INTRODUCTION:

“History is the recorded struggle of people for ever increasing freedom and for newer higher realisation of the human process. The common people possess the capacity to make history. In fact the historic initiative of the masses has time and again produced social cataclysms that have changed the world.” The subaltern approach centers on and around the people, as people constitute the central theme of history. The subaltern studies of history claims to be an improvement on the elitist mode (both Marxist and Non-Marxist type) of exploring and explaining history. This mode of explaining history also known as “history from below” aims at constructing the paradigm of subaltern consciousness manifesting in different forms, at different places, and at different times. ‘Subaltern studies’ is a new trend of writing history, like other trends i.e. Imperialism, Primitivism, Nationalism, Marxism, Neo-Marxism, Feminism, Ambedkarism etc. The need of rewriting and revaluation on the basis of narration of history is being expressed.

Objectives:-

1) Explain the meaning and nature of the Subaltern History.
2) A study of rise and growth of the Subaltern History writing.
3) A study of available sources for the Subaltern History Writing.
4) The survey of early contribution of Subaltern History writing in India.
5) Criticism and Response of the subaltern studies.

Meaning of subaltern studies:-

‘Subaltern’, meaning ‘of inferior rank’, is a term adopted by Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937), an Italian Marxist and Communist Party Leader, refers to those groups in society who are subject to the hegemony of the ruling classes. A subaltern is someone with a low ranking in a social, political, or other hierarchy. It can also mean someone who has been marginalised or oppressed. From the Latin roots sub- “below”, and alternus “all others”, subaltern is used to describe someone of a low rank (as in the military) or class (as in a caste system). Subalterns occupy entry-level jobs or occupy a lower rung of the “corporate ladder.” But the term is also used to describe someone who has no political or economic power, such as a poor person living under a dictatorship. Different kinds of synonyms are used for the word ‘Subaltern’, like: common people, lower-class, underprivileged, exploited, inferiors, minors, weak etc. British Historian, E.P. Thomson wrote an article in ‘The Times Magazine’. While giving his
opinion he used the words ‘History from Down Below’ Italian Marxist thinker Antonio Gramshi has used the word ‘subaltern’ for minor, poor, downtrodden people. Subaltern means overlooked, neglected, disregarded, and treated with unconcern and indifference.

**Nature of the Subaltern Studies:**

In the thousands years of history-writing it is clearly seen that there existed two kinds of people: Superiors and Inferiors in the society. The superiors have been given more importance. Therefore, it is expected in Subaltern studies to write the history again, making it free. The inclusion of lower people or common men’s history has been agreed. This trend of writing consists of the agony of exploited workers, labourers, oppressed caste, and women’s income beyond the world of thoughts. The consciousness and autonomy of lower class regarding consciousness is the foundation of Subaltern studies. “In the work of subaltern studies it is necessary to reach up to not only the ideological part but also the livelihood of common people i.e. poor farmers, shepherds, workers, labourers, oppressed caste women. They are also human beings, they also think, take decisions, decide the way to live and grow in the society. The subaltern studies, therefore, defy those historians who regard people’s action as external to their consciousness. So, the chief concern of the subaltern studies venture is thus to appreciate the people’s consciousness and their action. A proper analysis of this consciousness and its due recognition by the historians would rightly present and project the subalterns as the maker of the history they live out.

**Rise and growth of the Subaltern History Writing:**

The subaltern studies were proclaimed by its adherents as a new school in the field of Indian history writing. In the early 1980s, there emerged in India a ‘school’ of history that goes by the name of ‘Subaltern Studies’; this ‘school’ has now gained a world-wide reputation, and ‘Subaltern Studies’ is beginning to make its influence felt in Latin American Studies, African Studies, ‘cultural studies’, and other arenas. Where previously the history of modern India, and particularly of the nationalist movement, was etched as a history of Indian ‘elites’, now this history is being construed primarily as a history of ‘subaltern groups’. “Subaltern studies” is a foreign trend of thoughts and the philosophical foundation of this trend is found in the writing of the Italian Marxist thinker Antonio Gramchi. His thoughts were upheld by many thinkers Frants Cannan, Jivche Zanax, Eric, Hobbs Bon George Rud, Shiro Brizand can be specially mentioned. Antonio Gramchi was the founder of Marxist Party in Italian tradition and famous as a Marxist thinker. He was the organiser and leader of peasant revolt in Italy after the First World War. He wrote many articles after the rise of Mussolini to attack the dictatorship government and asserted the need to organise for changing Mussolini’s government. As a result he was arrested in 1926. During his stay in prison he discussed with the prisoners on the political condition and collected information maintaining the daily record. He died in the prison itself. Later on his writing was published under the titles “Selections from Political Writings” and “Selections from Prison Notebooks.” Gramchi tried to give the meaning of Marxist theory regarding the changed condition of world. “The process of production is the foundation of social development and change, economical transactions determine the direction of social development, thoughts and culture.”Gramchi makes argument regarding this theory of Mary and says, “Though financial transaction is the foundation of social life, the cultural building on it is of the same
importance. Social change gives speed and direction to culture”. Again Gramchi says, ‘Be an Integral Historian and join the ranks of organic intellectuals in recognising every trace of independent initiative on the part of the Subaltern group, rather than reproducing, the minds and analysing the actions of the dominant group’. Through the thoughts of Gramchi, the trend of Subaltern studies became conventional.

