



**MULTIPLE HISTORIES AT CROSSROADS: INTERVENTION WITH A
POLITICAL LENS**

Akanksha Sharma, Research scholar
Department of Political Science, University of Delhi

Introduction:

In the wake of post-modernist, post-structuralist, post-positivist and critical schools, there are emerging newer and enriched ways of engaging with the disciplines, revisiting the prevalent perceptions and understanding the nuances. Today, the multi-disciplinarity, subjectivity and the complexity of historical research and writing are acknowledged and thus come to forefront new ways of engaging with questions like social power and social subordination. The dialogue between cherished and silenced memories, oral and written histories and the archives have helped to address the questions comprehensively. Historiography has seen a trajectory from Missing the Dots to Connecting the Dots, via this dialogue.

There are questions about the authenticity of oral history, the impartiality of written records and archives, the memory v/s history debate (whether one is a part of other). Another subjective aspect is that both the yardstick of subordination and the forms of subordination are undergoing change. What was considered normal before may be seen as a form of subordination today, like bonded labour and patriarchy. Additionally, not all gets recorded and the constant domination-victimhood switch is rarely documented in the fullest sense.

In the wake of the 20th century and the acknowledgement of pluralistic and multicultural societies, there arose the debate around making history more plural by incorporating the hitherto excluded groups. In the 1960s, this list included “subaltern social groups and classes,

such as, former slaves, working classes, convicts, and women”¹. And, later included “ethnic groups, the indigenous peoples, children and the old, and gays, lesbians, and other minorities.”² This is what came to be known as history from below – The history which focused on the excluded, disenfranchised, poor, nonconformists, marginalised and so on.

This perhaps could have a connection with the behavioural revolution of the 20th century which reached its peak in the 1960 and 70s. and attempted to quantifiably study human behaviour, esp. their political behaviour. Therefore, in order to understand the people from all rungs of society, who would be the potential voters in the near future after universal suffrage, it became pertinent to know about their history which substantiated both subaltern studies as well as political studies.

This essay aims at understanding some underlying dynamics. However, instead of attempting to address these wider, debatable questions in this limited capacity, the essay is largely focused on few narrower issues. The first section talks about how democratisation of historiography, i.e. opening up of history writing to all, from the shackles of state control, has helped the discipline get a critical outlook. The second section takes into consideration the particular Indian context and the third section talks about the “internetization”³ of history and its implications. The essay further talks about various perspectives that have emerged as “history from below” followed by its significance and critical analysis.

DEMOCRATIZATION OF HISTORIOGRAPHY

There have generally been two dominant ways of history production. One, A highly centralised, institutionalised, formal, statist setup of archival knowledge production, and; Two, An informal, decentralised, oral tradition and memory-based history among people. There is another third Dimension of individual historians writing history on the basis of their own research, working and engaging with the earlier two. However, the ideology of historians underlies their work.

¹ Chakrabarty, Dipesh ‘Minority Histories and Subaltern Pasts’, in *Provincialising Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, 2007), p. 97

² Ibid. P.97

³ The term is not recognised or prevalent but I have just used it to capture the essence of the process when all the knowledge is being put upon the internet.

The hegemony of the state to maintain records, documents has been withering away. In the present world, the dialogue between history, memory and archive has been possible only by democratisation of the historiography which has enabled individual historians from the common people to interpret, construct and write history.

According to Guha, “the common sense of history may be said generally to be guided by sort of statism which thematizes and evaluates the past for it.”⁴ But millions are still left outside the domain, unrecorded, undocumented, unwanted. According to Nandy, “However odd this might sound to readers of a collection on world history, millions of people still live outside “history.”⁵ And the difference between these those within and outside is what he calls the “principle of principled forgetfulness.”⁶

The tendency to regard archives as neutral and unproblematic reservoirs of history and the notion of the archivist as a passive and impartial guardian of the surviving traces of the past is a very flawed idea. The post- positivist critique shows how the structure plays an important role in social sciences. Scholars like Thomas Kuhn talk immensely about it.

Archives are being criticized by various scholars. While Foucault in his work, “The archaeology of knowledge” terms archives as incomplete: as a law of what can be said; Derrida, in his work “Archive Fever” focuses upon “death drive of archive” pointing towards the violent connotation of archive. Ann stoler sees archives as a “site of fact production”/not as fact retrieval.⁷Trouillet also talks about the “silences of archives.”

INDIAN CONTEXT

In India, the post- independent nationalist historians, were not largely addressing the questions of statist perspective of power and subordination in the Indian society. Also, they weren't much critical of the colonial archives and tried to provide a neutral perspective. There are primarily reasons like: One, After the partition, the archives also got partitioned and historians were working along the archival grain, with the fractured archives: two, India was

⁴ Guha, Ranajit “The Small Voice of History”, in The Small Voice of History: Collected Essays (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2009), pg. 304

⁵ Nandy, Ashis “History’s Forgotten Doubles”, History and Theory, Vol., 34, No.2, 1995, pg.46

⁶ Ibid pg.46

⁷ Stoler Ann, “ Archives and the Arts of Governance’, Archival Science, 2, 2002

quite a fragile, newly Decolonised nation. The focus was to maintain integrity and stability. The tales of ancient times to manifest fraternity were more important than to provide the critical tales of social power and social subordination.

