Understanding Popular Politics: A Brief Outlook on Recent Historiographical Trends

Qazi Mohamad Shaheen
Assistant Professor History
Govt., Degree College Bandipora
Jammu And Kashmir,
India.

Abstract: The traditional professional historical scholarship held a very narrow view of politics. To it politics was considered to be comprised of activities done by the government and its institutions. Since government and its institutions were traditionally completely monopolized by the elites, the politics was considered to be the exclusive domain of such sections of society. The historians kept the focus of their scholarship solely on the elites. The common masses were completely ignored in their studies. The masses were considered to be apolitical and thus, were thought to have no history at all. However in the recent times such views were strongly challenged. The masses were not passive receptacles, claimed the new scholarship. But they were shown taking active part in the politics of the time through a variety of means. Even the traditional conception of politics itself was challenged. The new scholarship does not restrict politics to government and its institutions. But it claims that politics is in everything and everywhere. As a result, the increasing number of historians began to explore the politics of the common people. The study of popular politics has now become the subject of professional historical scholarship. In this paper the researcher will try to understand the popular politics by focusing on the new historiographical trends that arose from recent scholarship.

Key words: - Politics, Marginalized, Subaltern, Historiography, Tools

Introduction: - The traditional historians held firmly the idea of history which devoted itself exclusively to the exploration of politics which was considered to be the exclusive domain of elites. They held extremely skeptical views about the politics of the masses. According to this scholarship masses were considered to be basically apolitical. The scholars were of the opinion that politics was the preserve of the political elite, and that ordinary people were not excluded from politics but did not have any politics that could be studied.

The skepticism about the potential for political awareness [consciousness] amongst the ordinary people was so widespread that it can be detected even in the works of those historians who sought to broaden our conception of history and politics so as to allow some space for the common people[1]. Eric Hobsbawm, one of the pioneers of the historiographical trend that is classically known as 'history from below', in his classic discussion of Primitive Rebels, argued that the 'traditional forms of peasant discontent' should be seen as a 'pre-political phenomenon' for they were 'virtually devoid of any explicit ideology, organization, or programme' and the people had no 'specific language in which to express their aspirations about the world'.

However such skepticism had never been universal. Indeed there had been some historians who had shown some interest in mass protests in the form of violent resistances at the time of revolutionary upheavals. Michelet had long ago in his famous book, *History of the French Revolution*, tried to show the superiority of masses over the leaders.[2] He exclaimed *'I have taken history down, in the depth of the crowds, in the instincts of the people, and I have shown how the people led its leaders, etc.'*[3] The study of the politics of the common people, however, began to receive more serious attention after 1950s due to the efforts of the radical British historians like George Rude, Edward Thompson and Brian Manning who inaugurated a new historiographical trend that is known as 'history from below'. These historians demonstrated through their meticulous research that the mass actions of popular protest were both ideological and political in nature. The study of the politics of the ordinary people received further impetus and really

became a subject of professional historical scholarship with the emergence of 'Subaltern Historiography' in the domain of South Asian Studies in 1980s. Ranajit Guha, the founder and mentor of subaltern historiography, declared in a provocative opening statement that *"The historiography of Indian nationalism has for a long time been dominated by elitism".*[4] This *"blinkered historiography"*,[5] he went on to say, cannot explain Indian nationalism, because it neglected *"the contribution made by the people on their own, that is independently of the elite to the making and development of this nationalism"*[6] and thus *"failed to acknowledge the subaltern as the maker of his own destiny"*.[7] The elitist paradigm was marked by the absence of the politics of the people, and popular resistance were seen in it generally as resulting from economic exploitation or from process of mobilization from top. In his view there was now an urgent requirement for setting the record straight by viewing the history from the point-of-view of non-elite sections of society whom he calls Subaltern Classes. The objective of the Subaltern historians was thus to reinstate the common people as the subject of its own history, to refute once for all the insulting preconceptions which showed it as a brutish mass manipulated by the elites, and to do away with the teleological interpretation in which it merely figured as a passive cog in a sort of universal historical clockwork.[8] The scholars of Subaltern school of historical thought rejected the thesis that popular mobilization was the result of either economic conditions or initiatives from the top. They claimed that the politics of the people or 'Subaltern Polity' constituted an autonomous domain which '*neither originated from elite politics nor did its existence depend on the latter*'.[9] Its autonomy was rooted in conditions of exploitation and its politics was opposed to the elites. The politics of the people was characterized by its original process of mobilization, which were not vertical but horizontal (being based on kinship, territory, and sameness of living conditions), by its more spontaneous character, and a more frequent recourse to violent action. This domain was almost completely uninfluenced by the elite politics and possessed an independent, self-generating dynamics. The charismatic leadership was no longer viewed as the chief force behind a movement. It was instead the people's interpretation of such charisma which acquired such prominence in analysis of a movement or rebellion. Thus there was a "structural dichotomy" between the two domains of elite politics and that of the subalterns, as the two segments of Indian society lived in two completely separate and autonomous, although not hermetically sealed ,mental worlds defined by two distinct forms of consciousness.

