
UNIT 24 : HISTORY FROM BELOW

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24.1 INTRODUCTION

History from Below began as a reaction against the traditional histories which concerned themselves almost exclusively with the political, social and religious elites. It has been variously termed as ‘grassroots history, history seen from below or the history of the common people’, ‘people’s history’, and even, ‘history of everyday life’. The conventional history about the great deeds of the ruling classes received further boost from the great tradition of political and administrative historiography developed by Ranke and his followers. In opposition to this ‘History from Above’, the History from Below was an attempt to write the history of the common people. It is a history concerned with the activities and thoughts of those people and regions that were neglected by the earlier historians. Peasants and working classes, women and minority groups, unknown ‘faces in the crowd’, and the people lost in the past became the central concern of this historiographical tradition. History from Below is an attempt to make history-writing broad-based, to look into the lives of the marginalised groups and individuals, and to explore new sources and to reinterpret the old ones.

24.2 BEGINNING AND GROWTH

The beginning of the History from Below may be traced to the late 18th century. In the classical western tradition, history-writing involved the narration of the deeds of great men. The common people were considered to be beyond the boundaries of history and it was beneath the dignity of the historian to write about them. In any case, as Peter Burke points out, ‘until the middle of the eighteenth century, the word “society” in its modern sense did not exist in any European language, and without the word it is very difficult to have any conception of that network of relationships we call “society” or “the social structure”.

According to Eric Hobsbawm, such an approach to history became possible ‘only from the moment when the ordinary people become a constant factor in the making of such decisions and events. Not only at times of exceptional popular mobilization, such as revolutions, but at all or most times. By and large this did not happen until the era of the great revolutions at the end of the eighteenth century.’ In particular, he traces the origin of this trend in the French Revolution which provided the impetus and opportunity for writing such history by drawing the common people in the public sphere and by creating documents related to their actions. He states:

‘One of the reasons why so much modern grassroots history emerged from the study of the French Revolution is that this great event in history combines two characteristics which rarely occur together before that date. In the first place, being a major revolution, it suddenly brought into activity and public notice enormous numbers of the sort of people who previously attracted very little attention outside their family and neighbours. And in the second place, it documented them by means of a vast and laborious bureaucracy, classifying and filing them for the benefit of the historian in the national and departmental archives of France.’

The process basically started with the ‘discovery of people’ by the Romantics in late-18th century Europe. They used the popular cultural resources like ballads, folk songs and stories, myths and legends to reconstruct the past. Their emphasis on passion as against reason, on imagination as against mechanical science formed the basis for recovering the popular history. In Germany J.G.Herder coined the term ‘popular culture’. The two early-19th century histories which used the word ‘people’ in their titles were the *History of the Swedish People* by E.G.Geijer and the *History of the Czech People* by Palacky. In Germany, Zimmermann wrote about the German peasant war. In France, it was Jules Michelet (1798-1874) who, in his voluminous writing on French Revolution, brought common people into the orbit of history-writing. His *History of France* (1833- 67), *History of the French Revolution* (1846-53) and *The People* (1846) are notable for taking the masses into account. In England,

the History from Below may be traced to the writings of J.R.Green, Goldwin Smith and Thorold Rogers in the 1860s and 1870s. Green, in the Preface to his book *Short History of the English People* (1877) criticised the tendency to write the ‘drum and trumpet’ history, i.e., the history of wars and conquests. He wrote:

‘The aim of the following work is defined by its title; it is a history not of English kings or English conquests, but of the English People I have preferred to pass lightly and briefly over the details of foreign wars and diplomacies, the personal adventures of kings and nobles, the pomp of courts, or the intrigues of favourites....’

Similarly, Thorold Rogers’s huge, seven-volume study, *History of Agriculture and Prices* (1864-1902), was a major work on the social and economic history.

In the 20th century, the historian whose works inspired the left tradition of History from Below was Georges Lefebvre. He empirically grounded the study of peasantry in the context of the French Revolution. In his *The Peasants of Northern France during the French Revolution* (1924), he made a detailed statistical examination of the peasant life on the eve of the Revolution. He differentiated between various groups of peasants and outlined their differential responses to the Revolution. He further sought to comprehend the motives behind their actions. It was, however, his other book, *The Great Fear of 1789* (1932), which comprehensively described the peasant mentality during the Revolution. It is considered among the first texts of the new history from below which is basically concerned about delineating the thoughts and actions of the common people. Eric Hobsbawm, writing in 1985, feels that ‘If there is a single historian who anticipates most of the themes of contemporary work, it is Georges Lefebvre, whose *Great Fear* ... is still remarkably up to date.’ Thus it may be said that the History from Below, as we know it today, began with Lefebvre.

Building on his work, his pupil and friend, George Rude, advanced this tradition which had moved away for the ‘uncritically sentimental tradition’ of Michelet and the Romantics. Rude was basically concerned with the study of ‘the lives and actions of the common people... the very stuff of history’. In his many books, including *The Crowd in the French Revolution* (1959), *The Crowd in History* (1964), and *Ideology and Popular Protest* (1980), Rude discussed the participation of ordinary people in the epoch-making event. He was not interested in the actions and behaviour of the dominant classes. Rather, in the words of Frederick Krantz, ‘He sought ... to understand the crowd action of craftsmen, small shopkeepers, journeymen, labourers and peasants not as “disembodied abstraction and personification of good and evil”, but as meaningful historical activity susceptible, through meticulous and innovative research, to concrete re-creation’. The questions he asked about the masses set the precedent for the later work on grassroots history : ‘how it behaved, how it was composed, how it was drawn into its activities, what it set out to achieve and how far

its aims were realized.’ He sought to understand the crowd as a ‘thing of flesh and blood’ having its own ‘distinct identity, interests, and aspirations’.

In Britain, during the 1920s and 1930s, there were many popular history books published by the leftist Book Club. In the 1940s, the Communist Party Historians’ Group carried forward this tradition. Many of the figures identified with History from Below, such as George Rude, E.P.Thompson, Eric Hobsbawm, Christopher Hill, and John Saville were members of this group. This group was instrumental in bringing out the famous journal *Past and Present* in 1952 and later on the *Labour History Review*. Later on this tradition was carried forward by the *History Workshop Journal*, founded in 1976, which remained devoted to publishing people’s history.

E.P.Thompson, in his essay ‘History from Below’, published in 1966, first provided the theoretical basis to this tradition of history-writing. After that, according to Jim Sharpe, ‘the concept of history from below entered the common parlance of historians’. Thompson had already written his classic book, *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963), in which he had explored the perspective of the working classes in the context of the Industrial Revolution in England. In a famous statement he stressed that his aim was to understand the views and actions of those people who had been termed as backward-looking and had, therefore, been relegated to the margins of history. He wrote :

‘I am seeking to rescue the poor stockinger, the Luddite cropper, the ‘obsolete’ hand-loom weaver, the ‘utopian’ artisan, and even the deluded follower of Joanna Southcott, from the enormous condescension of posterity. Their crafts and traditions may have been backward-looking. Their communitarian ideals may have been fantasies. Their insurrectionary conspiracies may have been foolhardy. But they lived through these times of acute social disturbance, and we did not. Their aspirations were valid in terms of their own experience; and if they were casualties of history, they remain, condemned in their own lives, as casualties.’

In one of his famous essays, ‘The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century’ (1971), Thompson studied the crowd behaviour involved in food riots. According to him, the food riots were ‘a highly complex form of direct popular action’ where the people involved had rational and clear objectives.

Similarly, Christopher Hill and Eric Hobsbawm sought to emphasise the importance of the thoughts and actions of the lower classes in the making of history. Hill studied the radical and democratic ideologies in the course of the 17th-century English Revolution.

In his book, *The World Turned Upside Down* (1972), Hill argued that the radical movements of the ordinary people, such as the Levellers, the Diggers, the Ranters, had great revolutionary potential and was capable of subverting the 'existing society and its values'. It is a history written from the point of view of the radical religious groups involving ordinary people. Similarly, Hobsbawm wrote extensively on the thoughts and actions of the modern workers and pre-industrial peasants in books like *Labouring Men* (1964), *Worlds of Labour* (1984), *Primitive Rebels* (1959) and *Bandits* (1969). John Foster's *Class Struggle and Industrial Revolution* (1974) and Raphael Samuel's *Theatres of Memory* (1994) carries forward this tradition. In the USA, the works on the slaves by Eugene Genovese and Herbert Gutman belong to the same tradition.

