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The Subaltern Kashmiri: Exploring Alternative Approaches in the Analysis of Secession

by Dustie Spencer
MRes Programme South Asian Studies

Abstract

The Subaltern Studies group re-visited historiography in an approach that sought to extend voices to the voiceless actors in South Asian history: the peasants, insurgents, women, and others seen as subjugated by elitist, colonialist discourses through the re-evaluation of texts, documents, and alternative sources. Although an alternative, theoretical framework has been adopted by the disciplines of history and anthropology, the political sciences tend to operate on a top-down approach and do not adequately incorporate subaltern voices. Using the secessionist movement in Kashmir as a case study, this essay aims to explore the concept of subalternity and how it may be incorporated as an alternative perspective in which to analyse, interpret, and find solutions to contemporary internecine conflicts, useful to academics and policymakers.

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Introduction

The Kashmir dispute has been widely regarded as the most serious impasse in India-Pakistan relations since the birth of the two countries, after the British withdrew from the subcontinent in 1947. Yet even before then, Kashmiri Muslims had begun to forge an identity based largely on perceived oppression by the less populous Hindu Dogras (Zutshi, 2004). After independence and several subsequent wars, the *de facto* border, the Line of Control (LoC) was demarcated between Indian-Administered (IAK) and Pakistan-Administered (PAK) Jammu and Kashmir. At this time, Kashmiris comprised the majority of the Kashmir Valley in IAK, which will be the focus of this discussion. For generations, Kashmiris have been fighting for greater autonomy and more freedom from their perceived oppressors in modern times: the Indian Union Government. Although given a significant amount of autonomy constitutionally through Article 370, the State of Jammu and Kashmir has a history of New Delhi meddling in its internal affairs, rigging elections, and has been accused of being passive on human rights' abuses perpetrated by Indian security forces, especially in the Kashmir Valley. As Cockell suggests, this sense of collective persecution has led to a growing ethno-nationalist subaltern identity (2000). This Kashmiri identity, or *Kashmiriyat*, it is argued, is one of the primary motivations for politically mobilizing Kashmiris (Dasgupta, 2005, p240). It could follow then, that this subaltern identification has led to several generations of Kashmiris calling for greater autonomy, or outright independence from India.

The Kashmir separatist movement has come in and out of the limelight over the years, but has never left the interested academic bored with new theories or methodologies through which to analyse the ongoing conflict. In the tradition of realism, Kashmir has been analysed in terms of an Indo-Pakistan conflict; one which has gained international attention as being the first big test – and subsequent failure – of the United Nations (Schaffer, 2009, p17). Although Schaffer and others offer a concise account of political negotiations and events relating to the conflict, they fall short of offering a truly Kashmiri perspective. The political sciences and international relations remain saturated by scholars that undertake a more neo-realist or neo-liberalist evaluation of the conflict. Paul (2005), for example, claims that the conflict is more of an 'enduring rivalry' between India and Pakistan, rather than an intractable, intra-state conflict. The truth is that the Kashmir conflict is both an 'old war' as well as a 'new war', and therefore needs to be evaluated with an approach reflecting the dynamics of ground realities. Whereas the paradigmatic theories and methodologies historians have deployed to analyse historical events and discourses have evolved to incorporate a greater comprehension of subaltern actors, international relations theorists have largely been reticent to follow suit. Likewise, Subaltern Studies as a means to study *history* from below fails to reflect contemporary situations where the modern subalterns are underrepresented. Rather than scrapping Subaltern Studies as a passing fad, this essay argues that a subaltern approach can be most useful as a means to study *politics* from below. Being a disputed territory in South Asia and also a seemingly intractable conflict, Kashmir is a prime case for which to study the subaltern element within the context of a grander international relations theory.