It was to recognize the historical importance of people's free and sovereign agency, to retrieve its own culture, to arouse scientific interest in its authentic universe of thought and experience.[10] In short, one had to demonstrate that there exists an autonomous domain of the politics of the people, whose idioms, norms and values are rooted in the experience of labour and social exploitation, and which for this reason clearly contrasts with that of the elites.[11] The writings of the subaltern historians were criticized on numerous grounds particularly on its uncompromising stance on the autonomy and distinction of subaltern consciousness and agency. Nevertheless they did succeed in brining the subaltern polity – political views, assumptions and activities of the mass of the population below the line of the governing elite – in to the centre stage of the main stream historical scholarship. However these historians kept their focus only on violent uprisings for the understanding of people's politics.

However, in the more recent times it has been pointed out that emphasis on violent struggles to gain insight in to the politics of the non-elite sections of population had given us only "an episodic history of popular politics".[12] Such an approach can be of little help to explore the politics of the masses when the people were not rioting. It has been pointed out that if there were no disturbances over a given period of time, did that mean that the people were not politically conscious at that time, or they had slipped in to the lengthy phase of political indifference? Or what about the people who did not join in those riots that did occur? Were these people apolitical, or did they not just share the views of those rioted?

Thus, in the more recent times the scholars have began to divert their attention towards these questions. As a result of their in-depth study our understanding of the nature and significance of the politics of the people had become more sophisticated and the ways in which we seek to recapture this politics have grown more refined. In these studies it has been shown that there are variations in ways and means through which people can resist the authority or can give vent to their political opinions depending upon the type of power or repression which the protesters had to face or upon the cultural milieu to which the protesters belong. Thus these studies emphasize upon the multiplicity of the ways and means of resistance for gaining insight in to the politics of the common people. A protest in the form of open rebellions was, of course, one of the important means in which popular politics was manifested during the pre-modern period. It has been pointed out that even if the peasant rebellions may seem to us outwardly to be more purely economic forms of protest, but in fact they were often intrinsically political in nature, since the rebels were engaged in making public statements about how they thought those on the positions of authority were supposed to rule. Ranajit Guha has

pointed out that the subaltern identity was political in as much as the existing power nexus had to be on its head as a necessary condition of any particular grievance. He has shown that since British power in India permeated every level of rural structure under which the peasant labored and the rebellions thus transmitted in every case to social arrangements in which the Raj could be seen to play some determining part.[13]

Yet there were also other means whereby ordinary people could give voice to their political opinions. Ethan H. Shagan draws our attention towards rumours as *'mechanisms through which ordinary people could comment upon their political circumstances'*.[14] He convincingly shows how

'the protean character of rumours allowed individuals to express their opinions about Church and State by changing rumour's wording or surrounding the core content of a rumour with their own gloss' and thus that 'every person in the chain of rumour's transmission ……. participated to some degree in the creation of a popular political discourse'.[15]

Andy Woods looks at and demonstrates popular politics in plebeian speech – seditious words, the various languages of deference and defiance employed by the poor, and in more general terms is labeled as *'the politics of the speech'*.[16] In a similar perspective, Alastair Bellany focuses on libels, which afforded one type of space whereby *'dissident, marginal and oppositional voices …… could speak without serious risk of intervention'*, and thus *'made room for a politics of the excluded'*.[17] Similarly, James Scott enjoins us to study covert means which are being seen as expressing in symbolic terms a powerful critique of existing political systems. These covert means, which he has described as a *'weapon of the weak' or 'everyday forms of peasant struggle',* formed a strong vehicle of symbolic protest in societies where dissent and opposition to ruling regimes was not tolerated. [18]

Moreover, in the present times even the traditional conception of politics itself is questioned. In the traditional perspective politics was narrowly defined as something that took place in government and its institutions and was participated in by those who worked in them. However, many Political Scientists nowadays consider such a conception of politics too restrictictive. Thus Adrian Leftwich has stated that:

'politics comprises all the activities of cooperation and conflict, within and between societies, whereby the human species goes about organizing the use, production and distribution of human, natural and other resources in the course of the production and reproduction of its biological social life.'