Although the Marxist historians have mostly influenced the writing of History from Below in the 20th century, there are others also whose writings can be said to constitute this trend. Prominent among them are some of the historians of the *Annales* School. Both the founders of the *Annales*, Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre, had interests in popular mentalities. Bloch's classic book, *The Royal Touch* (1924), shows his interest in collective psychology and in people's mentalities, ideas and beliefs. Bloch explores the popular belief in the healing powers of the French and the English kings and their capacity to cure the skin disease scrofula just by touching the patient. This belief became a fundamental element in construction of royalty and maintenance of its strength. Similarly Febvre's *Martin Luther* (1928) and *The Problems of Unbelief in the 16th Century* (1942) were studies of mentalities. These works stimulated the later generations of historians to explore the history of mentalities.

It was, however, Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie's *Montaillou : Cathars and Catholics in a French Village, 1294-1324* (1975) that became one of the classic texts of this genre. It is a study of the ideas and beliefs of a medieval Pyrenean peasant community and offers valuable insights into the lives and activities of common people. Ladurie used as his basic source material the inquisitorial records of the Catholic church to explore the thoughts and beliefs of a small community.

Another classic work in the same tradition, though not of the *Annales* lineage, is Carlo Ginzburg's *The Cheese and the Worms* (1976). Here the author looks into the intellectual and spiritual world of one individual, an Italian miller named Domenico Scandella (also known as Menocchio). He was tried by the church authorities for his heretic beliefs and was executed in 1600. The copious documentation dealing with his case provided the basic source material to Ginzburg who is aware of the conceptual and methodological problems involved in recreating the world of subordinate groups and individuals in the pre-modern period. However, he thinks that 'the fact that a source is not "objective" (for that matter, neither is an inventory) does not mean that it is useless.... In short, even meagre, scattered and obscure documentation can be put to good use.' Ginzburg's other works, such as *The Night Battles : Witchcraft and Agrarian Cults in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (1966) and *Ecstasies :*

Deciphering the Witches' Sabbath (1989), also strengthened the tradition of History from Below. His works, along with those of Giovanni Levi, also created a new trend in history-writing known as 'microhistory' which we have discussed in detail in **Unit 11**. Peter Burke's *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (1978), Robert Darton's *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (1984) and Natalie Zemon Davis's *Society and Culture in Early Modern France* (1975) and *The Return of Martin Guerre* (1983) are some other works which explore the popular mentalities and belong to this kind of historiography.

24.3 MAIN TRENDS

According to Raphael Samuel, the 'term "people's history" has had a long career, and covers an ensemble of different writings. Some of them have been informed by the idea of progress, some by cultural pessimism, some by technological humanism'. There is a variety in the subject matter also. 'In some cases the focus is on tools and technology, on others on social movements, on yet others on family life.' This kind of history has also 'gone under a variety of different names – "industrial history" in the 1900s .., "natural history" in those comparative ethnologies which arose in the wake of Darwin... "Kulturgeschichte" (cultural history) in those late-nineteenth-century studies of folkways to whose themes the "new" social history has recently been returning'.

It is, however, clear that this version of historiography has been dominated by the Marxist historians. From Georges Lefebvre in France to Eric Hobsbawm and E.P.Thompson in England to Eugene Genovese and Herbert Gutman in the United States, the nature and method of History from Below in the West have been defined by Marxist social historians. They have first used this term and delineated its features in relation to the conventional historiography. Thompson, Hobsbawm and Raphael Samuel have written about its concepts and contents and most of them have practiced this kind of history-writing. In this version, politics of class struggle has been an important presence. Whether it is the study of the 18th-century French peasantry by Lefebvre, or the medieval English peasantry by Christopher Hill, or the working classes of the 19th and 20th centuries by Thompson, Hobsbawm and John Foster, the existence of classes and the class struggle is always noticeable. These historians insist on the agency of the people and their own role in shaping their lives and history. Some of them, particularly Thompson and Genovese also emphasise on the lived 'experiences' of the people instead of abstract notions of class for understanding their behaviour.

But the Marxist historians are not the only ones in this field. The historians belonging to the *Annales* School such as Marc Bloch, Lucien Febvre and Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie have also studied the life and thoughts of the subordinate classes. However, with them, it goes under the name of 'history of mentalities'. Closely allied to this is

the new cultural history. Developed in the 1960s by Le Roy Ladurie, Robert Mandrou and Jacques Le Goff who were part of the later *Annales* School in France, this version of historiography had a more populist conception of history and was critical of the 'religious psychology' approach of Febvre. These historians stressed that the people were not passive recipient of the ideas imposed from above or outside, but were creators of their own culture. Some other historians, such as Carlo Ginzburg, Robert Darnton and Natalie Zemon Davis, who are not allied with the *Annales*, may also be classified as cultural historians. This kind of cultural history is the history of popular ideas. It differs from the approach of the Marxist historians in that it does not stress on classes or economic or political groups. Instead, they focus on small communities or individuals, on everyday life, on routine work practices, and on ceremonies and rituals. It is, therefore, a version of History from Below in which the politics, though not absent, clearly plays a much less important role than in the Marxist version.

These two trends, one associated with Marxism and the other with the 'history of mentalities' and cultural history, have been the most important versions of History from Below in the 20th century. However, there are other versions of this kind of historiography. In the right-wing version of such history there is no place for politics. It is a history of people in which there is no class struggle, no conflict of ideas and there is a strong sense of religious and moral values. The institution of family is idealised and there is a tendency 'to interpret the social relationships as reciprocal rather than exploitative'. Raphael Samuel states that the 'characteristic location of right-wing people's history is in the "organic" community of the past.... The ideology is determinedly anti-modern, with urban life and capitalism as alien intrusions on the body politic, splintering the age-old solidarities of "traditional" life'. G.M. Trevelyan's *English Social History* (1944) and Peter Laslett's *World We Have Lost* (1965) are examples of this trend.

In the liberal version, the History from Below celebrates the spirit of modernity and benefits of capitalism and material progress. It is optimistic in tone and is future-oriented. It is critical of the pre-modern period which it considers synonymous with superstition and warfare. Guizot, Mignet, Thierry and later Michelet were some of the historians who represent this trend.

24.4 PROBLEMS OF WRITING HISTORY FROM BELOW

Both the exponents and critics have pointed towards several problems involved in the practice of History from Below. The most important problem relates to the nature and availability of sources. Most of the records left by the past describe the lives and deeds of the ruling and dominant groups. Even those records which relate to the lives and activities of ordinary people were created by the dominating classes or by those who were associated with them. This was done mostly for administrative purposes. The records about the subordinate groups are more numerous for the periods when

they were resisting or rebelling against the authorities. Before the late 18th century in Europe access to such sources is restricted. For other parts of the world, particularly the Third World countries, the availability of such records is even more difficult. Moreover, as most of these records were created by and for the members of the dominant groups, they suffer from hyperbole, neglect and misrepresentation. For example, the police records revealing the subversive activities among the masses are often exaggerated. Similarly, they completely ignore those areas in the life of people which were not in administrative interest.

The problem is compounded because the masses have generally not left much records of their own. Popular culture is generally preserved through the oral medium and not through written medium. The oral tradition, as Hobsbawm remarks, 'is a remarkably slippery medium for preserving facts. The point is that memory is not so much a recording as a selective mechanism, and the selection is, within limits, constantly changing'. The paucity of written sources left by the ordinary people is a great hindrance in writing about their feelings and ideas.

At another level, there are problems related to conceptualisation also. Although all practitioners of History from Below claim to write about people, the term 'people' itself is used with different, sometimes conflicting, meanings. Raphael Samuel states that 'In one version of people's history – radical-democratic or Marxist – the people are constituted by relations of exploitation, in another (that of the folklorists) by cultural antinomies, in a third by political rule'. The problem is further complicated by excluding certain groups from the category of people, while considering some as more people than others. In one version it is the proletariat which constitute the real people, in another it is peasantry. Herder, the German Romantic scholar, did not include the urban masses in the category of 'people'. For him and his followers, the 'people' were the peasants who lived close to nature and were innocent. The term sometimes also adopts racist connotations in which people speaking other languages or following different faiths are not counted among the real people. At the left radical level, the exclusion takes another form. Peter Burke, while praising the histories written by British Marxist historians, points out :

'Edward Thompson's *Making of the English Working Class* comes quite close to excluding working-class Tories from the people. As for *The World Turned Upside Down* [by Christopher Hill], it deals alternately with radical ideas and with the ideas of ordinary people, so that an incautious reader may very well be led to equate the two. However, in seventeenth-century England, not all ordinary people were radicals and not all radicals were ordinary people.'

