writings but the very commitment to the historical methodology itself. The most significant shift of 90s, however, is to be seen in the role of theories in historiography and the influence of theoretical insights on the historical discourses.

2. Feminism

Feminist historiography and related methodological developments has really influenced historical research during the last ten to fifteen years and

⁴F. S. Downs, *History of Christianity in India*. Bangalore: CHAI, 1992. See also the books by Snaitang, Kipgen and Lalsangkima Pachuau.

there is an influx of feminist literature in India. The attention of feminist critique and analysis is on the exclusion, experience, and invisibility of women. The resultant alienation should be the starting point of the feminist reconstruction of history, they affirm. The patriarchal silencing of women needs to be captured to understand the fundamental experience of exclusion and subordination of women in history. Both while reconstructing the autonomous space women had and while creating autonomous space in the present historical discourses, historians should deeply enter into the inner feelings and emotions and the subjected personality of women. They see this as the main task of feminist historiography.⁵

Despite the fact that there is a growing body of feminist history in India, it is unfortunate that feminist historiography is yet to find a significant spot within the studies on the history of Christianity in India. However, we need to mention a couple of significant feminist historical writings on Christianity by secular authors. One is by Uma Chakravathi, *Pandita Ramabai: Rewriting History Through the Life and Times of Pandita Ramabai*, Delhi, 1998. Another is authored by Gauri Visvanathan, *Outside the Fold: Conversion, Modernity, and Belief*, Delhi, 1998. Uma Chakravathi analyses how the colonial state had changed gender relations in a fundamental manner. She holds that the case history of Pandita Ramabai was not about silencing or invisibility but was one of suppression by the Brahminic patriarchal structures and how she threatened the then Hindu nationalists. Whereas, Gauri Visvanathan examines through the life and experiences of "converts," the vexing issue of the role of belief in modern society, and shows how it is arguably one of the "most unsettling political events in the life of a society," basically it is a cultural study focusing on the role of religions in modernity, and demonstrates how religious ideologies can alter patterns of modern society. Also, in a recent article, Mary Roy depicts the status and place of Syrian Christian middle class women in the Kerala society.⁶

⁵See Mary E. John, *Discrepant Dislocations: Feminism, Theory and Postcolonial Histories*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996.

⁶"Three Generations of Women," in *Indian Journal of Gender Studies*, July 1994.

3. Post-Colonialism

It was the groundbreaking study of Edward Said's, *Orientalism*, in 1978, which inaugurated the emergence of post-colonial theories in historical writings. The following can be stated as the major affirmation of post-colonial theory; to analyse sources and documents on colonies and colonial societies produced by the colonial discourses, one needs to expose the ideology of imperialism itself and the historian's first and foremost task is to remove this mask of "ideological discourses on imperialism" from the colonial discourses. Further, understanding the reciprocal relationship between colonial knowledge and colonial power is so vital to post-colonial reading of history. Through colonial power, which was derived out of colonial knowing of the East, which was presumed to be inferior and different from the superior West, they subordinated the people and their minds. The historian's task is to decolonize the categories created by the West, which even involves liberating their imagination to create a vital autonomous space. "To be autonomous is to break through the categories of thought constructed by others, to think afresh and analyse one's predicament and make one's choices in terms one has rationally and independently arrived at."⁷

Several post-colonial studies on Christianity and Christian society and ideology in India have appeared recently. However, none of these studies are from "the church historians," with the exception of a study by Jacob Dharmaraj, *Colonization and Christian Mission: Post-Colonial Reflections* (ISPCK, 1992). This book is a missiological critique of the colonial missionary ideas. He deeply analyses how these have shaped missionaries' missional assumptions in the background of the rise of the nationalist politics. Let us hope that more post-colonial discussions by Indian Christians on Christian missionary work will appear soon in the field of the history of Christianity in India. In the category of post-colonial histories of Christianity in India, the following books by secular historians deserve our attention: Susan Baylay, *Saints, Goddesses and Kings: Muslims and Christians in South Indian Society*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989; Henriette Bugge, *Mission and Tamil Society: Social and Religious Change in South India, 1840-1900*, United Kingdom, Curzon,

⁷J. N. Pieterse, ed., *The Decolonization of Imagination, Culture, Knowledge and Power*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997, ix.

