

**NPTEL**  
**Nation and Narration**

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**Transcript from the Video**

Hello everyone! In the previous lecture we talked about the caste system. The Indian caste system, as detailed in early Brahmanical texts like the Vedas, established a hierarchical structure comprising four primary groups known as varnas: Brahmans, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras. The Brahmans occupied the top tier of this social order, serving as priests and teachers who held significant influence over religious and educational spheres. The Kshatriyas, positioned just below the Brahmans, were warriors and rulers tasked with governance, military leadership, and upholding justice. Below them were the Vaishyas, who formed the community of cultivators, herders, and merchants, playing a crucial role in the economy through agriculture and trade. At the bottom of the four-fold system were the Shudras, who served the upper three castes and were denied access to privileges like education and religious rituals. Beyond these four varnas, a separate group known as the "untouchables" or chandalas emerged, likely added later. These individuals performed tasks deemed "impure," such as handling corpses, and faced severe discrimination—they were forced to live outside the boundaries of villages, isolated from mainstream society. The caste system functioned not only as a birth-based social order (varna) but also as a profession-based identity (jati), intertwining one's social status with their occupation. A core aspect of this system was endogamy—the practice of marrying within one's caste—to maintain the "purity" of the upper castes and prevent "pollution" from the lower castes and untouchables. Over time, this rigid and exclusionary structure reinforced the dominance of the upper castes, marginalizing lower castes and perpetuating social inequalities for centuries. The dynamics of centrality and marginalization inherent in the caste system left a lasting impact on Indian society, influencing cultural norms, social interactions, and access to resources.

In this lecture we will learn about the anti-caste movements that ran parallel to the nationalist movements. An inquiry into Dalit historiography raises several key questions: What kind of history is written and narrated in Dalit politics? Who and what issues come to focus in Dalit history? What are its implications? History related to caste and anti-caste movements has been written in three ways: 1. Theorizing caste which explores different meanings, facets, and origins of caste. 2. Documenting anti-caste movements, either through chronological accounts or regional studies. And, 3. Focusing on the lives of 19th-century anti-caste leaders. Since my focus is on knowledge produced by Dalit politics, I will primarily examine how Dalit and anti-caste politics are historicized rather than how caste itself is theorized. This approach does not diminish the significance of empirical studies on caste but emphasizes the counter-ideology created by anti-caste politics, which is central to contemporary Dalit theorization.

In popular understanding, Dalit politics is often perceived as a counter-hegemonic movement that arose during the nationalist struggle, primarily in opposition to the dominance of Brahmanical ideology. This interpretation positions Dalit politics not only as a quest for

social and political rights but also as a challenge to the exclusionary nature of mainstream nationalist movements. Nationalism, often shaped by upper-caste perspectives, failed to adequately address the deep-seated issues of caste discrimination and the marginalization of Dalits. Dalit politics, therefore, seeks to reclaim historical agency, critique caste-based oppression, and assert an identity distinct from the dominant nationalist narrative. This idea resonates with the field of subaltern studies in India, which aims to reinterpret history from the perspective of marginalized communities, creating an alternative to mainstream historical accounts.

Subaltern historiography challenges the elitist, often Brahmanical, view of India's colonial history and independence movement. Instead of focusing solely on the narratives of political elites, this approach prioritizes the experiences and agency of non-elites—peasants, tribal communities, and marginalized castes—who have largely been overlooked in conventional history writing. Subaltern scholars argue that traditional nationalist narratives often exclude these voices, presenting a homogenized view of the struggle for independence. By reclaiming the experiences of the marginalized, subaltern historiography seeks to disrupt the dominance of elitist perspectives and reconstruct history from the standpoint of the "subalterns." This approach challenges the authority and assumptions of elite historical narratives, emphasizing that history is not a monolithic account but a field of contestation where power dynamics shape whose voices are heard and whose are silenced.

Ranajit Guha, a foundational figure in subaltern studies, sought to "de-elitize" nationalist history by examining overlooked events like the Santal Rebellion of 1855. The rebellion, led by the Santal community under the command of Thakur, their local deity, was a significant yet marginalized episode in colonial history. The Santal Rebellion of 1855 was a significant uprising led by the Santal tribal community against British colonial rule and oppressive local landlords in the Bengal Presidency. Sparked by widespread exploitation, harsh taxes, and loss of ancestral lands, the rebellion saw the Santals, under the leadership of brothers Sidhu and Kanhu Murmu, rise in defiance. In popular history, the rebellion has often been portrayed as a chaotic, "spontaneous" act of violence, lacking organized strategy or political consciousness—an interpretation shaped by colonial records and mainstream nationalist narratives. In his work "The Prose of Counter-Insurgency" (1988), Guha critiques the way colonial authorities reduced peasant insurgencies to mere "administrative concerns," stripping them of their political significance and dismissing their legitimacy. By labeling these movements as "purely spontaneous," the colonial administration framed them as irrational, unorganized, and lacking in political consciousness. Guha argued that labeling the rebellion as "spontaneous" overlooked the Santhals' own understanding of their resistance, rooted in their religious beliefs and collective identity. Guha also critiques leftist interpretations, arguing that they overlook the role of caste and religion, often treating these uprisings as "pre-history" or mere precursors to organized class struggle. According to Guha, both the nationalist and Marxist views maintain a "scholastic and academic historic-political outlook" that values only conscious, pre-planned, and ideologically driven movements as genuine revolts (Guha 1988, 21). This rigid perspective fails to acknowledge the unique forms of agency exhibited by marginalized communities, whose modes of resistance may not align with conventional frameworks of organized political action.

