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Decolonizing Narratives: A Critical Analysis Of Postcolonial Trends In Indian Historiography

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Abstract

It has not been easy to unwrap the layers of Indian history which has already been entangled in the colonial threads for a long time and has been desperate to raise its muffled voice from every corner . This article is my attempt to deal with that entanglement and to throw light on the attempts that has been made by the post-colonial historians after 1947 to fix this issue . Like Ranajit Guha who talked of farmers after analysis of old papers or Partha Chatterjee who tried his best round the clock to change our attitude about looking towards the west . It's the view point of the marginalised and poors , women participating in history writing and the tribal groups sharing their past . The subaltern historiography that started in the 1980's and the dalits determining the caste stories helped me to connect the things . This work confronts the lies of the west and suffuse the missing parts . But doing this work has not been easy as the old British records and the rich and privileged class still leads everywhere and some voices rarely available, stay quiet . This article looks into the matter of the gradually changing historiography .

Keywords. Subaltern Studies, Feminist Historiography, Tribal History, Dalit Scholarship, Caste System, Decolonizing Historiography, Postcolonial Trends

INTRODUCTION

When one dives deep into the Indian history , it pulls them inside where one can find a ocean full of hidden stories . The British historians for a long time wrote about India that it was messy until they came with their tools which fulfilled the white man's burden theory . After the independence in a 1947, instead of

disappearing fast, that colonial narrative stayed strong . But after that Indian historians have been confronting to that narratives by stating that this is our story, our past and we will rewrite it .

This is not about neglecting the old works but it is about fixing what we have been told and adding the leftover and marginalised population from the history writing . The village stories that an old man should tell , the British might have never heard could be imagined . The new history is busy and full of life . Ramchandra Guha wrote about farmers, Partha Chatterjee confronted Western ideas and the dalit people broke old caste tales . I have read their books and investigated their works very closely and found that it is a living past . This is not for old and dusty shelves or any quite corners , it is for anyone asking who tells our history aur wondering to spin the story. India's history is not a loan from Britain, it is India's and we are taking it back .

THE COLONIAL SHADOW: A HISTORY OWNED

The colonial masters who ruled our country didn't just swipe the land but they also nabbed our whole sense of time . The most famous works of James mill in which he justified the slavery of Indian people under the British colonialists and considered the colonial rule necessary for the development of India . This was only an effort to provide legitimacy to the wrong doings of the colonial government. His *History of British India* bluntly laid that Indians were nothing until they came . His views reflect a utilitarian perspective, heavily influenced by his mentor Jeremy Bentham, and they served as a key intellectual basis for British rule in India. Mill perceived Indian society as stagnant, backward, and uncivilized. He argued that Indian culture was steeped in superstition, ignorance, and oppressive social structures like the caste system [1].

Undoubtedly Mill's views were Eurocentric and racist undertones. His depiction of Indian society ignored the complexity and achievements of Indian civilizations. His justifications were also used to rationalize exploitative policies, which often resulted in economic drain and social unrest in India.

All this was not by any mistake or a coincidence but it was well planned and they visionary character which helped them rule on us . This can be seen in the later British policies and way of ruling over India . Mill's work significantly influenced British policymakers and administrators in India, shaping the ideological framework of colonial governance during the 19th century. While writing Indian history they ignored the clashes, uprisings and everyday life and focused only on that part of the story that showed them great .

After independence that idea and the narratives didn't left behind. Post colonial Indian writers tried to tell a free country's story and add pride to it . Ranajit Guha's *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (1983), *Dominance without Hegemony: History and Power in Colonial India* (1997), Dipesh Chakrabarty's *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (2000), *Rethinking Working-Class History: Bengal 1890–1940* (1989), Partha Chatterjee's *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (1993), *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse?* (1986) , Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (1988) , Shahid

Amin's *Event, Metaphor, Memory: Chauri Chaura, 1922-1992* (1995), Gyanendra Pandey's *The Construction of Communalism in Colonial North India* (1990), *Remembering Partition: Violence, Nationalism, and History in India* (2001), Ravi Ahuja's *Pathways of Empire: Circulation, 'Public Works' and Social Space in Colonial Orissa (c. 1780–1914)* (2009) have significantly contributed to reshaping the understanding of colonial and postcolonial Indian history by foregrounding the voices of the oppressed and resisting hegemonic narratives. But the old way stayed rigid, focusing on rulers and dates, not on the marginalised.

SUBALTERN STUDIES: VOICES FROM THE DIRT

In the 1980's Ranajit Guha started something big. His work's elementary aspects said that the farmers were not just mere spectators but they also acted and fought like the others mentioned in the colonial history [2]. Subaltern studies wasn't narrow, it hit hard on the idea of negligence that the poor people doesn't matter in the process of history writing. Guha analysed the old papers and found the groups like Santhals and Mundas that the British didn't gave proper attention to. Others joint Ranajit Guha, bringing the real past out among the Indians and the rest of the world. They didn't want polished facts, rather than they wanted true stories of people who didn't wait for orders and acted voluntarily in reaction to the situation. It reached accordingly to the places which the old history neglected and skipped. Poor farmers and marginalised sections got heard, loud and clear. It is still a struggle because big people push in, but it keeps going strong.