The History from Below has also been criticised for not taking theoretical issues into account and for romanticising and idealising the people. Its rank and file approach

ignores the fact of institutional influence on industrial relations. Moreover, its neglect of quantitative analysis and overemphasis on narrative has also been criticised.

24.5 INDIAN CONTEXT

The main problem in writing the History from Below in India, apart from the conceptual problems discussed above, is the absence of relevant sources. The records pertaining to the lower classes were almost exclusively produced by those not belonging to that stratum of society. The relevant sources are a big problem even in advanced countries where the working-class literacy was much higher. Even there the sources related to the peasants and other pre-industrial groups come to us through those in authority. In India, most of the members of the subordinate classes, including the industrial working classes, are not literate. Therefore, direct sources coming from them are extremely rare, if not completely absent. Given this scenario, the historians trying to write history from below have to rely on indirect sources. As Sabyasachi Bhattacharya points out, 'Given the low level of literacy we have to depend on inferences from behaviour pattern, reports on opinions and sentiments (often involving a distorting refraction in the medium), on oral testimonies (best when exactly recorded as in trial proceedings) etc.' Oral traditions also have their problems. They cannot be stretched back too far and one has to work within living memory. These problems are outlined by one of the great practitioners of History from Below, Ranajit Guha, the founder of the *Subaltern Studies* about which we will read more in the next Unit. Guha, in his book, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (1983), talks about the elitist origins of most of the evidences which the historians use for understanding the mentalities behind the peasant rebellions :

'Most, though not all, of this evidence is elitist in origin. This has come down to us in the form of official records of one kind or another – police reports, army despatches, administrative accounts, minutes and resolutions of governmental departments, and so on. Non-official sources of our information on the subject, such as newspapers or the private correspondence between persons of authority, too, speak in the same elitist voice, even if it is that of the indigenous elite or of non-Indians outside officialdom.'

To overcome these elitist biases, it is often supposed, folk traditions may be used. But, according to Guha, 'there is not enough to serve for this purpose either in quantity or quality in spite of populist beliefs to the contrary'. Firstly, there are not much of such evidences available. Moreover, 'An equally disappointing aspect of the folklore relating to peasant militancy is that it can be elitist too.' Guha's suggestion for capturing the insurgent's consciousness is to read between the lines, 'to read the presence of a rebel consciousness as a necessary and pervasive element within that body of evidence'.

However, Sumit Sarkar finds a much deeper problem which may be the cause of this non-availability of evidences. It is the continued subalternity of the lower classes :

‘Above all, “history from below” has to face the problem of the ultimate relative *failure* of mass initiative in colonial India, if the justly abandoned stereotype of the eternally passive Indian peasant is not to be replaced by an opposite romantic stereotype of perennial rural rebelliousness. For an essential fact surely is that the “subaltern” classes have remained subaltern, often surprisingly dormant despite abject misery and ample provocation, and subordinate in the end to their social “betters” even when they do become politically active.’

It is with these constraints that the historians have worked on Indian people’s histories.

24.5.1 History of Peasant Movements

A general history of peasant movements by Barrington Moore Jr., *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy* (1967), puts the Indian peasant movements in a comparative perspective. In Moore’s account, the Indian peasantry lacked revolutionary potential and were comparatively docile and passive in the face of poverty and oppression. Thus peasant rebellions in India were ‘relatively rare and completely ineffective and where modernization impoverished the peasants as least as much as in China and over as long a period of time’. This view of the Indian peasant was challenged by many historians. Kathleen Gough, in her article on ‘Indian Peasant Uprising’ (1974), counted 77 peasant revolts during the colonial period. Her conclusion is that ‘the smallest of which probably engaged several thousand peasants in active support or combat’. And the largest of these ‘is the “Indian Mutiny” of 1857-58, in which vast bodies of peasants fought or otherwise worked to destroy British rule over an area of more than 500,000 square miles’. Ranajit Guha, in his book, states that ‘there are no fewer than 110 known instances of these even for the somewhat shorter period of 117 years – from the Rangpur *dhing* to the Birsaite *ulgulan*’. A.R.Desai is also against this view of the docility of the Indian peasantry and asserts that ‘the Indian rural scene during the entire British period and thereafter has been bristling with protests, revolts and even large scale militant struggles involving hundreds of villages and lasting for years’. It is, therefore, clear that, at least during the British period, the quiescence of the Indian peasantry is a myth and a large number of works explode this myth.

There are many studies undertaken on Indian peasant movements. Apart from Kathleen Gough’s work, A.R.Desai’s (ed.) *Peasant Struggles in India* (1979) and *Agrarian Struggles in India after Independence* (1986), Sunil Sen’s *Peasant Movements in India – Mid-Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (1982), Ranajit

Guha's *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (1983), Eric Stokes's *The Peasants and the Raj : Studies in Agrarian Society and Peasant Rebellion in Colonial India* (1978), and D.N.Dhanagare's *Peasant Movements in India, 1920-1950* (1983) are some of the all-India studies.

On Bengal, Suprakash Roy's pioneering work in Bengali published in 1966, and translated into English as *Peasant Revolts and Democratic Struggles in India* (1999), looks at these revolts basically in terms of class struggles of peasants against the imperialist and landlords' exploitation and oppression. He also linked these rebellions to the fight for a democratic polity in India. Muinuddin Ahmed Khan's *History of the Faraidi Movement in Bengal* (1965) sought to interpret this peasant movement basically as a religious movement against the non-Muslim gentry. However, Narhari Kabiraj, in his *A Peasant Uprising in Bengal* (1972) and *Wahabi and Farazi Rebels of Bengal* (1982) refuted this thesis and emphasised on economic factors as the cause of the rebellion. His conclusion was that during this movement the 'agrarian aspect took precedence over the communal one'. Blair King's study of the indigo rebellion in Bengal (*The Blue Mutiny : The Indigo Disturbances in Bengal 1859-1962* (1966)) also reaches the conclusion that it was a secular movement which combined all sections on Indian society. However, Ranajit Guha views the Indigo rebellion differently and argues that there were contradictions between various sections of the peasantry.

Some of the other important regional studies on peasant movements are : Girish Mishra's study on Champaran movement, *Agrarian Problems of Permanent Settlement : A Case Study of Champaran* (1979), and Stephen Henningham's *Peasant Movements in Colonial India, North Bihar, 1917-1942* (1982); Majid H. Siddiqi's *Agrarian Unrest in North India : The United Provinces, 1918-32* (1978), and Kapil Kumar's *Peasants in Revolt : Tenants, Landlords, Congress and the Raj in Oudh* (1984) on U.P.; works by Stephen Dale, Robert Hardgrave, Sukhbir Chaudhary and Conrad Wood on the Moplah rebellion in Malabar, Kerala. Apart from these there are also several works on peasant movements in other parts of India.

24.5.2 History of Working-class Movements

Until about twenty-five years ago, the history of Indian labour was almost synonymous with the history of trade unions. Writing in 1982, Sabyasachi Bhattacharya commented that 'Till now in our labour history the Trade Union movement has been the subject of the largest number of published work'. Besides this, the focus was on the worker as an economic being, which did not take into account his/her social and cultural existence. Since the 1980s, however, this situation began to change. Several studies have appeared which view the working class history from a broader perspective. For one thing, the trade unions are no longer considered as synonymous with the working class. It is true that the trade unions represent a

highly organised form of working class activities. However, trade unions are only one of the forms in which the workers organise themselves. Working class movement, on the other hand, is a much broader phenomenon and covers various mobilisations of all kinds of workers. Secondly, the recent studies have pointed out that economic motivation is not the sole determinant of working class action. The making of the working class and its movement derives from various sources in which the cultural, the social and the political are as important as the economic. Thirdly, it is indicated that the industrial workers, whom the trade union studies take as their basic staple, form a rather small part the entire working class which includes within its ambit the rural workers, urban workers in informal sectors, and service sector workers. Moreover, gender questions are also coming to the fore for an understanding of the attitude and behaviour of the workers, the employers, the public activists and government officials.