1994; Antony Copley, *Religion in Conflict, Ideology, Cultural Contact and Conversion in Late Colonial India*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997; Kawashima-Koji, *Missionaries and a Hindu State: Travancore, 1858-1936*, 1993.

How Christianity and Missionaries were involved in creating exclusive communal boundaries between communities and in the destruction of Indian pluralistic inclusive polity, find place here in these discussions. Further, themes such as conversions and the consequent conflicts of cultural identities within the Christian elite, evangelical Protestantism and the ideologies of imperialism, find space in these historical writings. One of the basic flaws of post-colonialism is the ideological assumption that colonial values have fundamentally and comprehensively affected every aspect and level of the colonized nation and society. Colonization affected only areas and countries which were integrally related to colonial power and agenda. We have to accept that colonialism has just added another additional nature to the already complex and highly pluralistic society of India. Don't we see more continuities than discontinuities in the so-called "colonial legacy?" So colonization processes should not be the over encompassing and sole framework within which historians work while analysing Christianity. Moreover, the very ideological premise of colonialism itself is a creation of the mutuality between the old and the new/modern consciousness. If so, should not we allow the emergence of a new consciousness based on our own ideologies, culture, self-hood and subjectivity rather than these theories, which continue to colonize our mind.

4. Subaltern Studies and Methodological Challenges

It is in the light of the above-mentioned perspectival and theoretical shifts occurring in the historical research of Christianity in India that we should consider looking at the path-breaking historiographical movement of Subaltern Studies Collective which came into being in India in the early eighties. The most significant moment in the development of this school which revolutionised the doing of history in India happened when *Subaltern Studies I: Writings on South Asian History and Society* (1982)⁸ and Ranajit Guha's pioneering work *Elementary Aspects of Peasant*

⁸Hereafter referred as *SS I*, etc.

Insurgency in Colonial India (1983) were published. Since then eleven volumes and several other books have appeared representing this school of history. To start with, the movement was the brainchild of Ranajit Guha and a team of historians who collaborated with him in this new academic search. Guha edited the first six volumes and later other members of the collective have taken over this. Recently, Subaltern studies and their methodology have received international academic attention and it is recognised as one of the most unique Asian or Indian contribution to the academia.

Although started twenty years ago, only recently has Subaltern historiography emerged as a methodological challenge to be reckoned with by theological researchers. It should be noted that this movement has creatively challenged not only historians, but also other disciplines across the board in the theological field. It is in the light of this development that I want to apprise interested students of history about its vast possibilities for application. So in the following commentary on Subaltern Collective, the effort is to highlight certain methodological aspects that I consider relevant for theological research. The themes and issues and disciplines covered in the Subaltern Studies Series⁹ are ever increasing and expanding, especially as recently seen in the volumes IX and X. For

⁹Ranjit Guha, ed., *Subaltern Studies I: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, Delhi, 1982; Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India*, Delhi, 1983; Ranajit Guha, ed., *Subaltern Studies II: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, Delhi, 1983; Ranajit Guha, ed., *Subaltern Studies III: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, Delhi, 1984; Ranajit Guha, ed., *Subaltern Studies IV: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, Delhi, 1984; Ranajit Guha, ed., *Subaltern Studies V: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, Delhi, 1987; Ranajit Guha, ed., *Subaltern Studies VI: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, Delhi, 1989; Partha Chatterjee and G. Pandey, eds., *Subaltern Studies VII: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, Delhi, (1992), 1993; David Arnold and David Hardiman, eds., *Subaltern Studies VIII: Essays in Honour of Ranajit Guha*, Delhi, 1994; Shahid Amin and D. Chakrabarty, eds., *Subaltern Studies IX: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, Delhi, 1996; G. Bhadra, G. Prakash and Susy Tharu, eds., *Subaltern Studies X: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, Delhi, 1999; See also, Vinay Lal "Walking with the Subalterns, Riding with the Academy: The Curious Ascendancy of Indian History," in *Studies in History*, 17, 1, n. s. (2001), 101-133; Ludden, David, ed., *Reading Subaltern Studies: Critical History, Contested Meaning, and the Globalisation of South Asia*, Delhi, 2001.