Guha's approach is deeply influenced by Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony and the idea of "subaltern consciousness." Drawing from Gramsci, Guha critiques the assumption that genuine political movements must adhere to formal, elite-driven frameworks. He emphasizes that historical narratives are inherently distorted, shaped by the biases and limitations of those who record them. Guha acknowledges that no historical account can fully capture the consciousness of the marginalized because such narratives are filtered through the

perspectives of the elite. In his view, “There is nothing that historiography can do to eliminate such distortion altogether, for the latter is built into its optics. What it can do, however, is to acknowledge such distortion as parametric—as a datum which determines the form of the exercise itself, and to stop pretending that it can fully grasp a past consciousness and reconstitute it” (Guha 1988, 77). This statement reflects a critical self-awareness in the writing of history, advocating for a more nuanced approach that accepts its limitations and acknowledges the power dynamics inherent in historiography.

The Santal Rebellion exemplifies an alternative historical narrative that defies the frameworks of both elitist nationalism and Marxist analysis. Its emergence from indigenous religious belief, local leadership, and spontaneous collective action challenges the notion that legitimate resistance must be premeditated, ideologically cohesive, or led by formal political elites. The rebellion, therefore, becomes a symbol of subaltern agency—one that disrupts dominant narratives and demands a rethinking of history from the perspective of the marginalized. By highlighting such episodes, Guha and other subaltern scholars seek to expand the scope of historical inquiry, making it more inclusive and representative of India's diverse socio-cultural realities. This subaltern perspective not only critiques mainstream historical accounts but also questions the very methods and frameworks through which history is written, pushing for a more democratic and pluralistic understanding of the past.

Elaborating on the purpose of theorizing history/historiography, Dipesh Chakrabarty writes in “Minority Histories, Subaltern Pasts”, “The relation between ‘subaltern pasts’ and the practice of historicising is not one of mutual exclusion. Subaltern pasts act as a supplement to the historian’s pasts and in fact aid our capacity to historicise. They enable history, the discipline, to be what it is and yet at the same time help to show forth what its limits are”. Subaltern studies worked in this ambit of critical enquiry into dominant elitist nationalist history and provided an alternative history.

We can ask who has the authority to write history and what relationship of power and knowledge is operative in such assertion/authentication. Dipesh Chakrabarty is skeptical about the minority histories as well. Hence he addresses the issue of what he calls “the question of crafting” through the following questions “How do you write the histories of suppressed groups? How do you construct a narrative of a group or class that has not left its own sources?” (473). He also emphasises on the denominator ‘minor’ which he understands not in numerical terms but in the context of power position they are located in. It is important, he argues, to understand the term ‘minority’ in the sense that “their very incorporation into historical narratives converts them into pasts ‘of lesser importance’ *vis-à-vis* dominant understandings of what constitutes fact and evidence in the practices of professional history” (474). He argues that such ignorance or silencing is not intentional but implicit.

In the context of producing or writing a ‘subaltern’ history, Dipesh Chakravarty points to the dilemma/rift between the subaltern subject of history and what the subaltern deems as the subject of their history. He refers to Guha’s construction of subaltern history centered on the 1855 Santal Rebellion, where Chakravarty opines that Guha seems to be grappling with the actual event of the rebellion (which, in professional history, is often derived from the consciousness of the rebels) and the cause that led the Santhals to rebel—the Santhals’ understanding of the rebellion (which in this case is caused by a supernatural belief that Thakur, or their god, instructed them to rebel and promised that true believers would not be harmed by British bullets). Guha, according to Chakravarty, therefore has to negotiate between the non-fact (supernatural) and the actual event of the movement. Guha thus needs to impose ‘logic’ onto the subaltern consciousness in order to make it suitable for professional history. What ensues is a dissociation between the subject’s (Santhal’s) consciousness and the consciousness of the history-writer. As a result, ‘their beliefs’ never get translated into ‘our belief.’ This makes Chakravarty question the validity of the discipline

of history as an authorizer of knowledge and leads to the conclusion that history is only one way of documenting/telling a past 'differently.' He writes, "In other words, the act of championing 'minority histories' has resulted in many cases in discoveries of subaltern pasts, constructions of historicity that help us see the limits to the mode of viewing embodied in the practices of the discipline of history. Why? Because, it has been argued by many (from Greg Dening to David Cohen in recent times), that the discipline of history is only one particular way of remembering the past. It is one amongst many" (476-477). And herein, narratives, memoirs, etc., become important in creating another past.

To summarise, subaltern historiography is an approach to writing history that focuses on the perspectives, experiences, and agency of marginalized and oppressed groups—those who have been historically excluded from mainstream, elite-centered narratives. Emerging in the 1980s, largely through the work of the Subaltern Studies Group led by Ranajit Guha, it critiques the dominance of colonial, nationalist, and Marxist interpretations that often ignore the voices of the "subalterns," such as peasants, tribal communities, and lower castes. Subaltern historiography aims to challenge elitist narratives and reconstruct history from the viewpoint of the oppressed, emphasizing that resistance and consciousness exist even outside formal, organized political movements. By questioning the authority of established historical writing, it seeks to democratize history and reveal the limitations of conventional historiography.