Writing of the Subaltern studies and sources:-

The sources of subaltern studies, the social group on which the history has to be written, are not available in large quantity because these groups at the low level of society is not capable of expressing their thoughts and opinions like the superiors or leading people. Therefore the literature expressing their revelation is not made we don’t have documents and sources of written correspondence. Therefore, Governmental documents, Govt. Reports, Reports of Revenue Department, Census Report, Documents of Police Department, Judicial Documents, Folktales, Folksongs, Folk-recollection, Interviews etc. are used to write subaltern studies. The meditation and thinking about all the above sources as well as the help of the different branches of knowledge like Economics, Sociology, Census, Anthropology, Archaeology, Psychology, Linguistics etc. are necessary only then can be created subaltern history.

Subaltern Studies and India:-

The founder of the subaltern studies is Ranjit Guha(an Indian) and the trend of ‘Subaltern studies’ prevailed in India, in the last twenty years of the 20th century. This new trend gave a way to new challenges by crossing the traditional writing of history. It provided a new direction, new amplitude and helped to begin a new chapter. Indian point of view of Subaltern history is similar to the trend of writing in England, which became famous as ‘History from Below’. The ‘Centre of South Asian Cultural Studies’ was established with the assumption that without knowing the work of downtrodden people, it is not possible to obtain the true sight of the contemporary history. Dr. Ranjeet Guha played a vital role in the establishment of this institute. He discussed about this view point of history with some of the Indian scholars. The historians, who experienced the need to study the new point of view regarding the revolt movement during the British rule in India, came together and deliberately started new experiments in the field of history. In 1982, a collection of articles edited by Dr. Guha “Subaltern studies” was published. This first issue of Subaltern studies can be called a concrete invention of the new trend of thoughts. Guha tried to write history of subaltern from the subaltern perspective. Then and then alone would it be possible to notice the kind of role that the majority of the population, the silent majority if you wish, played in directing the course of history. Inevitably, the issue is who was dominating whom and who revolted against the domination and in what kind of manner came to be central importance in these studies.

The philosophical base (foundation) of Dr. Guha’s ‘Subaltern studies’ is found in the writing of Gramchi. Later on, eight issues of ‘Subaltern studies’ were published. Through these issues he gave an outline of common people’s history. He also wrote ‘Elementary Aspects of Peasant Emergency in Colonial India’ In this book he wrote about the main parts of peasant’s revolt “A farmer is the creator of his own history”, says Dr. Guha. Dr. Shahid Amin, a close associate of Dr. Guha, has important contribution in the writing of ‘Subaltern studies’. He was the founder; editor and worked as teacher in history in Delhi University. He has analysed the
effect of Mahatma Gandhi on the minds of the farmers who participated in non-cooperation movement. He has tried to know the intention of different elements of society related to “Chauri-Chaura” incident. He wrote an article ‘Making the Nation Habitable’ and a book, ‘Remembering the Mussalmans.” He has expressed his thoughts about the dangers and bad effects on history writing from the point of view of any religious group.