instance, gender studies are finding more space than before indicating a gradual shift in focus. However, most of the earlier studies had concentrated largely on peasant movements, tribal rebellions and nationalist popular uprisings. In that sense, there is a wide range of assumptions and methods represented in the subaltern historical methodology. But we will concentrate on certain themes and issues, which will orient ourselves to the basic tenets of the Subaltern Studies.

5. Indigenism

The timing and the context within which the collective arose indicate the fundamental indigenous character of the move. Subaltern Studies emerged in the early 80s in an atmosphere of widespread negative response to Marxian orthodoxy in the academic research in analysing and understanding the Indian society and the nation. Indian socio-cultural reality was dissected mostly through the economic categories. The past and the contemporary happenings were viewed through the narrow glasses of class formations, and Indian people's and movements' subjectivities and pluralities were subsumed in such rhetoric of material determinism. So the Subaltern school may be characterised as a post-Marxian search to come to terms with the indigenous self of Indian society and look at its unique experiences on its own terms.

One of the dominant aspects of the post-independent history writing was the nationalist perspective that concentrated mostly on the colonial Indian experience. In fact, Subaltern School starts with a criticism of the historiography of Indian nationalism, which, according to them, has been dominated by colonialist elitism and bourgeois-nationalist elitism. Both were seen as products of British rule, but surviving into post-colonial period in neo-colonial and neo-nationalist forms of discourse. Both hold that making of the nation and the development of the consciousness of nationalism as creatures of elite like administrators, institutions, ideas, etc. This colonised mind-set of the nationalist historiography came under the critical and incisive scrutiny of the subaltern historians.¹⁰ Their starting point of a new historiography is nation and nationalism as against the representations of the elitist discourse.

¹⁰See Ranajit Guha, "Some aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India," *SS I, 1*.

The defining of nationalism as Indian elite responding to colonial context and Indian resources and as collaboration and competition with the ruling power was vehemently opposed. Subaltern historiography rejected the view that these processes constituted nationalism and negated the projection of Indian elite and the middle classes as the primary agents of change.¹¹ They rejected the idea that nationalism was predominantly an elite achievement. Guha observes: "In the colonialist and the neo-colonialist historiographies these achievements are credited to British colonial rulers, administrators, policies, institutions and culture; in the nationalist and neo-nationalist writings – to Indian elite personalities, institutions, activities and ideas."¹² He continues: "What, however, historical writing of this kind cannot do is to explain Indian nationalism for us. For it fails to acknowledge, far less interpret, the contribution made by the people *on their own*, that is, *independently of the elite* to the making and the development of this nationalism. In this particular respect the poverty of this historiography is demonstrated beyond doubt by its failure to understand and assess the mass articulation of this nationalism except, negatively, as law and order problem, and positively, if at all, either as a response to the charisma of certain elite leaders or in the currently more fashionable terms of vertical mobilization by the manipulation of factions."¹³ So Subaltern historiography also can be perceived as a clear oppositional movement and as a post-colonial search to find the real locatedness of the agencies of change and transformation in the Indian society and to identify the *politics of the people* that are left out in the "un-historical historiography."

As we have noted earlier, historians continued to grapple with the issue of what constitutes Indian Christianity and Indian Christians' role in the process of Indianizing Christianity. They have often ended up marginalizing the vast majority of Christians who were rural based and part of the popular religiosity. The tendency to see Indian Christian formation in the movement from 'Mission' to 'Church' and the transfer of leadership from the missionaries to the 'elite' Indian Christian groups needs thorough revision in the light of the questions raised by the

¹¹SS I, 2.

¹²SS I, 1.

¹³SS I, 3.

Subaltern School. Where does the actual agency can be placed and can historians unearth the real locatedness of the processes in carving out an authentic Indian Christianity are some of the aspects to be looked into.