Subaltern Studies and its Critics

South Asian and Orientalist studies at large, as posited by scholars such as Edward Said, have been formulated by a Western, imperialist interpretation of history that unjustly removes the agency of the subjected 'Other' through the dominant forces of colonialism. As a departure from elitist and colonial discourse, Marxist scholars such as Antonio Gramsci set the precedent for the Subaltern Studies discipline, which seeks to apply a revisionist historiography, giving voice and agency back to the subjugated masses and peasants. Viewing history through this alternative lens is what gave birth to the discipline of Subaltern Studies. Although the discipline has had much debate among members of its core group and has adopted a variety of methodologies and theoretical frameworks that has given it a certain mutability that makes it relevant today, As Chatterjee (2012) suggests, the discipline is in need of a revision that can adapt to a more modern paradigm that places it appropriately in contemporary India. Analyses of contemporary collective mobilization movements have been sparsely contextualized through the lens of the subaltern, but just after the Kashmiri insurgency of the 1990s had died down, Cockell (2000) attempted to do just that. In the inter-disciplinary domain of international relations, the inclusion of such theoretical frameworks as subaltern identity as an alternative perspective for evaluating modern conflicts can widen the narrow scope of neo-realism and neo-liberalism which have been status quo theories (Ayooob, 2002, p28).

Gyan Prakesh, part of the editorial group of the Subaltern Studies collective, states that the notion of the subaltern is:

drawn from Antonio Gramsci's writings [and] refers to subordination in terms of class, caste, gender, race, language, and culture and was used to signify the centrality of dominant/dominated relationships in history (1994:1477).

Gramsci, a Marxist imprisoned under the fascist regime of Mussolini, developed theories of cultural hegemony and subaltern identity, which later impacted a multitude of scholars and disciplines. The basic principles of the Subaltern project was based on the rejection of the predominate discourses of nationalism and elite bias in previous historical writing, Marxist notions of modernity as 'progress,' and the colonialist or imperialist doctrine that removes agency from the non-elites. Essentially, the Subaltern Study group's aim was to "restore history to the subordinated" (Prakesh, 1994, p1477). Furthermore, the approach was a departure from 'empirically' evaluating the peasant rebel as a "member of a class, but not as an entity whose will and reason constituted the praxis called rebellion" (Prakesh, 1994, p.1478). Works such as Guha's 1983 book *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency* were primarily aimed at a more comprehensive understanding of the Indian peasantry under British colonialism. Other essays in the *Subaltern Studies* collection have grown to include the subaltern 'untouchable' castes, religious minorities, and women. In addition to Guha's vague use of the *Concise Oxford Dictionary* that describes the subaltern as someone of 'inferior rank,' he continues to suggest that the subaltern is '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' (1988, p35). Although one cannot deny the putative political correctness of this definition, it is largely ambivalent and highly subjective. There has been much debate over who exactly can be classified as a subaltern. As stated earlier in this essay, Spivak argues that although there is not a singular homogenous subaltern, there are groups that a subaltern can fit into, albeit with some fluidity and ability for mobility into other categories (1988, p284). Bayly also raises the questions of who was actually considered to be a subaltern, and goes so far as to criticize Subaltern Studies for marginalizing those that don't fit neatly into the 'peasant' category (Bayly, 2008, p116).

Taking an interpretivist stance, who counts as a contemporary subaltern is largely a matter of perception. The implication is that academics and policymakers are in need of identifying the subaltern in conflict situations so as not to overlook these important actors and stakeholders in the process of conflict transformation and resolution.

