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Major Approaches to the History of Modern India

Looking at how histories are written is part of the study of the intellectual history of the period under discussion and can provide a variety of ideas and explanations. The starting point in the history of a society, therefore, has to be a familiarity with its **historiography**—the study of historical interpretation. This provides recognition of the intellectual context of history, instead of seeing history as just a narration of events. The modern history of India, for the convenience of understanding, can be broadly read under four approaches—the Colonial (or the Imperialist), Nationalist, Marxist, and Subaltern—each with its own distinct characteristics and modes of interpretation. However, there are other approaches—Communist, Cambridge, Liberal and Neo-liberal, and Feminist interpretations—which have also influenced historical writing on modern India.

View

The production of histories of India has become very frequent in recent years and may well call for some explanations... The reason is a two-fold one: changes in the Indian scene requiring a reinterpretation of the facts and changes in the attitudes of historians about the essential elements of Indian history.

—Percival Spear

Colonial Approach/ Historiography

For the major part of the 19th century the Colonial School occupied a high position in India. The term ‘colonial approach’ has been used in two senses. One relates to the history of the colonial countries, while the other refers to the works which were influenced by the colonial ideology of domination. It is in the second sense that most historians today write about the colonial historiography. In fact, the practice of writing about the colonial countries by the colonial officials was related to the desire for domination and justification of the colonial rule. Hence, in most such historical works there was criticism of indigenous society and culture. Simultaneously, there was praise for the Western culture and values and glorification of the individuals who established the colonial empires. The histories of India written by James Mill, Mountstuart Elphinstone, Vincent Smith and many others are pertinent examples of the colonial historiographical trend. Certain characteristics common to most of the works of these historians are the following:

- (i) ‘Orientalist’ representation of India;
- (ii) the opinion that the British brought unity to India;
- (iii) the notions of Social Darwinism—the English considered themselves superior to the ‘natives’ and the fittest to rule;
- (iv) India viewed as a stagnant society which required guidance from the British (White Man’s burden); and
- (v) establishing Pax Britannica to bring law and order and peace to a bickering society.

Nationalist Historiography/ Approach

The nationalist approach to Indian history can be described as one which tended to contribute to the growth of nationalist feelings and to unify people in the face of religious, caste,

or linguistic differences or class differentiation. This approach looks at the national movement as a movement of the Indian people, which grew out of the growing awareness among all people of the exploitative nature of colonial rule. This approach developed as a response to and in confrontation with the colonial approach. It should be noted that the nationalist historians of modern India didn't exist before 1947. Before 1947, nationalist historiography mainly dealt with the ancient and medieval periods of Indian history. Although, in the last quarter of the 19th century, a detailed and scientific critique of colonialism for the adverse economic aspects of alien rule was developed by nationalists like Dadabhai Naoroji, M.G. Ranade, G.V. Joshi, R.C. Dutt, K.T. Telang, G.K. Gokhale, and D.E. Wacha. The only accounts of the national movement was by nationalist leaders (not historians) such as R.G. Pradhan, A.C. Mazumdar, J.L. Nehru and Patabhi Sitaramayya. R.C. Majumdar and Tara Chand are noted nationalist historians of modern India.

Marxist Historiography/ Approach

The beginning of the Marxist approach in India was heralded by two classic books—Rajni Palme Dutt's *India Today* and A.R. Desai's *Social Background of Indian Nationalism*. Originally written for the famous Left Book Club in England, *India Today*, first published in 1940 in England, was later published in India in 1947. A.R. Desai's *Social Background of Indian Nationalism*, was first published in 1948.

Unlike the imperialist/colonial approach, the Marxist historians clearly see the primary contradiction between the interests of the colonial masters and the subject people, as well as the process of the nation-in-the-making. Unlike the nationalists, they also take full note of the inner contradictions between the different sections of the people of the Indian society. However, some of them, particularly Rajni Palme

Dutt, were unable to fully integrate their treatment of the primary anti-imperialist contradiction and the secondary inner contradictions and tended to counterbalance the anti-imperialist struggle with the class or social struggle. They tend to see the national movement as a structured bourgeois movement, if not the bourgeoisie's movement, and miss its open ended and all-class character. Another noted Marxist historian, who made a critique of R.P. Dutt's paradigm, is Sumit Sarkar; he considers Dutt's paradigm as a "simplistic version of the Marxian class approach". He looks at the nationalist leaders in the light of intelligentsia which acts as a "kind of proxy for as yet passive social forces with which it had little organic connection".

A.R. Desai traces the growth of the national movement in five phases, each phase based on particular social classes which supported and sustained it.