6. Recategorization and Deconstruction

Consequent to Subaltern school's search for new categories, which transcends several domains of human experiences and which included masses, they affirm that there is a subaltern – elite divide in society. The word subaltern is used as a synonym for people "of inferior rank." It is stated that, "it will be used ... as a name for the general attribute of subordination in South Asian society whether this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office or in any other way."¹⁴ For them it is the subaltern condition which largely constitutes historical and societal experience. Whereas, the term 'elite' signifies "dominant groups, foreign as well as indigenous." Officials of the colonial state, missionaries, merchants, planters, landlords, etc., are all included in this group.¹⁵ Thus several of the categories such as caste and class are subsumed into this recategorised subaltern identity of the people. It may be noted here that the dynamics of domination and subordination fundamentally inform the subalternity. "For his subalternity was materialised by the structure of property, institutionalised by law, sanctified by religion and made tolerable – and even desirable – by tradition."¹⁶

This emphasis on subalternity paved the way for, perhaps, a post-Marxian categorization of people which can transcend caste, class, ethnic, and tribal affiliations and take into account other more significant aspects of people's experiences. Because, for the Subaltern Studies considers "all aspects of the subaltern condition, material as well as spiritual, past as well as present" as important. It may be highlighted that some of the most important functional aspects identified are religious belief systems and the cultural dimensions in human experience and their formation and identity as a people. "As such there is nothing in the material and the spiritual aspects of that condition" of the subaltern which does not interest them.¹⁷

¹⁴SS I, vii.

¹⁵SS I, 8.

¹⁶SS II, 1.

¹⁷SS I, vii.

Here is a clear rejection of exclusive materialistic view of human condition and existence. This perspective relates to history, politics, economics and sociology of subalternity as well as the attitudes, ideologies and belief systems. Their approach is very clearly interdisciplinary by redefining disciplinary boundaries. Implications for biblical textual analysis, especially the sociological method that is being used now widely among biblical scholars may notice this profound way of looking at human experience. It may be noted that no primacy is given to the elite here. Objective assessment of the role of the elite and a critique of elitist interpretations of that role happen in this process.

So Subaltern Studies is a kind of an effort to hear people and their voices which were silenced by the dominant discourses, making them to speak in their own language, a language of protest, resistance and negation. For that, historians and others who are engaged in research should free themselves of the dominant narratives and materialistic categorizations. Let the silenced religio-cultural spaces be represented and recovered. These recategorization and recovery have direct challenge to theological researchers whose task is to understand human experience in a holistic manner. One of the most important contributions of this school was to consider the religious belief systems and the spiritual dimensions of human existence very seriously as a component in interpreting their actions and movements. This cannot be ignored as easily as we may think not only as theologians but as researchers concerned with too much scientific objectivity and as people dealing with empirical as well as imperceptible life realities.

It is a deconstruction of history that is taking shape in this collective venture. This deconstructive approach is based on certain additional affirmations of these historians to which we will turn now. One of the fundamental premises of the Subaltern School is that Subaltern is "the maker of his own history and the architect of his own destiny." Through various studies of peasant uprisings and tribal rebellions in India against landlords and at other times against colonial officers, missionaries, etc. in the form of resistance to elite domination, the Subaltern historiographers very clearly prove that the domain of Subaltern classes was an autonomous one, for it "neither originated from elite politics nor did its existence

depend on latter.”¹⁸ Although these subaltern movements were fragmented and sometimes lacked leadership these were clear articulations of their autonomous agency according to the School. The most significant development in the Subaltern methodological approach is the paradigm shift that they propose in the perspective that the agency of change is located in the subaltern. Thus the locatedness of agency and the autonomy within that location, in this case the subaltern, is the point of departure for the Subaltern Studies’ worldview.¹⁹