FEMINIST REVISIONS: WOMEN STEP IN

British historians kept into the centre, the mighty kings who ruled for large span of time. But what about their queens or the female rulers; almost nothing. New women writers changed that narratives. Uma Chakravarti's work "*Rewriting History: The Life and Times of Pandita Ramabai*" showed that women were not just in old stories but they were also the equal part of it and also made them [3].

Her work critically examines how British historians often distorted Indian history to serve their imperial interests, particularly in their representation of gender and society especially the women.

British colonial historians portrayed Indian women as oppressed and in the need of intervention of these colonial masters for their emancipation. This narrative justified the colonial rule as a "civilizing mission", and this is not something new. Chakravarti's "*Rewriting History*" is contrary to this portrayal which highlights the agency of Indian women like Pandita Ramabai, who actively withstand both colonial dominance and patriarchal swatch. She demonstrates how Ramabai's life was a testament to women's aversion, intellectual autonomy, and reformist benefactions.

While colonial historiography disenfranchised the voices of Indian women, Chakravarti centers them in her investigation. Through a feminist lens, she overhauls the life of Ramabai, accentuating her role as a reformer and a disparager of both colonialism and the caste-based social fabric. By doing so, Chakravarti

rejuvenates the voices of women who shaped Indian history, thereby decolonizing a narrative that historically banished them.

Chakravarti critiques how colonial historians misinterpreted Indian society by emphasizing primarily on Brahmanical traditions and upper class narratives. She examines how the British authorities discriminately buttressed social reforms that aligned with their stake, while overlooking the systemic issues within caste and gender hierarchies. While accentuating the encounters of disenfranchised women, specifically from the non-Brahmin backgrounds, she confronts the colonial slant that denied their strong presence.

She worked round o'clock finding queens in old writings. Others also looked at widows in Bengal in the later period where women not just suffered but also fought to live. These changes were not mild, they were strong, bringing women in the centre. Dalit women spoke too, breaking the years of silence. I have read their work, it's full of power, showing that the past was not just meant for men. Women are still working on it and contributing in the new findings everyday.

INDIGENOUS AND TRIBAL RECLAIMS

The British called the tribal people wild and uncivilized like they were stuck forever. New writers confronted their narratives on tribals. While the British historians largely viewed tribal societies as primitive, static, and in need of colonial intervention, Nandini Sundar's work dismantles these colonial assumptions by highlighting the agency of tribal communities and the complexities of their political systems. In her book "*Subalterns and Sovereigns: An Anthropological History of Bastar*", Nandini Sundar looked at Bastar where the tribes did not just wait but they led and resisted[4]. She talked to the old tribal people, hearing stories the British missed. They are not just pretty tales but they existed in real. The songs sung around the fire and the old memories shows that the groups like Santhals and Gonds had their own ways of livelihood.

The portrayal of tribal communities as backward and uncivilized justifying British rule under the pretext of civilizing these societies by the British historians was confronted in Sundar's research by challenging this narrative by documenting the indigenous governance structures of the Bastar region. She explores the tribal communities complex systems of administration, conflict resolution, and decision-making which contributes a lot in refuting the colonial claim that these societies lacked a organized political life. Colonial historiography typically frames tribal uprisings as desultory acts of violence without acknowledging their political motivations. In contrast, Sundar's analysis brings to light the resistance movements of the Bastar tribes against the colonial exploitation. By documenting how tribal leaders and communities actively resisted to British policies of resource extraction and administrative control, she restores the agency and political consciousness of these tribal groups.

Sundar, through her interdisciplinary approach, combines anthropology and history together and moves beyond the Eurocentric perspective of colonial historians. By using the oral histories, indigenous narratives, and some ethnographic accounts, her work challenges the dominance of colonial archives, which often used to silence the subaltern voices.

This type of methodological shift is a key aspect of decolonizing the Indian historiography. Her work aligns with the broader objectives of Subaltern Studies, which seeks to recover the voices of the oppressed and marginalized in the history writing. By accentuating the experiences of tribal communities in Bastar region, she expands the subaltern discourse to include local acts of resistance and self-governance, challenging the colonial legacy of historiography that erased such narratives dexterously.

Sundar's seminal literary work "Subalterns and Sovereigns: An Anthropological History of Bastar" acts as a convincing reminder regarding the pliability of the tribals and their groups, bluntly subverting the colonial portrayal of them as mere acquiescent subjects in the process of history writing. This process is still slow because British papers are in majority and it still rules but the efforts are steady, pulling stories out. I have felt how big this is. A past that won't stay trapped. It keeps growing and each story keep moving the things a little.