As of Bayly's review of the first five volumes of *Subaltern Studies*, he noted that "The subaltern authors have not yet deployed a mass of new statistical material and indigenous records nor have they made much use of the techniques of oral history to supplement the colonial documentation" (1988, p111). In defence of this, however, the sheer difficulty of locating sources outside of those in colonial documentation is highlighted by the fact that "Indian peasants had left no sources, no documents from which their own 'voice' could be retrieved" (Prakesh, 1994, p1480). Chatterjee does, however, recognize the lack of sources that could have been integrated had there been more methodological rigor in the implementation. Because the historical transition from empirical inquiry to the inclusion of pragmatic ethnography had been slowly shifted into the foreground by Subaltern Studies, this may advent the inclusion of visual and popular culture sources (2012, p48). Despite the need for a revision of the Subaltern Studies discipline, Chatterjee only passively mentions how future historians of South Asia can progress the discipline by utilizing the "...panoply of modern technologies of communication..." (2012, p49). Indeed, in much discourse on the use of cyberpolitics, it would seem that Subaltern Studies could benefit greatly through the excavation of internet resources where many voiceless actors are granted a voice in the new mediums available. A critique raised of politics in general – and in the case of Kashmir studies in particular – is that political scientists tend to avoid ethnographic methods, even as a complementary tool. As a tool in general, it can provide the links of micro-scale ground realities to grander themes of power politics (Bayard de Volo & Schatz, 2004). In the case of Kashmir, ethnographic methods can be utilized to engage with the subaltern actors, often under-served in Kashmir discourses. It is through the exploration of alternative, more progressive methodologies that the researcher may 'hear' the voice of the subaltern.

Another predominate criticism of Subaltern Studies is the binary logics of 'elites' and 'non-elites.' Ludden describes this dichotomous barrier as a "concrete slab separating upper and lower space in a two storey building" (2001, p10). He further notes how this "hard dichotomy alienated subalternity from social histories that included more than two storeys or which move among them" (ibid.). This essentialising of the categories echoes the critics of the Marxist distinction between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie which does not take into account class mobility. However, Spivak defends this criticism by suggesting that Guha proposed a 'dynamic stratification grid' which refutes the essentializing or the bifurcation of categories, instead insisting on the heterogeneity of the categories (1988, p284). Chatterjee also addresses the issue of this dichotomy by suggesting that subalternity needs to be re-defined in a modern era where there is a more complex 'framework of democratic citizenship' (2012, p46).

The Subaltern Kashmiri

A dominant theme of Subaltern Studies is the idea that a subaltern identity may be shaped in some way by a shared collective consciousness or identity, whereby heterogeneous subaltern groups have a consistently "unchanging character: that is, the notion of resistance to the imposed domination of the elite class" (Louai, 2001, p6). Spivak and Guha both discuss the idea that there is a subaltern consciousness of sorts. Despite the acknowledgement that these are not simple binary 'us' versus

'them' logics and that there are no dynamics that essentialize the non-elites as subalterns, group identity as a social and political construct is not denied. Indeed, as Guha and others re-visit the peasant rebel or insurgent as a collection of subalterns, Cockell (2000, p321) describes the Kashmiri subaltern identity as a collective consciousness borne of "the historical experience of discrimination and exclusion [which] serves to heighten the shared perception of a core commonality and shared values which may serve as the foundation for collective action..." This collective consciousness is identifiable by the common call for *azadi*, or freedom, in Kashmir. Elsewhere in South Asia, sub-national movements may also reflect a collective, subaltern consciousness and share similarities to the nationalist movements and revolts against Great Britain (Mitra, 1996, p14).

Cockell affirms that in the case of Kashmir, the collective Kashmir identity is a subaltern identity because of the Kashmiri's inferior political relationship with the dominant political institution (2000, p332). Writing in the aftermath of the full-scale insurgency in Kashmir, he suggests that Kashmiris have asserted an "autonomous insurgent consciousness' based on the theoretical components of the '...genealogical aspect of ethnicity in nationalist mobilization, and...the particular salience of such nationalist mobilization for *post-colonial* ethnic politics" (2000, p321). Despite the contradictions that a model of nationalism creates within the framework of a subaltern argument, Cockell purports that *ethno-nationalism* is not the same as a statist version of nationalism (ibid). Although implicating the subaltern identity, the arguments of a collective *ethno-national* identity are echoed in other works, such as Ganguly's (1996). Cockell continues to highlight the *ethnic* aspect of ethno-nationalism by suggesting that this identification with a common ethnicity, which has been developed and strengthened over years of continued subjugation, remains more salient than other identity markers such as religion or class (2000, p322). By consulting a Chatham House study, 'Kashmir: Paths to Peace,' it would seem that those districts of the State most in support of a separate nation-state is the Kashmiri-dominated Valley (Bradnock, 2010).