To support their premises they have originated a “theory of consciousness” or collective consciousness within the subaltern movements. Their point is that no movement arises merely out of spontaneous action. The most important functional change identified in resistance to dominance is from religious to the militant in many happenings in the Subaltern Studies. As a result of this approach “movements [are] pluralized and plotted as confrontations rather than transition and thus seen in relation to histories of domination and exploitation.”²⁰ Unlike the Subaltern perspective most other histories until recently regarded peasant insurgencies, subaltern movements, etc. as external to these peoples’ consciousness. Many actions were seen as imitations and emulations. For instance, the Sanskritization model to understand low caste movements proposed by the famous sociologist M. N. Srinivas, could be seen as denying this autonomous agency to the groups involved. In subaltern approach autonomous consciousness is one of the major sources of investigation of any people or group. One of the contributions of the subaltern group was to stress the position that consciousness of people is not an exclusive product of economic base of the society but the result of a complex process which includes religious and spiritual. Primacy given to ‘nation’ and economic base by the Nationalist-Marxian writers is questioned by the Subaltern School and gives a paradigmatic shift to the method of analysing society and people.

What is happening in this methodology is the restoration of subject to people that were either silenced or taken away by elitist discourses. Thus,

¹⁸SS I, 4.

¹⁹See for details, Gayatri Cakravorty Spivak, “Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography,” in SS IV, 330ff.

²⁰SS IV, 330.

the claim of the Subaltern School is that now we are able to arrive at indicators of the peoples' subjectivities and it takes shape on their own terms. So the unique contribution of Subaltern historiography is to challenge researchers to identify signifiers of these subjectivities in the location that they are studying whether they might be Dalits, women or Canaanite woman who is in conversation with Jesus. Thus, we are challenged to consider that the subaltern is also 'operating in the theatre of 'cognition'. Of course, Subaltern School does not claim that this consciousness is completely recoverable as the signifiers that we look for may not always reveal it completely or that it may be received signifiers. But the School calls this the "negative consciousness" that emerges out of the negation of dominance, in inversion [as against conversion] or appropriation of the elite perceptions. Spivak, one of the co-travellers of the Collective, makes the following critical statement: "This is the greatest gift of deconstruction: to question the authority of the investigating subject without paralysing him/[her], persistently transforming conditions of impossibility into possibility."²¹ When we want to recover life and subjectivity to a character or people while theologising or capturing their story what we need to do is to activate and enter into the subjectivity as far as possible and then start the reconstruction.

"Maker of his/her own destiny" claim by the Subaltern School is partly problematic because despite the autonomous consciousness they talk about, how the inner subjectivity is produced and whether it is an entirely inner process independent of external impositions is not clearly dealt within this question. But their argument would be that external influences would be appropriated in line with the subjectivity of a people. Subaltern autonomy is not absolute always. It is relative. But it can be within the conscious domain of the subaltern since their aspirations and views of the world have no common ground with the domain of the elite life and politics. So Subaltern School will hold that a subaltern history may reveal the "subject with distinct mind and energy of its own."²²

Subaltern School remains bound to the categorization and intellectual framework of almost two conflictual domains, the domain of the elite and the subaltern. Conflict is the premise on which they work. Thus, there is no

²¹SS IV, 336.

²²SS V, 234.

frame of reference to explore the human experience in the common domain where people interact and movements and communities meet creatively. Moreover, historical discourse need not always be products of two contradictory domains. Many issues with which historians of Christianity in India are dealing with might not be disjuncted movements or groups. Many domains of Christian formations were results of mutuality and complimentary despite the fact that caste and default lines of untouchability still exist within Christian communities. While the elite-subaltern divide will greatly enhance historians' effort to attribute subjectivity to peoples and marginalized groups, critical rejection of such an irreconcilable domain in human experience might not be out of place in our use of this methodology. Because, both in the religious and the cultural space the interface between the dominant and the subordinated will be crucial to perceiving the reality. Indian Christianity and faith articulations are many a time products of hybridity and mutuality. Further, the route of the upward mobility of many Christians was part and parcel of a constant process of continuity and change.