The studies which take into account these aspects of the changing scenario include E.D.Murphy's 'Class and Community in India : The Madras Labour Union, 1918-21' (*IESHR*, IV, 3, 1977) and *Unions in Conflict : A Comparative Study of Four South Indian Textile Centres, 1918-1939* (1981), R.K.Newman's *Workers and Unions in Bombay, 1918-29 : A Study of Organization in the Cotton Mills* (1981), S.Bhattacharya's 'Capital and Labour in Bombay City, 1928-29' (*EPW*, XVI, 1981), Dipesh Chakrabarty's *Rethinking Working-Class History : Bengal, 1890-1940* (1989), Rajnarayan Chandavarkar's *The Origins of Industrial Capitalism in India : Business Strategies and Working Classes in Bombay, 1900-40* (1994), Janaki Nair's *Miners and Millhands : Work, Culture and Politics in Princely Mysore* (1998), Samita Sen, *Women and Labour in Late Colonial India : The Bengal Jute Industry* (1999), and Nandini Gooptu's *The Politics of the Urban Poor in the early Twentieth- Century India* (2001).

24.5.3 History of Tribal Movements

Several scholars treat tribal movements as part of the peasant movements. It is because over the years the tribal society and economy have started resembling those of the peasants and the agrarian problems of the tribals are same as those of the peasants. Kathleen Gough, A.R.Desai and Ranajit Guha have dealt with the tribal movements as such. Moreover, many scholars like Ghanshyam Shah, Ashok Upadhyay and Jaganath Pathy have shown the changes in the tribal society and economy which have pushed them in the direction of the non-tribal peasants. However, K.S. Singh, one of the authorities in the field, is of the opinion that such an approach is not justified because it 'tends to gloss over the diversities of tribal social formations of which tribal movements are a part, both being structurally related'. Singh puts more emphasis on social organisation of the tribals than on their economic grievances. He argues that :

‘while the peasant movements tend to remain purely agrarian as peasants lived off land, the tribal movements were both agrarian and forest based, because the tribals’ dependence on forests was as crucial as their dependence on land. There was also the ethnic factor. The tribal revolts were directed against zamindars, moneylenders and petty government officials not because they exploited them but also because they were aliens.’

In contrast to this view, some scholars have questioned the very category of the tribe itself. For example, Susana Devalle, in *Discourses of Ethnicity : Culture and Protest in Jharkhand* (1992), argues that the category ‘tribe’ was constructed by the European scholars in India and the colonial officials in their effort to understand the Indian reality. Andre Beteille also thinks that there are a lot of similarities between the tribals and the peasants and, therefore, it would be a mistake to consider them as two distinct structural types.

However, the fact remains that a large part of the tribal societies, particularly until the 20th century, possessed several specific features which put them apart from the mainstream peasant societies. For one, social and economic differentiation within the tribal society was much less than among the peasantry. Secondly, the great dependence of the tribes on the forests also separates them from the peasants whose main source of survival was land. Thirdly, tribal social organisation and the spatial concentration of the tribes in certain areas kept them relatively isolated. These factors made them particularly sensitive to the changes brought about by the colonial rule and imparted more militancy to their rebellion.

The colonial administrators were the first to write about the tribals. This attention was due to the recurring tribal revolts as a result of colonial intervention. The earliest writings were an attempt to understand the tribal societies for better administration. W.W. Hunter’s *Annals of Rural Bengal* (1868), E.T. Dalton’s *Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal* (1872), and H.H. Risley’s *Tribes and Castes of Bengal* (1891) were some of these early works which described the tribal society. One of the earliest works by an Indian is Kali Kinkar Datta’s *Santal Insurrection* (1940). According to Datta, the main reason for the rebellion was the oppression and exploitation by the outsiders. Three of his students also focused on Chotanagpur region for their initial studies on the tribes. J.C. Jha’s *The Kol Insurrection of Chotanagpur* (1964), S.P. Sinha’s *Life and Times of Birsa Bhagwan* (1964) and K.S. Singh’s *The Dust Storm and the Hanging Mist : A Study of Birsa Munda and his movement in Chota Nagpur, 1874-1901* (1966) were pioneering efforts on these themes. The three volumes edited by K.S. Singh on *Tribal Movements of India* (1982, 1983 and 1998) are a big contribution to deal with the subject at the all-India level. John MacDougall’s *Land or Religion ? The Sardar and Kherwar Movements in Bihar, 1858-95* (1985), D.M. Praharaj’s *Tribal Movement and Political History in India : A Case Study from Orissa, 1803-1949* (1988), David Hardiman’s *The Coming of the Devi : Adivasi*

Assertion in Western India (1987), David Arnold's article on Gudem-Rampa uprisings in Andhra Pradesh (in *Subaltern Studies*, vol. I, 1982), S.R. Bhattacharjee's *Tribal Insurgency in Tripura : A Study in Exploration of Causes* (1989) are some of the regional studies.

24.6 SUMMARY

History from Below, as we have discussed in this Unit, is to introduce the perspective of the common people in the process of history-writing. It is against that concept of historiography which believes in Disraeli's dictum that history is the biography of great men. Instead, the History from Below endeavours to take into account the lives and activities of masses who are otherwise ignored by the conventional historians. Moreover, it attempts to take their point of view into account as far as possible. In this venture, the historians face a lot of problems because the sources are biased in favour of the rulers, administrators and the dominant classes in general. In countries like India, this problem becomes even more acute due to low level of literacy among the masses. Despite these constraints, however, the social historians have tried their best to bring the people from the margins to the centre.

24.7 EXERCISES

- 1) What is History from Below? Discuss its beginning and growth.
- 2) Write a note on the History from Below in the context of history-writing on India.
- 3) Discuss the important trends in the writings of People's history.
- 4) What are the main problems associated with writing History from Below?

24.8 SUGGESTED READINGS

Raphael Samuel, 'People's History', in Raphael Samuel (ed.), *People's History and Socialist Theory* (London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981).

Jim Sharpe, 'History from Below', in Peter Burke (ed.), *New Perspectives on Historical Writing* (Polity Press, Cambridge, 1991, 2001).

Eric Hobsbawm, 'On History from Below', in Eric Hobsbawm, *On History* (London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1997).

Matt Perry, 'History from Below', in Kelly Boyd (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Historians and Historical Writing*, 2 vols. (Chicago, Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers, 1999).

Peter Burke, 'People's History or Total History', in Raphael Samuel (ed.), *People's History and Socialist Theory* (London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981).

Frederick Krantz, *History from Below : Studies in Popular Protest and Popular Ideology* (Oxford, New York, Basil Blackwell, 1985, 1988).

Georg G. Iggers, *Historiography in the Twentieth Century : From Scientific Objectivity to the Postmodern Challenge* (Hanover and London, Wesleyan University Press, 1997).

Jeremy Black and Donald M. MacRaild, *Studying History* (London, MacMillan, 1997, 2000).

Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, 'Presidential Address', Indian History Congress, 1982.

Ghanshyam Shah, *Social Movements in India : A Review of Literature* (New Delhi, Sage, 2004).

Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (Delhi, OUP, 1983).

Sumit Sarkar, '*Popular*' Movements & '*Middle Class*' Leadership in Late Colonial Indi: Perspectives & Problems of a "*History from Below*" (Calcutta, K.P. Bagchi & Company, 1983, 1985).

Sanjukta Das Gupta, 'Peasant and Tribal Movements in Colonial Bengal : A Historiographic Overview', in Sekhar Bandyopadhyay (ed.), *Bengal : Rethinking History* (Delhi, Manohar, 2001).

UNIT 25 : SUBALTERN STUDIES

Structure

- 25.1 Introduction
- 25.2 Beginning of the Idea
- 25.3 Development of the Project
 - 25.3.1 First Phase : Elite vs. Subaltern
 - 25.3.2 Second Phase : Discourse Analysis
- 25.4 Critique
- 25.5 Rejoinder
- 25.6 Summary
- 25.7 Exercises
- 25.8 Suggested Readings

25.1 INTRODUCTION

The *Subaltern Studies* is the title given to a series of volumes initially published under the editorship of Ranajit Guha, the prime mover and the ideologue of the project. He edited the first six volumes of the *Subaltern Studies*. The next five volumes are edited by other scholars associated with the project. Right from the beginning the *Subaltern Studies* took the position that the entire tradition of Indian historiography before it have had elitist bias. The historians associated with the *Subaltern Studies* declared that they would set the position right by writing the history from the point of view of the common people. In this Unit we will discuss the various positions taken by the writers associated with the *Subaltern Studies* as well as the criticism of the project by historians and others working in the area of Indian studies.