What this view means is that politics is everywhere and in everything. As Leftwich continues:

'politics is at the heart of all collective social activity, formal and informal, public and private, in all human groups, institutions and societies, not just some of them, and……..it always has been and always will be.'[19]

The contemporary feminists have further broadened the conception of politics. To them*, 'even the personal is political'.*

This new scholarship, thus, not only focuses on popular protests in the form of violent struggles but also seeks to explore all other means in which people could be seen whether overtly or covertly giving vent to their political opinions. The popular protests in the form of violent resistance is seen as an important mode through which people give vent to their political opinions but it is not considered as the sole mean through which popular politics gets manifested. The absence of direct violent resistance is, therefore, not presumed to be a 'general approval of an undesirable world order' or 'political indifference of common people'. Alastair Bellany remarks that politics takes *'on a greater variety of forms'* and occurs *'in a greater variety of sites'* than is usually acknowledged and thus stresses upon the necessity of exploring:

'politics in symbols and ceremonies; on hearses and on corpses; at the end of ropes and on the points of knives; in Churches and on church doors; in words and in images; on walls and on paper; in print and on script; indoors and outdoors; among the elites and among the excluded, the marginal and the dissident'.[20]

Such insights free us from an episodic approach to the analysis of the politics of the subaltern classes.

Conclusion: - From above detailed discussion we have seen that there has been a paradigm shift in the subject of historiography with regard to its perception towards popular politics in the recent period. Not only has popular politics become the respectable subject of historical study but our understanding of politics itself has been broadened. Common people are no longer considered to be apolitical, but they have a politics of their own. This is what the recent historiography has brilliantly established through their meticulous research. The theoretical inputs that emerged from the recent historiography have proved illuminating for the study of political consciousness and actions of the mass of the population below the line of the governing elite.

References and Notes:-

1. Haris, T. 2001. '*Introduction',* in Tim Haris (Ed.), *The Politics of the Excluded, C. 1500 – 1850, pp. 2.*
2. Michelet, J. 1847. *History of the French Revolution,* tr. C. Cocks, pp. 10.
3. Quoted in Pouchepadas, J. 2000. '*Subaltern Studies as Post- Colonial Critique of Modernity*' in L Homme: Revue Francaise d'Anthropologie, 156.
4. Guha, R. 1982. '*Introduction'* in Ranajit Guha (Ed.) Volume i.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Pouchepadas, J. op. cit.
9. Guha, R. op. cit.
10. Pouchepadas, J. op. cit.
11. Ibid.
12. Haris, T. op. cit. pp. 3.
13. See Guha, R. 1983. *Elementary Aspects Of Peasant Insurgency In Colonial India.*
14. Shagan, Ethan H. 2001. '*Rumors and Popular Politics in the Reign of Henry viii',* in Tim Haris (Ed.), *The Politics Of the Excluded, C. 1500 – 1850, pp.31.*
15. Ibid.
16. Woods, A. 2001. '*Poore Men Woll Speke One Daye': Plebeian Languages of Deference and Defiance in England, C. 1520-1640 in Henry viii',* in Tim Haris (Ed.), *The Politics of the Excluded, C. 1500 – 1850, pp.*67-92.
17. Bellany, A. 2001. '*Libels in Action: Ritual, Subversion and the English Literary Underground, 1603-1642',* in Tim Haris (Ed.), *The Politics of the Excluded, C. 1500 – 1850, pp.*101.
18. Ibid. pp. 117.
19. Leftwich, A. 2004. *'The Political Approach to Human Behaviour: People, Resources and Power',* in Leftwich (ed.) *What is Politics?*, pp. 63, 64–65.
20. Bellany, A. op. cit. p. 117.