Subaltern Approach/ Historiography

This school of thought began in the early 1980s under the editorship of Ranajit Guha, as a critique of the existing historiography, which was faulted for ignoring the voice of the people. Right from the beginning, subaltern historiography took the position that the entire tradition of Indian historiography had had an elitist bias. For the subaltern historians, the basic contradiction in Indian society in the colonial epoch was between the elite, both Indian and foreign, on the one hand, and the subaltern groups, on the other, and not between colonialism and the Indian people. However, they do not subscribe to the Marxist theory of the nature of the exploitation by the nationalist movement: they point out that the Indian society of the time could not be seen in terms of class only as capitalism in the country was just nascent at the time. This school sees nationalism as exploitative in terms of caste, gender, religious and creed divisions.

View

A few historians have of late initiated a new trend, described by its proponents as subaltern, which dismisses all previous historical writing, including that based on a Marxist perspective, as elite historiography, and claims to replace this old, 'blinkered' historiography with what it claims is a new people's or subaltern approach.

—Bipan Chandra

Nationalism, say the subalterns, ignored the internal contradictions within the society as well as what the marginalised represented or had to say. They believe that the Indian people were never united in a common anti-imperialist struggle, that there was no such entity as the Indian national movement. Instead, they assert, there were two distinct movements or streams: the real anti-imperialist stream of the subalterns and the bogus national movement of the elite. The elite streams, led by the 'official' leadership of the Indian National Congress, were little more than a cloak for the struggle for power among the elite.

Communalist Approach

The historians of this school, relying completely on the colonial historiography of medieval India and colonial era textbooks, viewed Hindus and Muslims as permanent hostile groups whose interests were mutually different and antagonistic to each other. This view was not only reflected in the writings of the historians but it also found a more virulent form in the hands of the communal political leaders. In their view, India's medieval history was one long story of Hindu-Muslim conflict. As a corollary of this view, it was then argued that the 19th- and 20th-century Muslims had the 'happy' and 'proud' everpresent memory of having been the ruling class, while Hindus had the 'sad' and 'humiliating' memory of having been the subject race. This, ultimately,

developed mutual hatred among these groups often resulting in communal riots and, in the end led to the partition of India.

Cambridge School

According to this school of thought, the fundamental contradiction under colonial rule was not between imperialism and the Indian people, but among the Indians themselves. Further, Indian nationalism was not the product of a struggle of the Indian people against colonial exploitation, but what arose from conflict among the Indians for getting the benefits given to them by the British rulers. The leaders of the national movement, according to this school, were inspired by the quest for power and material benefits. This approach has been criticised by many scholars on the ground that it takes the mind or ideals out of human behaviour and reduces nationalism to 'animal politics'.

Liberal and Neo-Liberal Interpretations

According to this interpretation, the economic exploitation of the colonies was not beneficial to the British people as a whole. The availability of markets for British industrial goods in the colonial world and capital investment in overseas markets (like laying of railways in India) might have actually discouraged domestic investment and delayed the development of the 'new' industries in Britain. The proponents of this school of thought are Patrick O'Brian, Hopkins and Cain.

Feminist Historiography

The shift in terms of the writing of women's history began with the women's movement of the 1970s which provided the context and impetus for the emergence of women's studies in India. Very soon, women's history broadened and assumed the more complex shape of gender history. In the

early years, the endeavour was to write a history of women to supplement the writings of mainstream history. Also, an attempt was made to research and compile an archive of women's writing. An important area of research has been analysis of the way in which colonial structures, such as the legal structure, affected women's lives. Women's vulnerability due to the denial of ownership of productive resources has been focused on, in the analysis of how progressive laws shaped gender relations. In the colonial period, two works based upon the women's question in India—*The High Caste Hindu Woman* (1887) by Pandita Ramabai, and *Mother India* (1927) by Katherine Mayo—attracted international attention.

Summary

Different Approaches

Colonial Approach is influenced by the colonial ideology of domination. It focuses on criticism of indigenous society and culture, and praises the Western culture and values. James Mill, Vincent Smith etc., followed the approach.

Nationalist Approach evolved as a response to and in confrontation with the colonial approach. Before independence, this school dealt with the ancient and medieval periods of Indian history, and not the modern period. After independence this school focused on modern India. R.C. Majumdar and Tara Chand belonged to this school.

Marxist Approach focuses on the primary contradiction between the interests of the colonial masters and the native subjects. It also takes notice of the inner contradictions between the different sections of Indian society. R.P. Dutt and A.R. Desai were noted Marxist historians of India.

Subaltern Approach takes the position that the entire tradition of Indian historiography has an elitist bias and the role of the common masses has been neglected. Ranajit Guha belonged to this school.

Communalist Approach views Hindus and Muslims as permanent the hostile groups whose interests are mutually different and antagonistic to each other.

Cambridge School envisages Indian nationalism as a product of conflicts among the Indians themselves for getting the benefits from the British rulers. For them Indian nationalist leaders were inspired by the greed of power and material benefits.

Liberal and Neo-liberal Interpretations imply that the economic exploitation of the colonies was not beneficial to the people of Britain as it delayed the development of the 'new' industries in Britain.

Feminist Historiography focuses on areas of research that analyse colonial structures, such as the legal structure, which affected women's lives. It also focuses on women's vulnerability due to the denial of ownership of productive resources.