25.2 BEGINNING OF THE IDEA

The *Subaltern Studies* was proclaimed by its adherents as a new school in the field of Indian history-writing. Some of the historians associated with it declared it to be a sharp break in the tradition of Indian historiography. A group of writers dissatisfied with the convention of Indian history-writing became part of the collective and contributed for the volumes. It, however, also involved historians and other social

scientists not formally associated with the subaltern collective. Besides the articles published in the volumes of *Subaltern Studies*, these writers also wrote for many other journals and edited volumes as well as published monographs which are today associated with subaltern themes and methodology. Starting the venture with the help of those whom Ranajit Guha termed as ‘marginalised academics’, the *Subaltern Studies* soon acquired vast reputation both inside and outside India for the views they professed as well as for intensive research on subaltern themes. Initially planned as a series of three volumes, it has now become an ongoing project with eleven volumes in print till date. Apart from these volumes, Ranajit Guha has also edited one volume of essays taken from the various earlier volumes for the international audiences. In some of the recent volumes the *Subaltern Studies* has included themes from non-Indian Third World countries also.

The term ‘subaltern’ has a rather long history. It was initially applied to the serfs and peasants in England during the Middle Ages. Later, by 1700, it was used for the subordinate ranks in the military. It, however, gained wide currency in scholarly circles after the works of Antonio Gramsci (1891-1937), an Italian Marxist and Communist Party leader. Gramsci generally used the term in a broader connotation of ‘class’ to avoid the censorship of the prison authorities as he was in jail and his writings were scanned. Gramsci had adopted the term to refer to the subordinate groups in the society. In his opinion, the history of the subaltern groups is almost always related to that of the ruling groups. In addition, this history is generally ‘fragmentary and episodic’.

Ranjit Guha, however, in the Preface to *Subaltern Studies* I, did not mention Gramsci’s use of the term, even though he referred to Gramsci as an inspiration. Instead, he defined it as given in the *Concise Oxford Dictionary*:

‘The word “subaltern” in the title stands for the meaning as given in the *Concise Oxford Dictionary*, that is, “of inferior rank”. It will be used in these pages as a name for the general attribute of subordination in South Asian society whether this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office or in any other way.’

A little later, at the end of his opening essay in the volume, he further clarified this term:

‘The terms “people” and “subaltern classes” have been used synonymously throughout this note. The social groups and elements included in this category represent the demographic difference between the total Indian population and all those whom we have described as the “elite”.’

The Subaltern historians made a radical departure in the use of the term from that of Gramsci. Even while accepting the subordinated nature of the subaltern groups, they argued their history was autonomous from that of the dominant classes.

25.3 DEVELOPMENT OF THE PROJECT

Now there is a general and clear acknowledgement of basically two phases in the career of the Subaltern Studies. Phase I consists of :

- a) concern with the subaltern, i.e., lower, exploited classes;
- b) criticism of the elite, i.e., exploiting classes; and
- c) influence of Gramscian thought and Marxist social history and an attempt to work within broader Marxist theory.

In the second phase, there is a clear shift from these concerns. Now :

- a) there is an increasing engagement with textual analysis, a shift away from exploring the history of the exploited people, and more engagement, even though critical, with elite discourses; and
- b) Marx and Gramsci are jettisoned in favour of Michel Foucault, Edward Said, and other postmodernists and post-colonialists.

25.3.1 First Phase : Elite vs. Subaltern

The Subaltern Studies asserted itself as a radically new form of history-writing in the context of Indian history. It was initially conceived as a series of three volumes to be edited by its eldest protagonist and the prime mover of the idea, Ranajit Guha. The idea was seemingly informed by Gramscian thought. A deliberate attempt was made to break from both the economic determinism of a variety of Marxist theory as well as the elitism of bourgeois-nationalist and colonialist interpretations. A group of writers similarly dissatisfied with the convention of Indian historiography joined the collective and contributed essays for the volumes. It, however, also involved historians and other social scientists not formally associated with the subaltern collective.

Although basically concerned about India, the *Subaltern Studies* project was first conceived in England by some Indian academics, Ranajit Guha being the principal motive force behind it. Right from the beginning it was set against almost all existing traditions of Indian historiography. In what can be called as the manifesto of the project, Ranajit Guha, in a vein reminiscent of the opening line of *The Communist Manifesto* ('The history of all hitherto existing societies is the history of class

struggle'), declared in the very first volume of the *Subaltern Studies*, that 'The historiography of Indian nationalism has for a long time been dominated by elitism – colonialist elitism and bourgeois-nationalist elitism.' Both types of historiography was said to derive from the ideological discourse of the British rule in India. Despite their differences, both shared certain things in common and the most important of these was the absence of the politics of the people from their accounts. In his view, there was now an urgent requirement for setting the record straight by viewing the history from the point-of view of the subaltern classes. This standpoint as well as the politics of the people was crucial because it constituted an autonomous domain which 'neither originated from elite politics nor did its existence depend on the latter'. The people's politics differed from the elite politics in several crucial aspects. For one, its roots lay in the traditional organisations of the people such as caste and kinship networks, tribal solidarity, territoriality, etc. Secondly, while elite mobilisations were vertical in nature, people's mobilisations were horizontal. Thirdly, whereas the elite mobilisation was legalistic and pacific, the subaltern mobilisation was relatively violent. Fourthly, the elite mobilisation was more cautious and controlled while the subaltern mobilisation was more spontaneous.

The *Subaltern Studies* soon became the new 'history from below' which did not try to fuse the people's history with official nationalism. It, therefore, attracted the attention of the scholars who had become disenchanted with the nationalistic claims as embodied in the post-colonial state. Largely influenced by Gramsci in its initial phase in trying to discover the radical consciousness of the dominated groups, it was pitted against the three main trends in Indian historiography – colonialist, which saw the colonial rule as the fulfillment of a mission to enlighten the ignorant people; nationalist, which visualised all the protest activities as parts of the making of the nation-state; and Marxist, which subsumed the people's struggles under the progression towards revolution and a socialist state.

The aim of the project was manifold :

- a) To show the bourgeois and elite character of Congress nationalism which was said to restrain popular radicalism;
- b) To counter the attempts by many historians to incorporate the people's struggles in the grand narrative of Indian / Congress nationalism; and
- c) To reconstruct the subaltern consciousness and stress its autonomy. Considering the non-availability of evidences from subaltern sources, it was a difficult task. To overcome this, the subaltern historians endeavoured to extract their material from the official sources by reading them 'against the grain'.

Subaltern Studies was conceived in an atmosphere where Gramsci's ideas were making significant impact. Eric Hobsbawm, Raymond Williams and Stuart Hall were incorporating Gramsci's ideas into their works. Perry Anderson and Tom Nairn, on the other hand, were developing a favourable critique of Gramsci. Other influences were that of the new social history, written by Western Marxist historians such as Henri Lefebvre, Christopher Hill, E.P.Thompson, Eugene Genovese and others, who emphasised the necessity for considering people's point of view. Thus the objective of the *Subaltern Studies* was proclaimed to 'promote a systematic and informed discussion of subaltern themes in the field of South Asian studies and thus help to rectify the elitist bias characteristic of much research and academic work in this particular area'. (Ranjit Guha, 'Preface' to *Subaltern Studies I*.) Guha, in the Preface to vol. III, stated that what brought the subaltern historians together was 'a critical idiom common to them all – an idiom self- consciously and systematically critical of elitism in the field of South Asian studies'. He further asserted that it was in the opposition to this elitism that the unity of the subaltern project lay:

'We are indeed opposed to much of the prevailing academic practice in historiography and the social sciences for its failure to acknowledge the subaltern as the maker of his own destiny. This critique lies at the very heart of our project. There is no way in which it can express itself other than as an adversary of that elitist paradigm which is so well entrenched in South Asian studies. Negativity is therefore the very *raison d'être* as well as the constitutive principle of our project.'

On the political side, the international and national scenes of the late 1960s and early 1970s had become radicalised and questions were being raised on the established and conventional ideas. The conventional political parties, from the Right to the Left, came for criticism and much emphasis was placed on the non-conventional political formations and activities.

The Subaltern historians, disenchanted with the Congress nationalism and its embodiment in the Indian state, rejected the thesis that popular mobilisation was the result of either economic conditions or initiatives from the top. They claimed to have discovered a popular domain which was autonomous. Its autonomy was rooted in conditions of exploitation and its politics was opposed to the elites. This domain of the subaltern was defined by perpetual resistance and rebellion against the elite. The subaltern historians also attributed a general unity to this domain clubbing together a variety of heterogeneous groups such as tribals, peasants, proletariat and, occasionally, the middle classes as well. Moreover, this domain was said to be almost completely uninfluenced by the elite politics and to possess 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 prominence in analysis of a movement or rebellion.