7. Rereading of Texts

This brings us to the issue of sources of historical construction. What are the sources for establishing subalternity considering the given nature of the texts with which we have to work with? How will they counter elitist discourse when most of the literature is produced by the dominant themselves? They deal with it in various ways. Subaltern Studies take text very seriously and as a consequence, the method of reading it. In a sense, by attributing a collective consciousness with an agency of their own for the subalterns, the Subaltern Studies is proposing a theory of reading, which could be called rereading. Their position is that all texts are products of an agenda and there is nothing like a neutral or objective text, narrative or evidence. Every text, knowledge, information is a product of an affiliation, politics and agenda. However, Subaltern Collective has produced tools for critical reading of text in favour of the subaltern, even if the sources of information are almost entirely the creature of the dominant.

Ways of knowing history came under close inspection, especially the literary sources on which historian relies, and in that process culture became one of the focal points from which historians began to view historical happenings and the meaning systems represented in the actions

and the beliefs of the people. So, in that sense Subaltern Studies perceive historiography as a mediator. Thus, the very doing of history of people, particularly of South Asia, takes a shift. So these post-colonial writings broke new grounds in reading or rereading the colonial texts produced by the mind which was committed to a colonial mind-set and who perceived reality within the environment of colonialism, whether they were Indians or foreigners.²³

The aim of the rereading in subaltern methodology is to show how the colonially committed voice which we find in these texts are not only colonial knowledge but how the form of this knowledge includes the subtext of the consciousness of the peasant. So he shows how the decoded text represents the consciousness of the peasant and the original colonial text represents the text of counter-insurgency. This poses definite challenge to historians of Christian mission and related aspects of Christianization in India. Missionary texts could be decoded to bring out the story of the people who were the real subjects of these movements.

When we consider a text in historical research the primary tendency is not only to investigate the context within which the text has been produced but also to establish bias so that historian can arrive at a positive narrative. This should not be the main venture of the historian because every text by the dominant is "produced within well-defined fields of power."²⁴ So the position of subaltern school is that it is the historical discourse which needs to be analysed and not necessarily the bias of the writer of the text. Guha would go to the extend of stating the following: "Criticism must therefore start not by naming a bias but by examining the components of the discourse, vehicle of ideology, for the manner in which these might have combined to describe any particular figure of speech."²⁵ Further, some process of distortion might and should happen when interpreting data from the past as the sources are always distorted in itself due to the fact that all are discourses of subordination or domination. In fact according to subaltern school "an element of distortion is built into the very optics of historiography and, this being the case, the best one can look

²³See a critical reappraisal of Subaltern Studies in David Ludden, ed., *Reading Subaltern Studies*, New Delhi, 2001.

²⁴SS V, 167.

²⁵SS II, 9.

for is to reduce the distance between past consciousness and the historian's perception in order to achieve a closer approximation."²⁶ This is connected to the question of objectivity in history. Our objectivity should come out of our ability to establish the image of self or the subjectivity of a person or a movement under investigation. Still one can only strive to be as objective as possible and subjectivities at various levels will remain as a reality in all discourses.

Subaltern historiography has also raised issues about the relationship between discourse and objectivity. The post-modern position is that there is nothing like objective reality which can be recaptured because all the discourses and language itself are products of power. But Subaltern School points out that although all discourses are subjective and there is nothing like objective history possible through their methodology, they prove that it is possible to unravel certain realities behind the discourse and the text: the text behind the text. So when we read a text what is important is to unravel the power structure behind the production of the discourse and the capturing of the consciousness of the subaltern reflected in the discourse, perhaps negatively. Thus, representations in a discourse have to be translated into a level of representativeness.

8. Redefining Texts

What constitutes a text is also another question that the Subaltern Studies' raises. In fact, one of the criticisms against them was their dependency on literary sources. However, this is not entirely true. There are ample evidences to demonstrate that they redefine the very understanding of text. As a result rumours, myths and popular religiosity, rituals, etc. are all put to critical use to unearth the rebellious consciousness at work in the movements that they study. Recovery of the oral text is also part of the project. The best illustration of that is to be found in the excellent articles by Shahid Amin on Gandhi and popular perceptions of Gandhi in the minds of the subalterns. His work on Gandhian movements show how popular ideas among common people were at radical variance with those of the leadership and in opposition to some of the "basic tenets of

²⁶See Asok Sen "Subaltern Studies: Capital, Class and Community," in *SS V*, 234.

