
THE NEO-MIDDLE CLASS AND THE POLITICS OF SUBALTERN REPRESENTATION IN MODERN INDIA

Mahendra Pratap*

Department of History, Centre of Advanced Study, Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh, India

*pratapmahendra489@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The twentieth century witnessed the gradual emergence of a Neo-middle class in colonial and early post-colonial India, comprising lower-level professionals, teachers, doctors, lawyers, clerks, petty officials, small traders, vernacular journalists, and educated lower classes. This social formation, shaped by colonial education, administrative expansion, print media, industrialisation, and modern institutions, occupied an ambiguous position. They neither fully aligned with traditional elites nor reducible to the classical subaltern masses of peasants and labourers. In this Subaltern Studies, we explore the perspectives of this group not merely as beneficiaries of modernisation but as crucial mediators in the production of socio-political consciousness and representation within the social hierarchy. Providing the theoretical and practical points for such an inquiry into subaltern perspectives. It also invites scrutiny of those intermediate social groups who came to occupy new positions through reformist agenda and state intervention into vernacular and regional contexts such resistance as Peasant Movements, Tribal Resistance, Nationalist Mobilisation from Below. Dalit and lower-caste experiences, labourers and trade unions, Women in popular movements, regional and linguistic identities create a broad base for mobilisation. This mass mobilisation was not the outcome of chance or irrationality, but a conscious and systematic attempt to establish the relations between elites and non-elites. Many members of this emergent class originated from non-elite backgrounds and remained embedded in local social and political work. Their participation in local governance, reform associations, cooperatives, and vernacular press often reflected negotiations between popular aspirations and institutional constraints. From this perspective, the Neo-middle class cannot be understood simply as an appendage of the elite; rather, it operated within a contested terrain where subaltern communities were selectively incorporated into the modern socio-political forum. While the rise of the Neo-middle class expanded the broad social base for political participation, it did not necessarily dissolve structures of exclusion. In which the Neo-middle class increasingly positioned itself as the authorised representative of the people through education, literacy, and access to bureaucratic and political representation and reservation. How this group acquired the power to define what counted as legitimate political action, reform, or progress. In many cases, peasant protest, labour unrest, and social-based mobilisation were reframed by the Neo-middle-class actors into narratives of discipline and gradual reform. Thus, even as this class emerged from within a broader social base, it often participated in the rearticulation of dominance by translating subaltern demands, frequently producing new hierarchies of voice and visibility. Access to education, print culture, and organisational leadership enabled this class to speak for the masses, even as many subaltern actors, particularly women, landless labourers, and the marginalised class, remained absent from the archives and narratives constructed by these intermediaries. It also reproduced silence structured by gender, caste, and region. The formation of the Neo-middle class contributed to a partial democratisation of politics while simultaneously consolidating new forms of social, economic and political structure. By restoring agency to marginalised communities, challenging elite dominance in knowledge, and reshaping public memory, it transformed History into a tool of empowerment, critique, and social justice. While it cannot by itself partially dismantle material inequalities, it has profoundly altered how society understands power and identity contributed process of making of the Nation.

Keywords: Education, Social Justice, Marginal, Peasant, Reservation, Empowerment, India.

INTRODUCTION

The Neo-middle class in modern India has functioned as a crucial intermediary in subaltern politics, simultaneously enabling visibility, rights, and institutional access for marginalised groups, while also reshaping their voices through elite discourses of legality, development, and representation [1]. This dual role reveals the tension between empowerment and appropriation at the heart of subaltern politics [2]. In modern Indian history, the Neo-middle class refers to newly educated, salaried, and semi-professional groups that emerged mainly from the late colonial period and expanded after independence [3]. It includes: clerks, teachers, journalists, lawyers, small officials, lower-level professionals, NGO workers, activists, and cultural intermediaries [4]. They are upwardly mobile sections from non-elite backgrounds. They also occupy a position between non-traditional elites and the poorest subaltern masses, yet are not part of the latter [5]. In Subaltern Studies, the term 'Subaltern' refers to groups that have been historically excluded from power, elite politics, and dominant

