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PROBLEMATICS OF THE SUBALTERN'S VOICE IN LAGAAN

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Abstract

In this paper, commencing with the brief introduction of Subaltern Studies, we discuss it in relation with the movie Lagaan. The movie is studied from the viewpoint of the voice of the subaltern and its complexes. We also see how the (film) art works towards building a national identity.

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Introduction

“Iss aetihask jeet ke baad bhi itihask main Bhuvan ka naam kahi kho gaya”
(Even after the historical win, Bhuvan lost his identity in the history of struggle)

- Lagaan

Indian independence battle is famous for its peaceful struggle against the colonizers, its Gandhian principles, non co-operation movement, etc. The recent historiographers and scholars felt that the struggle and the history had been contrived under the influence of both the colonialists as well as indigenous elite and therefore the voices of the ‘people from below’ have been incompetent in getting registered with in the presentations and representations of history. Such people (and their history) from below are, what Ranajit Guha, called ‘subalterns’ and their study therefore as Subaltern Studies. Subalterns basically in Gramsci’s terminology meant ‘inferior rank’, but Ranajit Guha broadened this term to include all oppressed groups—peasantry, working class, untouchables, females and the other classes.

Between the world of politics on the one hand and the economic processes of the capitalist transformation on the other, there is the kind of mental space within which the social forms of existence and consciousness of the people are all their own—strong and enduring in their own right and therefore free of manipulations by the dominant groups.¹

¹ Javeed Alam, ‘Peasantry, Politics, and Historiography,’ in Reading Subaltern Studies, ed. David Ludden, (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2002), pg. 43-44

The above assumption of Javeed Alam is the strong critique of the fact that conventional historiographers—colonialists and nationalists—who through their deliberate efforts have intended to justify their respective actions (colonialist in the politics of colonizing and the nationalist in the politics of representation) by treating the subalterns of Indian subcontinent as devoid of consciousness and so, their inability of making their own history and also, lack of leadership qualities which made nationalist (-bourgeoisie) to represent them. The ‘mental space’ which Alam mentions, according to Guha, works for its own and therefore, is called ‘autonomous domain’; neither originated from elite politics nor did its existence depend on the latter². It is through such an ‘autonomous domain’ that the subalterns resist the tyrannical attitude of the ruling classes. It is because elites failed in crediting the people of their contributions and also did not acknowledge their interest. This in essence, gave rise to the ‘autonomous domain’, which seems to work towards class interest (since it operates outside the elite politics) and results in subalterns’ insurgency, which means that such a revolt on the part of peasants or the class representing subalterns, arises mainly due to the dislocation of their desires, interest and their identity and this may not necessarily be of nationalistic approach. Such an autonomous domain can very well be depicted in the Bollywood movie *Lagaan*.

In this movie, which exhibits the peasants’ revolt, we see that colonial administration and its intervention though present, is not the major concern of the movie than to fight for their right. And they, i.e. the villagers, had been aware or conscious as were the peasants in actual, of the injustice done to them (giving *lagaan* or tax every year), but when they had felt exploited, they revolted and this indeed united the whole community, in which, peasants of different caste and religion came together to rebel. For such a situation Guha says that “There is an invariant notion of resistance to elite domination and this is due to the common condition of exploitation.”³

In connection to the movie, we find that the approach is diachronic but the application is synchronic. Through the plight of peasants and villagers, movie succeeds in representing the plight of the whole peasantry in the history. But “The creation of the synthetic space of the pristine village community without any conflicts and contradictions gives the necessary unity that bourgeois national-ism requires. It (*Lagaan*) effaces the history of Awadh, especially the fact that the United Provinces was a ‘landlord province’.”⁴

Nissim Manathukkaren in his essay explicates the true story behind the scene. This indeed brings at stage the major problem of representation of such an issue within the film as art work. Indeed, it is a commercial film of twenty first century and not the low budget documentary/art movie and so movie takes taste of the audience (to which it succumbs slightly and therefore to the ‘synthetic space’) and the theme at work, simultaneously. Does that mean that such kinds of movies are then deceptive artwork? Or the theme in the movie has misrepresented the history? Or is this movie then shares the implicit indigenous elite/bourgeois-nationalist attitude?

To us, the conceptualisation of ‘art’ and ‘film’ seems bifurcated; where an art film confines itself as an esoteric interest. This may be reasoned out as the dramatic change in the taste of the viewers which has distinctified the art film and commercial film. There could then be a little respite as far as *Lagaan* “effaces the history of Awadh”. Again, the conundrum of indigenous elite/bourgeois-nationalist attitude of the movie can be explained through the words of Marx quoted in Spivak’s essay ‘Can the Subaltern Speak’: “They have no other aim but the immediate one of overthrowing the existing government, and they profoundly despise the more theoretical enlightenment of the workers as to their class interest: Thus their anger—not *proletarian* but *plebeian*...”⁵

Plebeian is thought of as commoner, uncultured and coarse and therefore more derogatory as compared to the proletariat who relatively is more rational. Within the film, the villagers are not shown as uncultured or plebeian, though uneducated but quite aware and deeply rooted culture wise. As the movie nears to the end, we find out that