Although the subalterns of Jammu and Kashmir have scores of varying regional, ethnic, linguistic, and religious identities as explored in literature on identity politics, such as Chowdhary's *Identity Politics in Jammu and Kashmir* (2010) and Malik's *Kashmir: Ethnic Conflict, International Dispute* (2005), there has been much debate about whether or not there is any overarching communal consciousness to sustain a cohesive political movement based on any single identity alone. In fact, when juxtaposing the analysis of academic works with that of online chatting and blogging, there is a sharp contrast between some overarching Kashmiri identity and that of the Kashmiri *Muslim* identity (Spencer, 2010). Zutshi (2004) also describes the overlapping of these salient identity markers. The *only* common theme, regardless of how dynamic or loose the definition may be, is that those who are mobilizing *feel* they are being unfairly subjugated in some way; that their voices are not being heard. Whether through political pressure, a violent insurgency, massive demonstrations, or stone pelting, the politically active Kashmiri associates him- or herself with a subaltern identity.

The Subaltern in International Relations

Although an extensive discussion of Indian foreign policy is beyond the scope of this essay, it is worth noting at least cursorily that India's foreign policy itself has not fit neatly into a Western framework like 'realism' or 'liberalism.' India's policy of non-alignment, for example, was a denunciation of Cold War *realpolitik* of competing hegemonic world powers. Hewitt (1997) argues this policy was in part based on India's attempt at becoming a great regional power. This strategy,

liberal economic reforms, India's intervention in Sri Lanka, and the country's nuclear posturing with Pakistan have created confusion in foreign policy analyses. For example, Ayoob (2002) interprets Indian policy towards Kashmir as a post-colonial state's attempt to consolidate power. Ayoob argues that India has been unjustly pressured to cede to hegemonic Western doctrines. In his view India is a subaltern state, and he argues for 'subaltern realism' (2002). Where his arguments falls flat according to human rights' advocates is when he essentially vindicates Indian abuses and state repression in Kashmir by arguing that these actions are "for consolidating state authority" and should be distinguished from "...purely predatory activities of self-seeking rulers who are interested...in privatizing the state to enrich and empower themselves" (Ayoob, 2002, p46). Regardless of how the conflict is perceived outside of Kashmir or portrayed in mainstream Indian media, state repression is very much perceived in Kashmir as a predatory action by the Indian government and the 700,000 troops stationed there. Whereby India may perceive itself as a subaltern entity vis-à-vis Western powers, advocates of an independent Kashmir may perceive their state to be subaltern vis-à-vis India – the growing global powerhouse occupying disputed territory.

One of the most distinguishing features of Cockell's argument is his criticism of the arguments of prominent Kashmir experts, who repeatedly place the Kashmir conflict within the framework of institutional decay or under the guise of a fundamental Islamic insurgency (2000, p325). Overused explanations of the current situation in Kashmir are second only to the Indo-Pakistan dialogue, which seemingly extinguishes Kashmiris completely from the conflict as autonomous actors. Despite Cockell's dismissal of institutional decay, this argument does seem to hold merit. Ganguly (1996) analyzes the breakdown of institutions in the state which paved the way to the violent uprisings of the 1990s, exacerbated by an influx of Islamist militants from Pakistan. Had Kashmiris been given the option of voicing their dissent through a fair electoral process, he argues, they would have been less likely to opt for the militant option. The failure to uphold autonomy of Kashmir, to hold a plebiscite as a means to discover what political destiny Kashmiris wanted, the more recent violent repression and human rights violations, and the over-bearing presence of military camps and check-points have contributed to the supporting of a collective subaltern, Kashmiri consciousness. These politically conscious subalterns are weary of their subjugation and eager to let their voices be heard. If indeed history has a tendency to repeat itself and Kashmiris continue be denied a forum to voice their dissent, the dangerous consequences are readily apparent.