narratives, including peasants, workers, tribals, dalits, women, and marginalised communities [6]. Later the Neo-middle class make a space as a mediator between governing body and institutions of power such as administration, parties, courts, academia, and media [7]. In those cases, the Subaltern voices are not directly heard, but filtered through educated intermediaries. The Neo-middle class can speak out on the issues of the marginalised, which may be reframed in elite or middle-class language [8]. This group advocates for rights in participation of land, education, reservations, welfare, but may also appropriate struggles for socio-political capital, NGOs, academia, or party politics with the help of mass mobilisation, authors of history and reports, spokespersons in media and civil society. In colonial and postcolonial India, the Neo-middle class played a major role in participation in national politics, social reform movements, Dalit and tribal advocacy, feminist and environmental movements [9]. While these interventions expanded into democratic space, they also restructured subaltern struggles into institutional and bureaucratic forms. This transformation of subaltern resistance into organised politics and civil society activism. The Neo-middle class in India emerged largely from sections of the educated lower classes and subaltern groups rather than from traditional elites. A combination of colonial institutions, nationalist politics, and post-colonial state policies shaped this transformation [10]. British rule introduced modern, secular education that enabled people from non-elite backgrounds to acquire literacy in English and vernacular languages, Legal, administrative, and technical skills, and access to clerical, teaching, and professional jobs. This created a new group of educated subalterns who were no longer peasants or artisans but not part of old aristocratic elites either [11]. These jobs provided regular salaries, social respectability, and urban mobility. The growth of cities, railways, factories, and commercial centres created new urban occupations, which provided new opportunities for migration from villages. Urban life weakened caste-based economic dependence and allowed class mobility. This was a transitional class between the labouring masses and elites [12]. The spread of printing press, newspapers, pamphlets, and journals in regional languages created a new public opinion, encouraged political debate, social reform, and identity formation, and gave voice to educated non-elite groups. Resulted the emergence of vernacular intellectuals and political consciousness among the marginalised class [13]. The freedom movements politicised educated subaltern groups for participation in the Indian National Congress, socialist, Gandhian, and regional movements under the leadership at local levels. This insisted on exposure to modern political ideas such as rights, representation, and citizenship. Thus, the Subaltern actors became political intermediaries rather than passive subjects [14]. The movements against caste discrimination and for social equality challenged traditional hierarchies. They promoted education and public employment, asserted dignity and self-representation. The lower castes and marginalised groups entered professional and administrative roles gradually [15].

After independence, India created large employment sectors: Government services, public sector undertakings, education, healthcare, and planning institutions. This rapid growth and expansion of state-dependent middle strata into rural and backward backgrounds was accommodated [16]. Further constitutional provisions for Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and Other Backward Classes provide affirmative steps for access to education and government jobs. These structural inclusions accommodate historically marginalised communities into middle-class occupations [17]. Post independence universities, technical institutes, and training programs produce teachers, engineers, doctors, social workers, and administrators. It's a credential-based class system replacing birth-based status and the consolidation of a Neo-middle class based on education and service. In this series, the economic reforms and service-sector growth such as media, IT, banking, hotels, transportation, hospitals, private education, NGOs, entrepreneurship and consumer identities, diversified the Neo-middle class beyond state employment [18]. From a subaltern perspective, the Neo-middle class represents a '*Reconfiguration of subaltern agency*'. These groups are neither purely subaltern nor belong to traditional elites. They are neither fully aligned with traditional elites nor reducible to the classical subaltern masses of peasants and labourers. They often mediate between the masses and power structures. They sometimes claim to represent subaltern interests, raising questions of appropriation vs. empowerment. By the 20th century, weakening of feudal relations, caste-based occupational rigidity, and landlord dominance at the same time other hand, monetisation of the economy and legal rights reduced dependence on traditional elites. That is enabled new identities based on profession and education rather than birth [19]. Moving towards nationalism, socialism, Ambedkarite thought, feminism, and rights discourse [20]. The Neo-middle class emerged not simply as a product of colonial modernity, but as a social formation created by the intersection of education, state power, political mobilisation, and democratic institutions. While rooted in subaltern backgrounds, this class gained institutional access and acted as mediators between the state and the masses. This section reshaped subaltern struggles into legal, political and academic forums [21].