² Javeed Alam, pg. 46

³ Guha, Studies 1, pg. 4

⁴ Nissim Mannathukkaren, ‘Subalterns, Cricket and the 'Nation': The Silences of 'Lagaan,' in Economic and Political Weekly, pg. 45

⁵ Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak, ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’, in Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture, ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1988), pg. 273

the whole Chhavani itself gets uprooted and relocates itself at the princely state of Raj Ghat. The villagers unite together and form a cricket team, a game of royals and uniting towards the 'class interest'. The team learns the game (vaguely and not exactly theoretical enlightenment)⁶ and defeats the English team and by doing so, the villagers discard the category 'plebeian' as mentioned by Marx. They are not pushing their "immediate" aim of "overthrowing the existing government", but revolted only when they perceived the dislocation of their rights. This implies that the movie in one sense is not promoting the bourgeois-nationalist viewpoint. Indeed, there are other factors as well like the role of other subalterns (Indian females, minority, untouchables and alike) and role of white women Elizabeth and keeping the elite nationalism at the outskirts, which we will discuss later.

Empirically, an incident of insurgence viz. Chauri Chaura incident of 1922, when the mob of angry citizen killed 23 policemen and set the Chowki at fire, can be seen as prototype of subalterns' revolts and such an incident qualifies Marx's contention regarding plebeians. The movie of course relatively portrays the safer aspect concerned only with subalterns' elevation and conjecture of their voice's presence in the history of struggle. But as far as the Chauri Chaura incident is concerned, Gandhi withdrew his Non Co-operation movement owing to the fact that masses had still not learnt the meaning of peace and this movement. There were indeed those who believed in Gandhi's principles and therefore ridiculed the violence of the mobs. The question arises that then how the masses (or the subalterns) would have reacted? we think it is the result of what Ranajit Guha calls 'the politics of the people'⁷; where 'the people', adjusting themselves 'to the condition prevailing under the Raj and in many respect developing entirely new strains in both form and content'⁸ and where the tilted adjustments are resolved through insurgence. It may not necessarily be the freedom struggle than their demand of appropriate 'meat price'. This could be seen as how the subalterns (or the masses) were caught in the cobweb of deceptive or false ideology of national elite which either quilted or evaded the basic social problems of subalterns. Probably, such kind of politics of nationalism, therefore, failed to unite the masses for struggle as a whole. *Lagaan* in eluding the above stated problems, attempts in the permutation and combination of probabilities which project the film towards the simple yet complicated endeavour of Guha to detect the 'history from below'.

The phrase 'history from below', sets up the base for the voices of subalterns once their importance and pertinence to the political/ apolitical history is recognised. But are these voices really their own? There is, in fact, (if one takes the term 'subaltern' as derogatory) only thin line of 'conscience' which segregates subaltern scholars from those intellectuals who invest their conscience in appropriating the colonial project as benevolent. For what really could have been the voice of subalterns is what Vinay Bahl explicitly writes:

The In short, subaltern studies left out from their consideration material culture, such as clothes, food, furniture, living and working conditions, housing, technology, and financial system, and failed to show how material culture is produced by human agency in the process of social interaction. Moreover, this material culture is also important in the formation of the value culture of people along with the psychic activity of the brain. Besides leaving out the material aspect of people's culture, the subaltern studies' approach is not even capable of creating any emancipatory politics for the masses in whose name it came into existence.⁹

The juxtaposition of innumerable endeavours towards textual approach has ripped the intellectuals off their original commitment of representation of subalterns out and apart of hegemonical history, if one has to believe in Vinay Bahl's argument. Even from the viewpoint of nationalistic concern, such particular analyses were very important. Such a probe is necessary in understanding the psyche behind the pattern in which their knowledge or consciousness reaches their abode as far as 'material culture' and 'social interaction' are concerned. Consciousness among

⁶ Obviously, this theoretical enlightenment is not really what Marx meant. But the scene in movie *Lagaan* We are referring to is where Elizabeth teaches the villagers cricket 'theoretically' by making the circle in the ground with a stick and describes the meaning of pitch, wicket, batting, fielding, etc and enlightens them of such a game of gentlemen. My view is that they simply did not absurdly go around but defeated the English men in a systematic way.

⁷ Javeed Alam, pg. 45

⁸ Spivak, Can the Subaltern Speak?, pg. 284

⁹ Vinay Bahl, 'The Decline of the Subaltern in Subaltern Studies,' in Reading Subaltern Studies, ed. David Ludden, (Delhi: Permanent Black,2002) pg. 359

subalterns is reflected in 'knowledge of materials that constitute society'¹⁰. The incomplete knowledge regarding the subject class may also deter in the project of representation. The politics of representation also creates trouble for the original voice of subalterns in being effective. Spivak enumerates the distinction between the two version of representation; that is, representation as *proxy* or *vertreten* as in politics; and, representation as re-presentation i.e. portrait (*darstellen*), as in art. In the essay by Spivak, *Can the Subaltern Speak?* We find the session between Foucault and Deleuze— '*the unguarded practice of conversation*'—where she depict the problem behind the conflation of both version of representation; that is, *vertreten* and *darstellen*, due to which either the subaltern's voice comes as secondary or otherwise loses its potency and therefore becomes mute.