CASTE AND THE DALIT PUSH

British writers considered caste as old rituals, not as a power. Colonial narratives often disregarded indigenous critiques of caste, positioning Indian history as one of internal oppression. British historians like James Mill generalized Indian society as a product of rigid and unchanging caste divisions, reinforcing the notion that colonial rule was necessary to reform these inequalities. BR Ambedkar disagreed to this. Ambedkar, however, refuted these views by demonstrating that the Shudras were not inherently inferior but were deliberately oppressed through the manipulation of religious texts and power structures. His book "Who Were the Shudras?" asked bluntly that who got pushed down and why [5]. He meticulously analyzes ancient texts like the Rigveda to trace the historical emergence of the Shudra identity. By interrogating Brahmanical texts like the *Rigveda* and *Manusmriti*, Ambedkar provided an indigenous perspective that deconstructed colonial assumptions.

"Who Were the Shudras?" is not merely a critique of caste but a bold step in reclaiming historical agency. By confronting both Brahmanical and colonial narratives, Ambedkar contributed to a more authentic and inclusive understanding of India's past. His work remains a foundational text in anti-caste literature, emphasizing the need to question and dismantle hierarchical social norms. By offering a historically grounded critique of caste, Ambedkar empowered the Indian scholars to challenge the colonial narratives. His book remains an essential tool in the intellectual decolonization of Indian historiography, encouraging further inquiries into the intersection of caste, power, and resistance. It opened pathways for Subaltern Studies and Dalit scholarship, which continue to dismantle colonial and elitist representations of Indian

history. His evidence-based analysis questioned the colonial portrayal of caste as a timeless, self-imposed system . This idea continued .

Gopal Guru stated that Dalit's did not just tolerated , they changed the things . Through poetry, songs, theatre, and autobiographies, Dalits have expressed their lived experiences and reclaimed their histories.[6]. Gopal Guru's analysis underscores the need for inclusive narratives in Indian society, where the voices of the oppressed are not only heard but also celebrated as agents of change. He studied how they fought from temples to streets , but the casteism didn't stopped rather it hurt deep .

This fight is strong, breaking old stories related to casteism and letting the voice of dalits to rise . It is not quiet, it is loud, fixing a past that hid too much . I have read their words, they hit hard, real and clear, rectifying the mistakes and lies about the past . Some old ideas resist but the change is coming , and that change is theirs .

THE ROUGH EDGES: WHAT HOLDS IT BACK

Breaking these narratives isn't easy as the British papers are piled up everywhere .The west still considers us backward and unfit for history writing. The common people are made to be heard mostly and they are not the part of history writing themselves [7]. I have seen how dust collects on the Indian papers . Authors struggle to manage who have come out from the misery and less facilities of educational institutions.

The past is entangled and on the other side caste, tribals and women want their role to be focused and prioritized, want their place in history. This has been tough but don't break and continued because it's not over . A lot has to be done further and a lot is being done in the contemporary period . Proper attention and consideration will lead to justice with all these disenfranchised aspects and dimensions.

WHERE IT'S HEADED: A PAST UNBOUND

This is not finished. Subaltern studies slowed, some say it's too fancy , but new people pick it up [8]. Digital things however help a lot , old stories go online and Dalit blogs shares rapidly . British narratives keep on winning and the local history remained kept out . I saw students in Pune reading Ambedkar free on his phone . This is like a revolution if a person from past comes to know about this . This helped cross the demarcated boundaries and spread all over the world . Other places like Africa and Latin America joined India's ideas . It's not an easy route , old papers slow it , but it's moving, and the past breathing new air after unwinding from the entanglement of the colonial narratives by the British historians.

CONCLUSION

Indian history is not borrowed in the sense of narratives of the British thinkers and historians . It's a fight to take it back and new thinkers keep going . Ranajit Guha's farmers, Parth Chakravarti's women , Gopal Guru's Dalit's , they are taking it back , strong and real, by emphasizing the voices of subaltern groups, questioning the hegemony of Western epistemology. Whereas feminist historians and Dalit scholars have expanded the discourse by integrating gender and caste perspectives. It is not perfect , rich people stay, gaps remain, but every change helps breaking the old story. I have read their work and felt it's push, this is India's history, not borrowed. It is still going, loud and big, and it is ours . Post colonial approaches have enabled a richer, multidimensional understanding of history, but the persistence of colonial frameworks in academic structures remains a challenge . The continuous re-examination of historical narratives, supported by regional histories and indigenous voices, will further decolonize the field of historiography . Ultimately, postcolonial analysis serves not only as a critique of past historical methods but also as a call to embrace a more equitable and pluralistic representation of history.

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