

**Title—Selected Subaltern Studies**  
**Author—Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak**  
**Year—1988**

Categories: Theory, Subaltern, Politics, Colonialism

Place: South Asia

Time: 1800-1960

Argument Synopsis:

This essay collection promises a revisionist history of nineteenth and twentieth century India with a concerted focus on the subaltern as an important historical actor. Subaltern studies offers a theory of change. The insertion of India into colonialism is generally defined as a change from semi-feudalism into capitalist subjection. The subaltern studies group attempts to revise this general definition by proposing two things: that the moment(s) of change be pluralized and plotted as confrontations rather than transition and that such changes are signaled or marked by a fundamental change in sign-systems. In their introduction, Guha and Spivak consider the displacement of the subaltern as an actor in colonial histories, especially in the Indian subcontinent. When justifying the displacement of the subaltern, Guha and Spivak reveal that the most dominant argument is the much greater scope, organization, and strength of the colonial authorities. They are critical of the elite historiography that ignores the subaltern as a significant historical actor. In this collection, they put forth some strategies for revealing the subaltern even within colonial sources, an example being reading these sources against the grain. Although, they note that it is only possible to read against the grain if misfits in the text signal that way, i.e. moments of transgression or critical moments. A note found throughout the essays is the reiterated fact that it is only the texts of counterinsurgency or elite documentation that gives us the news of the consciousness of the subaltern.

The essays in this collection make clear an implicit set of assumptions about the nature and the role of the subaltern means of communication, such as rumor, in the mobilization of insurgency. Guha and Spivak claim that it is most appropriate to think of the power of rumor in the subaltern context as deriving from its participation in the structure of illegitimate writing rather than the authoritative writing of the law. Writing of the law tends to operate on an implicit phono-centrism, or the presupposition that speech is the immediate expression of the self. Rumor is primordially errant—it is always in circulation with no assignable source. The mistake of colonial authorities was to take rumor for speech and to impose the requirements of speech upon something that draws its strength from participation in writing in the general sense. This collection demonstrates the complicity between the subject and the object of investigation, or the subaltern group and subalternity.

Guha and Spivak argue that the subaltern should be seen as a significant historical actor. They claim that subalterns are all suppressed by imperialism and by the indigenous middle-class elite; the subaltern are also silenced by colonialist historians within the historiography. The ten essays in the collection illustrate the working principles of subaltern historians, as well as highlighting the limitations of their conceptions and historiography.

Key Themes and Concepts:

- South Asian political modernity brings together two non-commensurable logics of power
- Subalterns should be seen as significant historical actors
- All theory is susceptible to open-endedness