Such a situation can be explained with the help of the film *Lagaan*. Considering the film as intellectual's work (*darstellen*), we discover that the voice of representative (as representation) of the subaltern, Bhuvan, is not altogether his own. Since in the work of art, much depends on artist (director), so the artist's voice becomes imperative in relation to Bhuvan's voice. So Bhuvan's voice is much the matter of conscience of the artist, who is working under the directive and influential force of dramatic taste of viewers. Inevitably, the voice of Bhuvan (as *vertreten*) is actually the product of *darstellen* (re-presentation). It here becomes apparent that locating the voice of subaltern is a very tough task, since the real voice is not real so the truth value contained in it will always be ambiguous. The voice of subalterns seems inaccessible until and unless they undertake the task of both *proxy* and *portrait*.

There is yet another important fact within the film and that is the conceptualization of subalterns as 'Other', the standpoint from which hints the existence of the relation between 'Raja Sahib' and the villagers. Chandrima Chakraborty argues that the "Colonialist historiography, as various critics have elucidated, aided and abetted the more overt brutalities of colonisation by creating the categories of 'other,' which were used for the subjection and objectification of the naive societies to justify the imperial processes of discrimination, subordination and oppression."¹¹

Within the category of 'other', Raja Sahib—who otherwise might be viewed as feudal lord— had associative function in the film. In relation to the British government, Raja ji seems to work on their behalf as a 'privileged' among other minions. Of course, by doing so he cannot escape from the accusation against him and his class in history as tyrannical. Such an attitude of Raja and his class is quite Hobbesian in nature and the reason behind it is that 'the object of men's desire is not to enjoy once only, and for one instant of time; but to assure forever, the way for his future desire'¹². His desire for fame and to rule; and colonizer's acting as 'Common Power', fell doubly upon the villagers. This in effect, brings the politics of people in focus where the problematic is various. The logistics of such a domain of people is taken over by many determinants like religion, independence as economic factor, social inter/intra- action, and alike. The presence of white lady as *vertreten* reflects the failure of indigenious/ elite nationalist who were unable to pervade the consciousness among masses, and the masses in return had varied notions regarding their social position after the attainment of independence. We conceive of white lady i.e. Elizabeth as 'white teaching (educating) the subaltern (Brown natives) his/her own culture (cricket)'. Fulfilment of such a basic necessity (education of cricket) not only helped the villagers to unite for the cause and have confidence in them but also to win the game. Gauri and other females' roles are also subordinating in nature confined to the task of fulfilment of companionship. Historically as well, females had never had the voice of their own and led the life of 'other within the other', always staying at the outskirts of the main stream. Kachra, an untouchable and Bagha, a dumb, are not the part of conventional society; they have no family and with Bagha the villagers had a kind of disinterested harmonical relation which is more based on utility. Here, the problem of females and the others (untouchable and disable) as Other within the subalterns indicate the identical problem which the subalterns faced from the nation point of view, that is, of consciousness but the subaltern Other always remained a step behind the subalterns. Raja Sahib and elites were kept outside the subalterns' abode and this was necessary so that subalterns' abode comes to light.

¹⁰ Spivak, pg. 286

¹¹ Chandrima Chakraborty, 'Subaltern Studies, Bollywood and "Lagaan",' in Economic and Political Weekly, , pg. 18

¹² Thomas Hobbes, 'Of the difference in Manners,' Leviathan, ed. Ricahrd E. Flathman and David Johnson, (New York: Norton & Company), pg. 55

We think in doing this, the movie has achieved almost what the subaltern scholars have been trying to attempt, which is, wiping out the politics of 'above' and representing the possibilities of 'below' or rather making 'below' at par 'above'.

We, hereby, conclude my term paper by mentioning the importance of art and framing of national identity through it. Film art through such attempts develop a sense of belongingness, where viewers irrespective of caste, creed or colour, come together and discuss the issue at hand, privileges over other forms of art or researches by art pupil. In any era, the national belongingness arises out of the emotional attachment with ancestral property, whether concrete or abstract, which forms their identity, propels the ideologies and such ideologies are the base of nation building. Film art, as has *Lagaan*, succeeded in demonstrating the national identity through preserving the land of subalterns because if they are unable to give tax/lagaan then they will have to lose their land, which is equivalent to national property, either to zamindars or to Britishers and the cricket being symbolical of the revolt is won by subalterns. This cannot be ignored that the failure in locating of voice of subalterns is a bitter truth. The subaltern studies and its implementation in art seem utopian in nature with its thrust invested in finding the proper equipment in staging the voice of subalterns. The complexity of voice may also be in the fact that colonialist historiographers curbed their voice from the very origin itself which means that in explicating the imperial or national project from the vantage point, the chances of oppressed class's voice has only diminished since then.

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