

Response: Dalit Studies and the Figure of the 'Subaltern' in Kerala

Sanal Mohan, *Mahatma Gandhi University (Kerala)*

Critical history writing, as Gyanendra Pandey says in his interview, as 'minority history' writing, will continue to be there, contributing to, as he observes further, 'in small ways changing the world'. I consider this optimism of a historian/social scientist very important in our times.

Having lived for the most part of my life in Kerala, teaching in a state university, I have observed the ways in which concepts and categories of critical history-writing travelled across the academia from the metropolis down to the small towns and provincial universities where a certain kind of translation of concepts and categories took place. There must also have been a travelling back of vernacular concepts and categories, though I am not in a position to provide the routes of such an intellectual traffic. Therefore, I wish to restrict my part here to an engagement with the central issues raised by Pandey.

Unlike prominent academic institutions in many parts of India, where radical historians and social scientists worked through the categories opened up by Subaltern Studies, the academic institutions in Kerala did not see a comparable intellectual response. As I have argued elsewhere, in the early 1990s small groups of Dalit activists including college teachers formed collectives that referred to themselves as Subaltern Studies groups and had discussions and seminars oriented mostly towards problematizing Dalit history and political-economic questions that had a bearing on Dalit life. Interestingly, this engagement with Dalit history happened much before Subaltern Studies historians themselves started moving towards problematizing caste questions or Dalit history, as Pandey mentions.

The period I am referring to here is 1993-95, when a small NGO, Dalit Women's Society, in the village of Kurichy near Kottayam in Kerala, began conducting discussion on Subaltern Studies. The person who led the study group was T. M. Yesudasan, a much respected scholar of English Literature (teaching at C. M. S. College, Kottayam), who knew very well the nuances of the Subaltern

Studies project as it had evolved in South Asian history writing, and seemed to have accepted the term 'subaltern' as a generic term describing the condition of Dalits. In the Malayalam vernacular context, the term 'subaltern' is translated as *Keezhalar*, which is not a term that would be used by any other social group or class, including the working class, as a self-referential term. However, it was acceptable to Dalits as a self-referential term.

Although I am not arguing that there was a misrecognition of the term 'subaltern' in the vernacular context of Malayalam, the identification of 'subaltern' with *Keezhalar* was the direct result of the above-mentioned Dalit intellectual group's seizure and productive use of the critical category of 'subaltern', perhaps much to the amazement of the original Subaltern Studies collective. I reiterate this particular example to show the significance of the vernacular translation of the concept of 'subaltern', which was in fact very powerful in providing a new imagination to the Dalit activists although it was a small group. The simultaneity of the social time inhabited by the Subaltern Studies scholarship and the Dalit intellectual endeavors in Kerala was never recognized properly in the wider academic world as most of the articulations were in Malayalam. This is an instance of a metropolitan idea, reworked by local groups, not quite traveling back to the metropole.

In Kerala, for most of the 1980s and 1990s, Subaltern Studies remained a historians' forte, on a few occasions traversed by an occasional economist. Even here, the concern came from an engagement with the tribal question as raised by M. Kunhaman, who published some of his books as Subaltern Studies publication. Of course, the tribal questions were part of the original project of the Subaltern Studies collective. It was only in the late 2000s that a collection of essays from Subaltern Studies was translated and published in Malayalam, edited by Susie Tharu and S. Sanjeev, and was supported by many feminist and progressive academics in Kerala.

In many ways then, I think the vernacular translation of the term 'subaltern' in Kerala was the handiwork of the natural ally of the wider intent of Subaltern Studies – Dalits. I am not sure at the moment how far that intellectual project was carried forward. I think certain elements of it can be seen in the critical booklet by T. M. Yesudasan titled in Malayalam *A Prologue to Dalit Studies*, published in 1993 by Dalit Women's Society, which was translated into English by the author himself and included in *No Alphabet in Sight: New Dalit Writing From South India, Dossier 1* (edited by Susie Tharu and K. Satyanarayana, 2011). I have given this example here to show the manner in which, outside the formal academic context, the idea of the 'subaltern' had a very interesting circulation and acceptance in Kerala. We find a certain kind of intellectual engagement here, although in a very small way, towards what Pandey refers to as 'changing our world' through history and critical social sciences.