- (I) **Representation in Electoral Politics and Parties:** The subaltern groups have made a transformative contribution to representation in electoral politics and political parties in post-independence India by democratizing access to power and reshaping political priorities [22]. Through universal franchise, identity-based and regional parties, and the emergence of Dalit, backward-caste, peasant, tribal, and working-class leadership, marginalised communities entered legislatures and party organisation in large numbers. Their participation reframed political agendas around social justice, reservations, land reform, labour rights, welfare, and dignity, embedding these concerns within state policy and law [23]. While this process empowered subaltern communities and pluralised Indian democracy, it also produced a Neo-middle class of subaltern origin that mediated popular demands through parliamentary and bureaucratic forms, highlighting the tension between direct voice and institutional representation [24]. The subaltern leaders entered local bodies, legislatures, parties, and trade unions. The caste-based, regional, peasant, and labour politics created new political elites. The electoral politics and parties created a new space in which leaders and activists from subaltern backgrounds began to speak for and organise and raise symbolically popular interests within the political system, welfare state and representation in the legislature for their upliftment as a community converted with Political capital. Elected representatives, party workers, and leadership from subaltern communities became part of a new intermediary class between the state and the marginalised group. This group gradually encompassed the Universal adult franchise. Leaders from subaltern backgrounds formed regional parties, the socialist movement, and later caste-based parties like Dalit, OBC, and Tribal for mobilisation into electoral politics [25]. The subaltern representatives claimed legitimacy as '*Voice of the People*'. The subaltern groups did not merely enter electoral politics; they restructured it by transforming social identities into political representation, producing leadership from below, redefining agendas around rights and welfare, and institutionalising social justice, they made Indian democracy more inclusive and socially grounded. At the same time, their incorporation into party systems and parliamentary structures created a new class of political intermediaries, revealing the ongoing tension between self-representation and institutional mediation [26].
- (II) **Representation in Bureaucracy and State Institutions:** The subaltern groups have played a significant role in representation within bureaucracy and state institutions in post-independence India. Through constitutional provisions, reservations, and expanded public employment, Dalits, Adivasis, backward-castes, women, and working-class individuals try to enter civil services, education, health, and development sectors. Their presence reduced elite domination of governance, facilitated access to welfare and rights for marginalised citizens, and brought grassroots perspectives into policy-making bodies and commissions [27]. The Subaltern groups did not remain silent after independence. The group gradually engaged in education-based recruitment in both the colonial state and the post-independence [28]. The developmental state required large numbers of employees. Education replaced land, caste, and lineage as the key basis of status. The subaltern individuals became salaried professionals, forming a Neo-middle class [29]. This created a Neo-middle class of subaltern origin inside the state. The secure salaries, pensions, and institutional authority transformed many from marginalised origins into a Neo-middle class within the state apparatus. Through the reservation, the reserved seats for SCs, STs and women are represented in village and ward-level populations in the local Self-Government in both Panchayati Raj and Urban bodies [30]. They manage development schemes and articulate grassroots demand directly to the state. The representation is a process of reframing popular politics and decentralising power from elite or middle-class discourses and as a form of empowerment [31]. The Mandal moment marks a decisive transformation in Indian democracy through the rise of an OBC, that entered state institutions, education, and political leadership. From an Ambedkarite perspective, this represents a historical realisation of self-representation, breaking the upper-caste monopoly and enabling constitutional voice for the oppressed. Yet, as Subaltern Studies warns, this same class often functions as a mediating elite, translating popular aspirations into bureaucratic, legal, and developmental languages that contain rather than transform subaltern politics. Consequently, post-Mandal democracy embodies a central tension: between empowerment through institutional inclusion and the persistence of elite mediation that limits autonomous subaltern voice. The Dalit, OBC as a Neo-middle class stand at a crossroads, either as a vehicle of radical social justice or as a new structure of domination within post-colonial governance [32].
- (III) **Social Movements and Identity-Based Mobilisation:** The Subaltern groups have made a fundamental contribution to social movements and identity-based mobilisation in modern India by democratising politics, redefining inequality as a matter of rights and justice, and transforming marginalised identities into bases for collective action. Through Dalit, tribal, peasant, labour, and women's movements, they

challenged elite dominance, reshaped social hierarchies, and forced the state to adopt policies of reservation, land reform, labour protection, and decentralised governance [33]. Their mobilisation also produced new cultural expressions and grassroots leadership from within marginalised communities, altering both institutions and everyday social relations. From a Subaltern Studies perspective, these movements reveal the agency of the oppressed while also highlighting how their voices are increasingly mediated through institutional and professional forms of representation. They allowed subaltern groups to represent themselves outside elite nationalist frameworks [34]. Dr. Ambedkar argue that the subaltern group are those who were most oppressed and marginalised from the mainstream socio-political system [25]. That structure was not accidental its deep-rooted in caste hierarchy, not merely poverty or class. Caste is not just a social system; it is a system of graded inequality and political exclusion. Ambedkar did not reject representation through elites altogether-he insisted on counter-elites from within the oppressed [36].