Shahid Amin's study of the popular perception of Mahatma Gandhi is a revealing example. In his article, 'Gandhi as Mahatma', deriving evidences from Gorakhpur district in eastern UP, he shows that the popular perception and actions were completely at variance with the Congress leaders' perception of Mahatma. Although the mechanism of spread of the Mahatma's message was 'rumours', there was an entire philosophy of economy and politics behind it – the need to become a good human being, to give up drinking, gambling and violence, to take up spinning and to maintain communal harmony. The stories which circulated also emphasised the magical powers of Mahatma and his capacity to reward or punish those who obeyed or disobeyed him. On the other hand, the Mahatma's name and his supposed magical powers were also used to reinforce as well as establish caste hierarchies, to make the debtors pay and to boost the cow protection movement. All these popular interpretations of the Mahatma's messages reached their climax during the Chauri Chaura incidents in 1922 when his name was invoked to burn the police post, to kill the policemen and to loot the market.

Earlier historians were criticised not only for ignoring the popular initiative but, equally seriously, accepting the official characterisation of the rebel and the rebellion. Ranajit Guha, in his article 'The Prose of Counter-Insurgency', launched a scathing attack on the existing peasant and tribal histories in India for considering the peasant rebellions as 'purely spontaneous and unpremeditated affairs' and for ignoring consciousness of the rebels themselves. In his opinion,

'Historiography has been content to deal with the peasant rebel merely as an empirical person or member of a class, but not as an entity whose will and reason constituted the praxis called rebellion. The omission is indeed dyed into most narratives by metaphors assimilating peasant revolts to natural phenomena : they break out like thunder storms, heave like earthquakes, spread like wildfires, infect like epidemics.'

He accused all the accounts of rebellions, starting with the immediate official reports to the histories written by the left radicals, of writing the texts of counter-insurgency which refused 'to acknowledge the insurgent as the subject of his own history'.

Gyan Pandey, in 'Peasant Revolt and Indian Nationalism, 1919-1922', argued that peasant movement in Awadh arose before and independently of the Non-cooperation movement and the peasants' understanding of the local power structure and its alliance with colonial power was more advanced than that of the urban leaders, including the Congress. Moreover, the peasant militancy was reduced wherever the Congress organisation was stronger.

In Stephen Henningham's account of the 'Quit India in Bihar and the Eastern United Provinces', the elite and the subaltern domains were clearly defined and distinct from

each other. Thus, 'the great revolt of 1942 consisted of an elite nationalist uprising combined with a subaltern rebellion'. Their motives and demands were also different:

'Those engaged in the elite nationalist uprising sought to protest against government repression of Congress and to demand the granting of independence to India. In contrast, those involved in the subaltern rebellion acted in pursuit of relief from privation and in protest against the misery in which they found themselves.'

He further contends that it was this dual character of the revolt which led to its suppression.

David Hardiman, in his numerous articles, focused on subaltern themes and argued that whether it was the tribal assertion in South Gujarat, or the Bhil movement in Eastern Gujarat, or the radicalism of the agricultural workers during the Civil Disobedience Movement, there was an independent politics of the subaltern classes against the elites. Similarly, Sumit Sarkar, in 'The Conditions and Nature of Subaltern Militancy', argued the Non-cooperation movement in Bengal 'revealed a picture of masses outstripping leaders'. He stated that the term 'subaltern' could refer to basically three social groups: 'tribal and low-caste agricultural labourers and share-croppers; landholding peasants, generally of intermediate caste-status in Bengal (together with their Muslim counterparts); and labour in plantations, mines and industries (along with urban casual labour).' These groups might have divisions among themselves and include both the exploiters and exploited in their ranks. However, he argued that :

'the subaltern groups so defined formed a relatively autonomous political domain with specific features and collective mentalities which need to be explored, and that this was a world distinct from the domain of the elite politicians who in early twentieth century Bengal came overwhelmingly from high-caste educated professional groups connected with zamindari or intermediate tenure-holding'.

Thus we see that in these and in many other essays in the earlier volumes, an attempt was made to separate the elite and the subaltern domains and to establish the autonomy of subaltern consciousness and action. Although there were some notable exceptions, such as the writings of Partha Chatterjee, this phase was generally characterised by emphasis on subaltern themes and autonomous subaltern consciousness.

25.3.2 Second Phase : Discourse Analysis

Over the years, there began a shift in the approach of the Subaltern Studies. The influence of the postmodernist and postcolonialist ideologies became more marked.

While the emphasis on the subalterns may be associated with Guha, Pandey, Amin, Hardiman, Henningham, Sarkar and some others, the postcolonialist influences were revealed in the works of Partha Chatterjee right from the beginning. His influential book, *Nationalist Thought and Colonial World* (1986), applied the postcolonial framework of Edward Said which viewed the colonial power-knowledge as overwhelming and irresistible. Such themes were also evident in Chatterjee's articles in the volumes of the Subaltern Studies even earlier. His later book, *The Nation and its Fragments* (1995), carries this analysis further. Many other writers in the Subaltern Studies slowly abandoned the earlier adherence to Marxism. There was a bifurcation of intellectual concerns in their ranks. While some of the Subaltern historians still stuck to the subaltern themes, a larger number began to write in postcolonialist modes. Now there was a clear move from the research on economic and social issues to cultural matters, particularly the analysis of colonialist discourse.

Subalternity as a concept was also redefined. Earlier, it stood for the oppressed classes in opposition to the dominant classes both inside and outside. Later, it was conceptualised in opposition to colonialism, modernity and Enlightenment. The researched articles on themes concerned with subaltern groups decreased in number in later volumes. So, while in the first four volumes there were 20 essays on the subaltern classes like peasants and workers, in the next six volumes there were only five such essays. There was now an increasing stress on textual analysis of colonial discourse. Consequently, the discourse analysis acquired precedence over research on subaltern themes. The earlier emphasis on the 'subaltern' now gave way to a focus on 'community'. Earlier the elite nationalism was stated to hijack the people's initiatives for its own project; now the entire project of nationalism was declared to be only a version of colonial discourse with its emphasis on centralisation of movement, and later of the state. The ideas of secularism and enlightenment rationalism were attacked and there began an emphasis on the 'fragments' and 'episodes'.

There is also an attempt to justify this shift and link it to the initial project. Thus the editors of Vol. X of *Subaltern Studies* (Gautam Bhadra, Gyan Prakash and Susie Tharu) proclaim that 'Nothing – not elite practices, state policies, academic disciplines, literary texts, archival sources, language – was exempt from the effects of subalternity'. Therefore, all the elite domains need to be explored as the legitimate subjects of Subaltern Studies.

Gyan Prakash has argued that since the Indian subalterns did not leave their own records, the 'history from below' approach in imitation of the Western model was not possible. Therefore, the *Subaltern Studies* 'had to conceive the subaltern differently and write different histories'. According to him, it is important to see the 'subalternity as a discursive effect' which warrants 'the reformulation of the notion of the subaltern'. Thus,

‘Such reexaminations of South Asian history do not invoke “real” subalterns, prior to discourse, in framing their critique. Placing subalterns in the labyrinth of discourse, they cannot claim an unmediated access to their reality. The actual subalterns and subalternity emerge between the folds of the discourse, in its silences and blindness, and in its overdetermined pronouncements.’

The subalterns, therefore, cannot be represented as subjects as they are entangled in and created by the working of power. Dipesh Chakrabarty goes even further in denying a separate domain not only for the subaltern history, but the history of the Third World as a whole :

‘It is that insofar as the academic discourse of history – that is, “history” as a discourse produced at the institutional site of the university – is concerned, “Europe” remains the sovereign, theoretical subject of all histories, including the ones we call “Indian”, Chinese”, “Kenyan”, and so on. There is a peculiar way in which all these other histories tend to become variations on a master narrative that could be called “the history of Europe”. In this sense, “Indian” history itself is in a position of subalternity : one can only articulate subaltern subject positions in the name of this history.’

The second phase of the *Subaltern Studies*, therefore, not only moves away from the earlier emphasis on the exploration of the subaltern consciousness, it also questions the very ground of historical works as such, in line with the postmodernist thinking in the West.

25.4 CRITIQUE

There has been wide-ranging criticism of the *Subaltern Studies* from many quarters. Right from the beginning the project has been critiqued by the Marxist, Nationalist and Cambridge School historians, besides those who were not affiliated to any position. Almost all positions it took, ranging from a search for autonomous subaltern domain to the later shift to discourse analysis, came under scrutiny and criticism.