So, the phase of 1950s,60s, 70s didn't produce many critical historians. It is only in the last few decades of the 20th century that we see subaltern thinkers, Marxist/ neo-marxist thinkers who adopted not just “reading against the grain”⁸ approach but also took account of testimonies, oral histories and memories. They were influenced by larger global trends of rising critical theories. And this is how these scholars like Thapar, Nandy, Spivak, Guha, Amin give an alternative picture of history, as different from what was perceived. Amin constantly juxtaposes colonial archives with the subaltern archives and thus lead to what is called “alternative history” .

There were several de facto aspects of Indian society that were curtailed by the Colonisers by their Draconian laws, that we even today are rectifying. Also, it comes to notice that after 1857, not only did the British stop to undertake any socio-religious reforms but also any such movement from the side of Indians also took a backseat. It was a surprising aspect that pathos of nationalism overpowered the ethos of reform.

Such was the position that we could not see much constitutional assembly debates around core issues like homosexuality, adultery, privacy etc. The campaign against section 377 of IPC became and the recent decriminalisation of homosexuality by Supreme Court tell that we are still rectifying the faults.

Similarly , on one hand, we have “carnal intercourse against the order of nature “ as a crime in the rule book and on the other hand we have khajuraho temples legitimising the same. Here comes the contradiction between legal and legitimate.

Scholars take note of the absence of pertinent issues like honour killing in the colonial archive. Also, the fact that those who were trying to assert themselves were put under the nomenclature of “criminal tribe”. So, there was constant subordination and power Interplay, a major chunk of which was unaddressed.

⁸ Adopted by Ranajit Guha in Indian context

The whole societal fabric was manipulated in the archives by constant attempts of LEGITIMISING, DELEGITIMISING CONSTRUCTING AND SILENCING and this constantly further subordinated the subalterns more. The cultural subalterns of India had no voice.

But the reason why we today can possibly talk about this is because of this dialogue between memory, history and archives! The traditions, customs, oral history, the emotions have been alive because of memories. For example, No archives of partition but only testimonies and memories can recall the trauma of partition, partially! history writing cannot be complete without the interplay of archive, memory and history.

According to Amin, “how could the history of the unlettered, the oppressed, the subordinated be written on the basis of old, established, ‘elite’ documents. Surely, the new history requires new sources”⁹

INTERNETIZATION OF HISTORY

Today with the advent of the internet revolution, and the possibility of recording and accessing all the data, it has become very, very easy for scholars and students to access information, to study past records.

This has had two major consequences:

1. There is an accessibility and apparently blurring of distinction, marked by immense information flow allowing the subaltern groups to come up and write for themselves which privilege was denied to them historically. Also, the oral history, the dying languages and other traditions can be recorded which is a bliss for historians.
2. On the darker side, this internetization has seen a trajectory towards post- truth era and one can be easily misled. Additionally, the digital divide has again led to new forms of subordination and this subordination is not regional but global. Ex- a tech savvy country has much more leverage than a lower income group country.

⁹Amin Shahid, “Some Considerations on Evidence, Language and History, Indian History Congress, “1994. Pg. 8-9

There are also few limitations that are left unaddressed, The linguistic context plays an important role for understanding of history and this sometimes is not understood properly. Amin also pays attention towards the translation problem. Huge oral histories still remains unrecorded on the pretext of lack of evidences.

There have been constant attempts of reconstructing histories: sometimes to create a nationalist sentiment, at other times to silence a particular aspect of history. This again created a 'false consciousness' that we had sought to evade.

Recently, historian Romila Thapar in an interview with the Hindu said, “ Histories are written not by committees but by individual historians” to show her anguish towards the same trend.¹⁰

From Missing the Dots to CONNECTING THE DOTS”

The reason why historians all across the world could insightfully talk about questions of social power and social subordination is because of the triadic relationship between memory history and archive. Newer ways of engaging not with just the questions but also newer forms of domination have come into picture. This dialogue has led to connecting the missing dots and to reach to meaningful conclusions.

Various new perspectives

“Minority histories” instead of “grand narratives” in post modernist terms have been representative of the struggle of inclusion and thus, characterise the liberal democracies. So, history of any nation cannot be , in the strict sense of the term, a uni-directional, singular history seen with an elite-driven lens. It has to have a history from below lens. This has led to a success of 'trickle-down' in history writing wherein not just the dominant groups but also the socially oppressed groups have been included and thus seem to have a written history of their own cherished past.

¹⁰<https://www.google.com/amp/s/www.thehindu.com/news/national/history-is-not-written-by-committees-but-by-individual-historians/article23366668.ece/amp/#ampshare=https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/history-is-not-written-by-committees-but-by-individual-historians/article23366668.ece> 28

There are various ways of revisiting the subaltern pasts, ranging from postmodernist perspective, to that of alternative history, approaches ranging from critical school to that of reading against the grain. Testimonies, oral history, autobiographies etc have been of significant importance in the recent times to revisit history from a new perspective.