- (IV) Civil Society, Media, Literature and Cultural Production:** The subaltern groups have made a transformative contribution to civil society, media, literature, and cultural production in modern India by democratising the public sphere and asserting self-representation. Through grassroots organisations and rights-based activism, they redefined civil society as a space of struggle rather than elite reform [37]. In media, vernacular journalism, alternative platforms, and digital activism enabled marginalised communities to challenge dominant narratives and publicise everyday injustice [38]. In literature, Dalit, Adivasi, feminist, and working-class writings created Counter-History that brought live experiences of oppression into the cultural canon. Through folk traditions, protest art, street theatre, and performance, they politicised culture itself, turning identity, memory, and everyday life into tools of resistance [39]. Together, these interventions not only elite control over knowledge and representation but also reshaped how power, dignity, and citizenship are imagined in Indian society. The mass identities were articulated outside official state discourse. Consistently propagated language of law, development and rights. The civil society and media mediated between the challenged state and the masses [40].
- (V) Conclusion:** The Neo-middle class is socially rooted in subaltern society, but politically aligned with elite forms of power and representation [41]. The Subaltern Studies Historiography marks a decisive break from elite-centred narratives of Indian history by foregrounding the agency, consciousness, and political practices of marginalised groups. Initiated by Ranajit Guha, it critiques both colonial and nationalist historians for silencing popular politics and emphasises the autonomous domain of subaltern action [42]. While it has democratised Historiography and reshaped understandings of nationalism, its later cultural turn and reliance on elite mediation raise questions about whether the subaltern can truly 'speak.' In contemporary India, the framework is especially useful for analysing how Neo-middle-class leadership represents, translates, and sometimes contains subaltern aspirations within institutional politics. Ranjit Guha argues that the Neo-middle class does not extend subaltern autonomy; it replaces it with representation from above [43].

The Marxist Historiography and Subaltern Studies both challenge elite-centred narratives of Indian History, yet they diverge in their understanding of power, agency, and social change. Marxist historians foreground class relations and material structures, interpreting Historical transformation through economic conflict and organised struggle. Subaltern Studies, by contrast, emphasises marginality, culture, and discourse, seeking to recover autonomous popular politics that have been excluded from both colonial and nationalist narratives [44]. While Marxism risks economic determinism, Subaltern Studies risks cultural abstraction. Together, however, they offer complementary perspectives: one revealing the structural foundations of domination, the other exposing the silences, exclusions, and mediated representations within historical knowledge-especially relevant for analysing the political role of the Neo-middle-class in modern India [45].

Subaltern Historiography collectively dismantles Elite-centred, Eurocentric, and nationalist narratives of Indian History by foregrounding the agency, memory, culture, and political consciousness of marginalised group [46]. From Guha's recovery of peasant insurgency as autonomous politics to Spivak's radical critique of representation itself, these scholars reveal that domination do not operate only through institutions but also through knowledge, language, and Historiography. Subaltern Studies thus transforms History from a narrative of leaders and states into a critical inquiry into power, voice, and the persistent exclusion of the marginalised- a framework that remains essential for analysing post-colonial politics, including the rise of the Neo-middle class as a new representative elite [47].

Subaltern Historiography does not view the Neo-middle class as a simple agent of subaltern empowerment. Instead, it interprets this class as a Historically produced mediating elite that emerge from subaltern background

but come to dominate the politics of representation. Through institutions of the state, civil society, development discourse, and intellectual production, the Neo-middle class translates subaltern demands into elite languages of governance, legality, and reform. While this expands participation within constitutional politics, it simultaneously contains, filters, and often silences autonomous subaltern agency [48]. In this sense, Subaltern Studies reveals the Neo-middle class as both a product of subaltern mobility and a new structure of domination in post-colonial India.

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