Some of the earlier critiques were published in the *Social Scientist*. In one of them, Javeed Alam criticised *Subaltern Studies* for its insistence on an autonomous domain of the subaltern. According to Alam, the autonomy of the subaltern politics is predicated on perpetuity of rebellious action, on ‘a consistent tendency towards resistance and a propensity to rebellion on the part of the peasant masses’. Whether this autonomous action is positive or negative in its consequences is of not much concern to the subalternists :

‘The historical direction of militancy is ... of secondary consideration. What is primary is the spontaneity and an internally located self-generating momentum. Extending the implications of the inherent logic of such a theoretical construction, it is a matter of indifference if it leads to communal rioting or united anti-feudal actions that overcome the initial limitations.’

In another essay, a review essay by Sangeeta Singh and others, Ranajit Guha was criticised for presenting a caricature of the spontaneous action by peasant rebels. In Guha’s understanding, it was alleged, ‘spontaneity is synonymous with reflexive action’. Since ‘Spontaneity is action on the basis of traditional consciousness’, Guha’s whole effort is said to ‘rehabilitate spontaneity as a political method’. Moreover, Guha, in his assertion about the centrality of religion in rebel’s consciousness, approves the British official view which emphasises the irrationality of the rebellion and absolves colonialism of playing any disruptive role in the rural and tribal social and economic structures.

Ranjit Das Gupta points out that there is no precise definition of the subaltern domain. Moreover, the subaltern historians ‘have tended to concentrate on moments of conflict and protest, and in their writings the dialectics of collaboration and acquiescence on the part of the subalterns ... have by and large been underplayed’. The rigid distinction between the elite and the subaltern, ignoring all other hierarchical formations, was criticised by others as well. David Ludden, in the Introduction to an edited volume (2001), writes that :

‘Even readers who applauded Subaltern Studies found two features troubling. First and foremost, the new substance of subalternity emerged only on the underside of a rigid theoretical barrier between “elite” and “subaltern”, which resembles a concrete slab separating upper and lower space in a two-storey building. This hard dichotomy alienated subalternity from social histories that include more than two storeys or which move among them;... Second, because subaltern politics was confined theoretically to the lower storey, it could not threaten a political structure. This alienated subalternity from political histories of popular movements and alienated subaltern groups from organised, transformative politics....’

Rosalind O’Hanlon offers a comprehensive critique of earlier volumes of *Subaltern Studies* in her article ‘Recovering the Subject’. She argues that, despite their claims of surpassing the earlier brands of history-writing, ‘the manner in which the subaltern makes his appearance through the work of the contributors is in the form of the classic unitary self-constituting subject-agent of liberal humanism’. Among the Subaltern historians, particularly in the writings of Ranajit Guha, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Stephen Henningham and Sumit Sarkar, there is ‘the tendency to

attribute timeless primordiality' to the 'collective traditions and culture of subordinated groups'. She finds an essentialism at the core of the project 'arising from an assertion of an irreducibility and autonomy of experience, and a simple-minded voluntarism deriving from the insistence upon a capacity for self-determination'. This leads to an idealism, particularly 'in Guha's drive to posit an originary autonomy in the traditions of peasant insurgency. He does at times appear to be approaching a pure Hegelianism'.

Christopher Bayly, in 'Rallying around the Subaltern', questions the project's claim to originality. According to him, the Subaltern historians have not made use of 'new statistical material and indigenous records' which could substantiate their claim of writing a new history. Their main contribution seems to be re-reading the official records and 'mounting an internal critique'. Thus, the only distinguishing mark which separates the Subaltern Studies from the earlier and contemporary 'history from below' is 'a rhetorical device, the term 'subaltern' itself, and a populist idiom'. Bayly thinks that 'the greatest weakness of the Subaltern orientation' is that 'it tends to frustrate the writing of rounded history as effectively as did "elitism"'.

Sumit Sarkar, who was earlier associated with the project, later on criticised it for moving towards postcolonialism. In his two essays, 'The Decline of the Subaltern in Subaltern Studies' and 'Orientalism Revisited', he argues that this shift may have been occasioned due to various reasons, but, intellectually, there is an 'attempt to have the best of both worlds : critiquing others for essentialism, teleology and related sins, while claiming a special immunity from doing the same oneself.' Moreover, such works in Indian history have not produced any spectacular results. In fact, 'the critique of colonial discourse, despite vast claims to total originality, quite often is no more than a restatement in new language of old nationalist positions – and fairly crude restatements, at that.' The later subaltern project became some sort of 'Third World nationalism, followed by postmodernistic valorisations of "fragments"'. In fact, the later *Subaltern Studies* 'comes close to positions of neo-traditionalist anti-modernism, notably advocated ... by Ashish Nandy'. Even earlier, according to Sarkar, there was a tendency 'towards essentialising the categories of 'subaltern' and 'autonomy', in the sense of assigning to them more or less absolute, fixed, decontextualised meanings and qualities'. Sarkar argues that there are many problems with the histories produced by the subaltern writers and these arise due to their 'restrictive analytical frameworks, as Subaltern Studies swings from a rather simple emphasis on subaltern autonomy to an even more simplistic thesis of Western colonial cultural domination'.

Such criticism of the *Subaltern Studies* is still continuing and the Subaltern historians have responded to it with their own justification of the project and counter-attacks on critics.

25.5 REJOINDER

The subalternists took some time before reacting to the critiques. In vol. IV, Dipesh Chakrabarty's reply to some of the critiques was published. But before that, in the Preface of the same volume, Ranajit Guha railed against the criticism by those whom he called 'the vendors of readymade answers' and academic 'old rods' who supposedly posed as the 'custodians of official truth entrenched within their liberal and leftist stockades'. He peremptorily dismissed the criticism by those scholars 'who have lived too long with well-rehearsed ideas and methodologies'. He also derisively referred to what he termed as 'the manic reaction' of a 'Delhi critic who, on the publication of each volume, has gone round the block waving his review copy and shouting, like the mad watchman in Tagore's story, "sab jhuta hai! Sab jhuta hai!"

Chakrabarty's reply was more detailed and well-argued. He questioned the intentions of some reviewers. For example, the charge of both Hegelianism and positivism against Guha seemed contradictory. It was because, he says, "Idealism", "positivism", etc. are not used in the essay as simple, descriptive terms; they are terms of condemnation as well'. In reply to the charge of ignoring the colonial contexts or any outside influences on the politics and consciousness of the subalterns, he said that 'this alleged "failure" is actually our conscious refusal to subordinate the internal logic of a "consciousness" to the logic of so-called "objective" or "material" conditions'. He further asserted that :

'The central aim of the Subaltern Studies project is to understand the consciousness that informed and still informs political actions taken by the subaltern classes on their own, independently of any elite initiative.'

It was because, as shown by subaltern historians, 'in the course of nationalist struggles involving popular mobilization the masses often put their own interpretations on the aims of these movements and proceeded to act them out'. Besides Dipesh Chakrabarty, Gyan Prakash has been a most vocal defender of the project. He praises the project as part of the 'post-foundational' and 'post-Orientalist' historiography of India. He argues that the Subaltern historians have been able to rescue their writings from the clutches of elite historiography :

'the significance of their project lies in the writing of histories freed from the will of the colonial and nationalist elites. It is this project of resisting colonial and nationalist discursive hegemonies, through histories of the subaltern whose identity resides in difference, which makes the work of these scholars a significant intervention in third-world historiography'.

In another article, Gyan Prakash outlines the reason for a shift in the position as the *Subaltern Studies* project developed and he defends this change. He supports the later developments as it 'has turned into a sharp critique of the discipline of history'.

Gyan Pandey, writing 'In Defense of the Fragment', argues against most of the writings on communal riots in India. He states that in these versions, 'The "fragments of Indian society – the smaller religious and caste communities, tribal sections, industrial workers, and activist women's groups, all of which might be said to represent "minority" cultures and practices – have been expected to fall in line with the "mainstream" ... national culture'. It is because since the nineteenth century the state and the nation have been the 'central organizing principles of human society'. Similarly, Ranajit Guha, in 'The Small Voice of History', accused the modern historiographical tradition of being statist. He argues that,

'the common sense of history may be said generally to be guided by a sort of statism which thematizes and evaluates the past for it . This is a tradition which goes back to the beginnings of modern historical thinking in the Italian Renaissance.'