In conceptualizing the subaltern in a contemporary political movement, it would not be useful to construct an image of a peasant during the British Raj, but rather of the contemporary Indian peasant (Chatterjee, 2012, p45). The same can be said for the subaltern Kashmiri. The historical construct of ruling authorities residing 'outside the bounds of the peasant community' (Chatterjee, 2012, p46) no longer applies in an India where "the activities of the government have penetrated deep into the everyday lives of rural people and affect matters like the supply of water to their fields or electricity to their homes...transport...schooling, public health services..." (Chatterjee, 2012, p47). There is dynamism and an intersection between the call of secession and the need for issues of local governance. Despite decades of insurgency, inter-state war, and political turmoil, Kashmiris, soldier on. As Chatterjee points out, there is a distinction between politics of sovereignty and the more "...ordinary stuff of democratic politics..." (2012, p47). After the Amarnath land grab controversy over the transferring of Kashmiri lands (on a Hindu pilgrimage site) sparked protests in both Jammu and Kashmir from Hindus and Muslims, the Indian government placed a positive

spin on the turnout of voters for local *panchayat* elections (Tremblay, 2009). As Tremblay suggested (and events since then have alluded), Kashmiri support for *azadi* has not waned, but Kashmiris understand the need to engage with their local governments while in pursuit of *azadi*, as a means to continue to go about their daily lives the best they can (ibid).

In his critique of Subaltern Studies, Bayly questions the implication of the peasant's "...occasional and diverse moments of resistance..." whereby the question is raised "...why peasant, tribal or workers' movements occurred at particular times and not at others..." (1988, p114). This suggests a discontinuity in the peasant movement over time. In the case of Kashmir, people didn't suddenly stop agitating for *azadi* or for more autonomy at some points, and spontaneously erupted into protests or insurgency at others; but they adopted different methods for agitation at different times. It could be a more concise question, however, if we asked what specific events led to subsequent violence, for example. The absence of violence is not acquiescence with the ruling elite. As Cockell purports, the adoption of violence only occurs after attempts at engaging in non-violent means to illicit change (2000). As a young Kashmiri in the Channel 4 documentary *Trails of Torture* (2012) contends, he is not going to just become a suicide bomber overnight, but if everything is lost, that's when he would not care anymore.

Conclusion

Failure to include the 'Other' in historical textual analysis is, in a sense, the failure to include any supporting cast in a production. The analysis of the 'Other' as a departure from elite, colonial texts can also guide the contemporary discourse of disciplines other than those traditionally associated with Subaltern Studies, such as history and anthropology. However, the inclusion of the 'Other' in reaching a deeper understanding of the context of modern popular political movements can add depth to other disciplines of social science. As Chatterjee (2012) asserts, the discipline of Subaltern Studies is in need of revision in order to make it relevant for today's political context. This unfortunately and invariably means that problems such as who exactly a subaltern is today are left without a rigorous framework for analysis. In the context of Kashmir specifically, the subaltern represents a somewhat negotiable position in the secessionist movement, and as such there needs to be flexibility in analyses and methods within which to advance the study of the subaltern identity in contemporary secessionist movements. Although the most vocal in the conflict are those who are either activists who do not fear reprisal from the Indian government or those using new media as a means for voicing their discontent, there are many who have suffered as a direct result of a central Indian authority in Kashmir, and they remain marginalized. A more dynamic approach then is required if academics and policymakers are to better understand the dynamics of grievances in this, and other, separatist movements. As Spivak affirmed in the words of Louai (2012, p7), "...the task of an intellectual is to pave way for the subaltern groups and let them speak freely for themselves." Regardless of the discipline or the methodologies utilized, it is the duty of the academic to ensure that these voices are being 'heard' and analysed so as to justly represent them where they would otherwise be condemned to silence.

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