Scholars have worked with oppressed castes and excluded groups-Guha in “Small voices of history”¹¹ has multi-dimensionally engaged with subaltern pasts and also talked about social realities like Chandra's death which give oneself such inconsolable experience which cannot be forgotten any time soon. Similarly, Sharmila Rege talks about the significance of Dalit autobiographies.¹² Davesh Soneji in his work ¹³ on Devdasis in South India has talked about Devdasis historiography and experiences. Likewise, Rustom Bharucha¹⁴ talks about The oral history of Rajasthan.. All these works along with others try to give a counter perspective which has been overlooked in dominant history or Majority History.

Engagement of the new perspectives with “history from below” and their Significance

These entrance of new perspective in historically both as an act and an event has helped to engage with the concept of history with below in an unprecedented manner-

- It enriches the discipline of not just history but also other social sciences by adding plurivocality and multiple vantage points.
- By knowing cultural pasts associated with people, it becomes easier to preserve their culture. For example, a dying language can be preserved forever by proper technology. Thus, these alternative perspective help to enrich not just the discipline but the heritage as well. Therefore, it is a bedrock of multicultural societies.
- This helps to engage with the questions of historical injustices, subordination, dominance and so on.

¹¹ Guha, Ranajit ‘Chandra’s Death’, in *The Small Voice of History: Collected Essays*, pp. 271--303

¹² Rege, Sharmila ‘Debating the Consumption of ‘Dalit Autobiographies: The Significance of Dalit Testimonios’, in *Writing Caste, Writing Gender: Narrating Dalit Women’s Testimonios* (Chicago: 2006), pp. 1--92.

¹³ Soneji, Davesh. *Unfinished Gestures: Devadasis, Memory and Modernity in South India* (Chicago, 2012), pp. 1--26.

¹⁴ *An Oral History of Rajasthan: Conversations with Komal Kothari* by Rustom Bharucha (New Delhi: Penguin, 2003), pp. 1--35, 288--295, 296--300, 328--329. 4)

- It tries to fill the gap in the dominant historiography and thus provides a comprehensive as well as inclusive picture which acts as a “Patchwork” which becomes a “tellable tale” according to Amin and therefore, adds much more comprehensiveness and completeness.
- According to Chakrabarty, these perspectives are a result of growing demands for democratisation of history. Therefore, the counter perspective which has a counter-narratives and thus provides not only helps build alternative history but also grassroots history.

Critical Examination

there are many apprehensions attached to this and the critical analysis of these perspectives points towards the fact that although the counter perspectives are essential but they are not free from their own limitations.

- They fail to adequately address the question of agency. There has been this criticism that the person whose past is being documented doesn't get involved himself in the history writing. Therefore, it is seen more as an appropriation.
- Also, the ideology, values, preconceptions of the historian comes into play and a completely neutral history seems to be highly difficult.
- There is an inherent subjectivity along with the impossibility of objectivity in the discipline. “Objectivity unattainable in history; the historian can hope for nothing more than plausibility. But plausibility obviously rests not on the arbitrary invention of an historical account but involves rational strategies of determining what in fact is plausible”¹⁵
- There needs to be a sense of rationality associated with history writing. “A madman's narrative is not history. Nor can a preference that is arbitrary or just personal—based on sheer taste, say—give us rationally defensible principles for narration”
- It becomes very difficult to reconcile various contrasting narrations of a same incidence and devise a clear historical understanding. Thus, Plurivocality can act as a hurdle too. Ranajit Guha talks about the same myth of Rahu being seen as different in

¹⁵Chakrabarty, Dipesh ‘Minority Histories and Subaltern Pasts’, in *Provincialising Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, 2007), p. 9

different contexts, he also pays attention towards “grammatology, genealogy, cultic dimension of the myth”

- This brings us to the question between factual and fictional narrative. “We can probably positive distinction between factual and fictional narrative clearly evident to native uses of any language”¹⁶. It becomes very difficult to separate the fact from fiction. The authenticity might get compromised and therefore, it might act as a threat to historicity.
- Also, the question of the etymology of minority history and subaltern past is being discussion by Chakrabarty. According to a critic, “although academic “majority” history has brought “minority” histories of marginalized and oppressed peoples into the disciplinary mainstream, it has continued to ignore “subaltern pasts” with radically different principles of historical understanding.”¹⁷
- There comes a question on the appropriate methodology about how to work with these alternate perspectives and rewrite the subaltern history in a meaningful manner. The various approaches like the normative approach, the positivist approach, the interpretationist approach provide choices. However, the research remains difficult considering the plurality and methodological pluralism.

CONCLUSION

The various perspective and approaches that have become prominent in the recent times dealing with the oppressed caste and excluded groups I have proved to be much celebrate tree in the decentralization of historiography enriching the sense of the discipline and providing a completeness to the discipline however over Reliance on these counter narratives need to be dealt with much question in the era of pleura vocality and multiple truths so as to give a comprehensive understanding to history writing.

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¹⁶Rao, Shulman and subhramanyam, writing history in South India: textures of time (new Delhi 2001) p.5

¹⁷<https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/april-1998/minority-histories-subaltern-pasts-a-response>

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