Gandhism itself."²⁷ This challenges studies on Dalits, Tribals and women to explore extra texts available within the non-mainstream literary sources.

The whole premise of the Subaltern Studies based on the elite-subaltern divide, on the one hand, liberates the academia from depending on straightjacket forms to either the class theory or the caste theory. Because there is no "one is to one" relationship between lower caste positioning and economic poverty. Further, most of the studies on the institution of caste now prove that 'caste' has been part of a dynamic process which was in formation all the time and that material conditions have played a role in shaping the dynamics of this formations. On the other hand, the Subaltern School ignores the fact that the fault line of untouchability was perpetuated throughout the history of caste relations, and Dalits were victims of that fault line. How do they account for this not very clear when they hold that caste need not be an exclusive categorical tool in the analysis of Indian society and people. The post-colonial mode of the analytical framework takes away the initiative to look at the equally significant lower caste or Dalit protest movements although several Dalit studies make use of the insights from the Subaltern School in a creative but hybrid manner. What constitutes evidence and what are historical sources are very important issues for subaltern historians. Thus the unwritten, religious cultural 'texts' and orality were brought into the mainstream of historical methodology as against the western methodological tools which emphasise on written documents for evidence. Thus the dismissed and marginalised subjectivity of peoples during the colonial and the post-colonial period is reconstructed through the help of orality. Thus, ultimately the people themselves become the sources for historical writings.

The subaltern perspective, at least partially, seems to have influenced many recent works on the history of Christianity in India. These histories hold that, without considering the subalternity of Dalit Christians, one cannot fully unravel the history of Dalit Christians and their conversions in India. Thus, a re-reading of Christian conversion movements in India is emerging as a result of this realization. Thus these religious conversions are seen in continuity with their pre-Christian belief systems and pre-

²⁷See Shahid Amin, "Approver's Testimony, Judicial Discourse: The Case of Chauri Chaura," *SS V*, 166.

existing rebellious consciousness. These historians who use the Subaltern perspective explain how Dalit conversion movements in India were clear protest movements against the dominant castes on the basis of their own autonomous subjectivity. The most significant contribution of this subaltern strand in the historiography of Christianity is the effort of historians to enter into the arena of belief systems, and cultures of peoples involved. The worldview of Dalits, influenced by beliefs in spirits, gods and goddesses, especially offers a rich field of research. Oral tradition and oral texts have found a prominent place in this method of research. Religio-cultural continuities and discontinuities in subaltern Christianity are made clearer through these historical studies. The works of Dick Kooiman, George Oommen, Geoffrey Oddie, etc. are some partial attempts to demonstrate how the subaltern perspective can be a very useful tool in writing the history of Christian Dalit movements.²⁸

One of the major contributions of the influence and the role of social theories is that it helps the historian to discover and unearth the hidden and silenced spaces in history. So historians should use critical tools offered by modern theories such as Subaltern Studies. It will definitely enhance the process of deconstruction and decategorization which is vital to the doing of history and recapturing of the inner and deeper attitudes, ideas and beliefs of peoples and movements. However, at no moment historians should declare their subservience to a theory. Wherever theory may distort actual 'facts' and 'truths', and above all the subjectivity of the past, it should be applied cautiously. The ultimate test of the relevance of a theory or theories' in historical research should be the recovery of the subjective experience of the past.

²⁸Dick Kooiman, *Conversion and Social Equality*, Delhi, 1994; George Oommen, "Dalit Conversion and Social Protest in Travancore 1854-1890," in *Bangalore Theological Forum*, 27 (September-December 1996); George Oommen, "Re-reading Tribal Conversion Movements: The Case of the Malayarayangans of Kerala, 1848-1900," in *Religion and Society*, 44 (June 1997); George Oommen, "Strength of Tradition and Weakness of Communication: Central Kerala Dalit Conversion," in Geoffrey Oddie ed., *Religious Conversion Movements in South Asia: Continuities and Changes*, UK, 1997,