In the trend of ‘Subaltern studies’ Dr. Sumit Sarkar also has contributed a lot. He is known as a brilliant historian, he employs the term subalterns for tribal and low-caste agricultural labourers and sharecroppers, landholding peasants, generally of intermediate –caste status in Bengal and labour in plantations mines and industries. He studied Marxism and his important writings consist of the history of common people in national movement, history of neglected group, leadership of Mahatma Gandhi in national movement and the dominant nature of foreign colonial government. In 1977 he discussed with Dr. Ranjeet Guha and turned towards this new trend. He wrote book like : Swadeshi Movement in Bengal (1973), Popular Movements and Middle Class Leadership in the late Colonial India, Prespectives and problems of History from Below (1985), Writing Social History, Modern India 1885-1947 and 1983-1985. He wrote articles as, Limits of Nationalism, Decline of the Subaltern in Subaltern studies, Beyond Nationalist frame. Dr. Sumit Sarkar is closer to the concept of ‘History from Below’ by Edward Thomson. In the introduction to his book, ‘Popular Movements and Middle Class Leadership’ he says - ‘History from Below being by concentrating on local and regional developments, encompassing various groups in the word popular-tribal, Peasant, artisan, labour protests and in the middle class a class which started asserting some kind of regional on national leadership and which had a totally different composition from Princes and Zamindars.” Dr. Sumit Sarkar has expressed meditative thoughts about Subaltern studies. He says ‘Subaltern studies with its critique of all varieties of eliticism, whether colonist, nationalist or even Marxist has its focus on lower class indicatives, its pioneering efforts do represent a major breakthrough in our history writing’. He does not neglect the leadership of organic group of middle class as insignificant. Apart from this, in his article ‘Decline of the Subaltern in Subaltern studies’ he says that while giving emphasis on the psychology and work of deprived group in society, their social history is neglected.

CRITICISM AND RESPONSE OF THE SUBALTERN STUDIES:-

There has been wide-ranging criticism of the Subaltern Studies from many quarters. Right from the beginning the project has been critiqued by the Marxist, Nationalist and Cambridge School historians, besides those who were not affiliated to any position. Almost all positions it took, ranging from a search for autonomous subaltern domain to the later shift to discourse analysis, came under scrutiny and criticism. Some of the earlier critiques were published in the Social Scientist. In one of them, Javeed Alam criticised Subaltern Studies for its insistence on an autonomous domain of the subaltern. According to Alam, the autonomy of the subaltern politics is predicated on perpetuity of rebellious action, on a consistent tendency towards resistance and a propensity to rebellion on the part of the peasant masses. Whether this autonomous action is positive or negative in its consequences is of not much concern to the Subalternists: ‘the historical direction of militancy is of secondary consideration. What is primary is the spontaneity and an internally located self-generating momentum. Extending the implications of the
inherent logic of such a theoretical construction, it is a matter of indifference if it leads to communal rioting or united anti-feudal actions that overcome the initial limitations.

Sumit Sarkar, who was earlier associated with the project, later on criticised it for moving towards post colonialism. Over the years, there began a shift in the approach of subaltern studies. The influence of the post modernist and postcolonist ideologies became more marked. In his two essays, ‘The Decline of the Subaltern in Subaltern Studies‘ and Orientalism Revisited’, he argues that this shift may have been occasioned due to various reasons, but, intellectually, there is an attempt to have the best of both worlds: critiquing others for essentialism, teleology and related sins, while claiming a special immunity from doing the same oneself. Moreover, such works in Indian history have not produced any spectacular results. Even earlier, according to Sarkar, there was a tendency towards essentialising the categories of subaltern and autonomy, in the sense of assigning to them more or less absolute, fixed, decontextualised meanings and qualities. Sarkar argues that there are many problems with the histories produced by the subaltern writers and these arise due to their restrictive analytical frameworks, as Subaltern Studies swing from a rather simple emphasis on subaltern autonomy to an even more simplistic thesis of western colonial cultural domination’. Such criticism of the Subaltern Studies is still continuing and the Subaltern historians have responded to it with their own justification of the project and counter-attacks on critics.

The subalternists took some time before reacting to the critiques. Ranjit Guha railed against the criticism by those whom he called the vendors of readymade answers and academic old rods who supposedly posed as the custodians of official truth entrenched within their liberal and leftist stockades. He peremptorily dismissed the criticism by those scholars who have lived too long with well-rehearsed ideas and methodologies. The subalternists took some time before reacting to the critiques. Dipesh Chakrabarty’s reply was more detailed and asserted that: The central aim of the Subaltern Studies project is to understand the consciousness that informed and still informs political actions taken by the subaltern classes on their own, independently of any elite initiative.’ It was because, as shown by subaltern historians, in the course of nationalist struggles involving popular mobilization the masses often put their own interpretations on the aims of these movements and proceeded to act them out.

Conclusion:-

The subaltern studies asserted itself as a radically new form of history-writing in the context of Indian history. The History written till now is one-sided, partial and not showing true picture of low level group in society. A group of people is deprived of proper position. A great man or intellectual group cannot create history. True history is not of superior group but it is shaped from the group of common people. Subaltern studies became an original site for a new kind of history from below, a people’s history free of national constraints, a post-nationalist reimaging of Indian nation, on the other side, at the margins, outside nationalism. This work brings together all the historians through the new trend of writing ‘Subaltern studies’, so that the recipients of success should get justice and in the same way true history will be written.

References :


10) Dr. Kothekar Shanta, Ibid, PP. 240


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