In history writing today, following the debates unleashed by the ascendancy of Subaltern Studies, we come across distinct genres of history and social science writings that may be referred to as Dalit histories or Dalit Studies. Though this corpus is not as organized as Subaltern Studies, it happens in multiple locations, and different people and institutions are involved in it both in India and abroad. In the last few years, there have been a number of books published by international publishers and reputed university presses under titles varying from 'Dalit Literatures of India' to 'Dalit Studies', among others. What I want to suggest is that these genres of history or critical social sciences and humanities try to carry forward the academic agendas that were not central to Subaltern Studies originally but intimated therein.

Here, I am not trying to build a connection between the various projects of Dalit Studies and Subaltern Studies. However, my aim is to show that within these kinds of academic endeavors, there are real efforts to foster radical inquiries that problematize the official ideologies of the Indian state or its nationalism, with a distinct optic all of its own. This would refer to the fact that through the exploration of the 'Pariah problem', slavery, new modes of literary expressions and the critique of aesthetic canons, and the imbrications of caste and gender, our understanding of the old problem of dominance and subordination becomes much more profound and nuanced. The analysis of modernity becomes much more complex, as in the current situation, where scholarship is trying to understand the problem of dominance/subordination in multiple locations, and explore the manner in which communities and peoples are trying to appropriate and transform elements of colonial modernity (as in the case of Dalits in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries). This I think is very different from the manner

in which Dalits have been thought of and written about in different historiographies including Subaltern Studies.

For example, there is a curious way in which the problems of race and caste being talked about generally get problematized in the struggles of Dalits in various parts of Kerala. In fact, this has a long history. It begins with the Anglican missionaries in the early 20th century instructing the Pulayyas with the translation of Booker T. Washington's *Up from Slavery* as a text for self-improvement. The connecting link here is slavery in the US and caste slavery in Kerala. We find throughout the mid-19th century, through the early decades of the twentieth century, anti-slavery journals carrying writings on slavery in Kerala; and after abolition, we read about the conditions of the emancipated slaves. Most of such writings compared the condition of slaves in Kerala with that of the slaves in the US. In the twentieth century, in whatever little has survived as printed materials produced by Dalit movements in Kerala, we come across articles on the problems of African Americans. The spirit of the American Civil Rights Movement had reached the Dalit communities in Kerala, who on many occasions named the venues of their meetings in small towns and villages in Kerala after Martin Luther King Jr. I still remember hearing the slogans shouted by Dalit Christians in Kerala that coupled the names of King Jr. and Ambedkar.

A much more serious and sophisticated engagement with the radical currents in the US is seen in the 1980s initiatives in translating the theological text *The God of Oppressed* by James Cone into Malayalam. This was the period of the struggle of Dalit Christians in Kottayam within the Central Kerala Diocese of the Church of South India. James Cone was invited to Kottayam to address the people. One may also record here the influence of Black theology and Liberation theology on Dalit Christian activists in Kerala.

I write of these instances to show that there was an interesting identification of Dalit problems in Kerala and the problems of the African Americans in the US as understood by Dalits, however imperfect their understanding might have been. This is not to say that such efforts were the precursors to the Subaltern historians' engagement with the questions of race and marginality in the US. What I am arguing is that for a variety of reasons specific to Kerala, we notice here a very interesting identification with radical thinking among the African Americans.

Today, when we think about history writing, it is possible to think about a variety of experiences that were not problematized in the genre of Subaltern historiography. However, in Indian history or critical social sciences and humanities, Subaltern Studies offered a radical alternative and that I believe has been path breaking.