Dipesh Chakrabarty, in his 'Radical Histories and Question of Enlightenment Rationalism', criticises the Marxist historiography for being influenced by 'a certain form of hyper-rationalism characteristic of colonial modernity'. He further argues that now 'post-structuralist and deconstructionist philosophies are useful in developing approaches suited to studying subaltern histories under conditions of colonial modernities'. The fact that there was a shift in the position is also sometimes denied. Dipesh Chakrabarty argues that from the very beginning, the *Subaltern Studies* was different and 'raised questions about history writing that made a radical departure from English Marxist historiographical tradition inescapable'. He says that right since its inception the *Subaltern Studies* followed the postcolonial agenda and was not in tune with the 'history from below' approach :

'With hindsight it could be said that there were broadly three areas in which Subaltern Studies differed from the "history from below" approach of Hobsbawm or Thompson.... Subaltern historiography necessarily entailed (a) a relative separation of the history of power from any universalist histories of capital, (b) a critique of the nation-form, and (c) an interrogation of the relationship between power and knowledge.... In these differences lay the beginnings of a new way of theorizing the intellectual agenda for postcolonial histories.'

Thus, in their responses to the critics, the writers associated with the Subaltern project sought to defend their works as part of the post-Marxist, post-colonial and poststructuralist streams of historical thinking.

25.6 SUMMARY

The *Subaltern Studies* began in the early 1980s as a critique of the existing historiography which was accused by its initiators for ignoring the voice of the people. The writers associated with the project promised to offer a completely new kind of history in the field of Indian studies. Judging from the reactions from the scholars and students in the early years, it seemed to have fulfilled this promise to some extent. It soon received international recognition. In the early years, encompassing six volumes, edited by Ranajit Guha, the *Subaltern Studies* made efforts to explore the consciousness and actions of the oppressed groups in the Indian society. However, there was another trend discernible in some of the essays published in it. This trend was influenced by the increasingly important postmodernist and post colonialist writings in the Western academic circles. In the later years, this trend came to dominate the works of the writers associated with the *Subaltern Studies*. This trend was marked by a shift from the earlier emphasis on the subaltern themes. Sometimes the scepticism became so extreme that it questioned the need for the writing of history itself.

25.7 EXERCISES

- 1) What do you understand by the term 'subaltern'? How did the *Subaltern Studies* begin in India?
- 2) Discuss the two phases in the development of the project of the *Subaltern Studies*. Do you think the differences between the two phases are fundamental in nature? Answer with examples.
- 3) What are the basic points of criticism directed towards the *Subaltern Studies*? What is the response of the Subalternist historians?

25.8 SUGGESTED READINGS

Subaltern Studies, 11 volumes (1982-2000).

David Ludden (ed.), *Reading Subaltern Studies : Critical History, Contested Meaning, and the Globalisation of South Asia* (Delhi, Permanent Black, 2001).

Vinayak Chaturvedi (ed.), *Mapping Subaltern Studies and the Postcolonial* (London and New York, Verso, 2000).

Vinay Lal, 'Walking with the Subalterns, Riding with the Academy : The Curious Ascendancy of Indian History', *Studies in History*, 17, 1 (2001).

Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History', in Ranajit Guha (ed.), *A Subaltern Studies Reader, 1986-1995* (Delhi, OUP, 1998).

Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'Subaltern Studies and Postcolonial Historiography', *Nepantla : Views from South*, 1:1, 2000.

Gyanendra Pandey, 'In Defense of the Fragment', in Ranajit Guha (ed.), *A Subaltern Studies Reader, 1986-1995* (Delhi, OUP, 1998).

Gyan Prakash, 'Subaltern Studies as Postcolonial Criticism', *The American Historical Review*, December, 1994 (99, 5).

UNIT 26 : ECONOMIC HISTORY

Structure

- 26.1 Introduction
- 26.2 Colonial and Nationalistic Writings
- 26.3 Pre-colonial Economy and Colonial Trends
- 26.4 Statistical Inquiries
- 26.5 Town and Country
- 26.6 Industrialisation
- 26.7 Summary
- 26.8 Exercises

26.1 INTRODUCTION

The emergence of economics as a discipline in the eighteenth century led in due course to the development of a new branch in history called economic history. The progenitors of economics were Adam Smith and other classical economists. India was very much in the vision of the classical economists, a group of thinkers in England during the Industrial Revolution. They advocated *laissez faire* and minimising of state intervention in the economy. Adam Smith, the foremost classical economist, condemned the East India Company in its new role as the ruling power in India. In his view, the Company's trading monopoly ran counter to the principle of the freedom of the market. In the classic work entitled *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (1776), he said, 'The government of an exclusive company of merchants is perhaps the worst of all governments for any country whatever.'

Economics underwent a theoretical transformation in the early twentieth century under the influence of John Maynard Keynes, who advocated strategic economic intervention by the government for promoting welfare and employment. Keynes, too, thought deeply about India while developing his new economic theories, and his earliest major work, *Indian Currency and Finance* (London 1913), illustrated his notions of good monetary management of the economy. It is also noteworthy that the early classical economists, such as Ricardo, influenced the thinking of a group of Utilitarian administrators who set about reforming the administration of India in the nineteenth century. Above all, the influence of Adam Smith is noticeable in the end of the Company's monopoly by the Charter Acts of 1813 and 1833.

Not surprisingly, therefore, historians have paid close attention to the connection between the evolution of economic thought in England and the question of reform of the colonial administration in India. This is evident in such works as Eric Stokes, *The English Utilitarians and India* (Oxford 1959); S. Ambirajan, *Classical Political Economy and British Policy in India*; and A. Chandavarkar *Keynes and India: a Study in Economics and Biography* (London 1989). Classical political economy in England laid the foundations for the *laissez faire* economics of the Raj in the nineteenth century. Keynesian economics, on the other hand, contained the germs of the development economics of the mid-twentieth century. Both types of economics affected the state and the economy in India, and stimulated debates in the economic history of India.

26.2 COLONIAL AND NATIONALISTIC WRITINGS

Early colonial writers about the economy of India did not have to reckon with a critical Indian public and nationalistic opinion. Some of them were free and frank in their criticisms of the effect of the British rule upon the indigenous economy and they were sometimes critical of what they admitted to be a drain of wealth from India to Britain. They did not deny what a contemporary Persian chronicler named Saiyid Ghulam Hussain Khan observed in *The Seir Mutaqherin* (1789) with regard to the English habit of ‘scraping together as much money’ in this country as they can, and carrying it ‘in immense sums to the kingdom of England’. A manuscript official report, entitled ‘Historical Review of the External Commerce of Calcutta from 1750 until 1830’, commented freely on ‘the plunder of the country’. After conquering Bengal, the East India Company ceased to import silver for their purchases of Indian goods for export to Europe, and deployed the revenues of Bengal for the purpose. According to the report, the unrequited exports became the vehicle for the remittance of the fortunes made by individual Englishmen in the country.

As critical Indian opinion emerged in the later nineteenth century, the colonial administration became more concerned to show that economic progress was happening in the country. The Madras administration commissioned a voluminous statistical work by S. Srinivasa Raghavaianagar, entitled *Memorandum on the Progress of the Madras Presidency during the last forty years of the British Administration* (Madras, Govt. Press, 1893), which constituted a well-documented apology for foreign rule in the country. The second century of British rule in India was marked by an ongoing controversy between the critics and apologists of empire. Indian nationalists, sympathetic Britishers and, at a later state, Marxists intellectuals blamed the drain for the impoverishment of India. Colonial officials, at the instance of Lord Curzon, contended that there was no impoverishment at all, and rival estimates of national income were produced on both sides. Among the works of the period may be mentioned, on the one side, Dadabhai Naoroji, *Poverty and Un-British Rule in India* (London, 1901), an earlier version 1873), and William Digby,

“Prosperous” *British India: a Revelation from the Official Records* (1901); and on the opposite side, F.T. Atkinson, ‘A Statistical Review of the Income and wealth of British India’, *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society*, June 1902. Atkinson, an official under Lord Curzon, sought to show that the national income of India was rising over the years, though somewhat slowly. Naoroji who entertained contrary views, computed the annual drain from India at around £30,000,000 in his own day, and estimated that earlier, around 1800, the figure had stood at about £5,000,000.

The debate generated the first general work on the economic history of India. To Curzon’s annoyance, a retired ICS officer who became President of the Indian National Congress, Romesh Chunder Dutt, drew up a formidable critique of the economic effect of British rule upon India in *The Economic History of India under Early British Rule (1757–1837)* (London, 1902) and *The Economic History of India under the Victorian Age* (London, 1904). Dutt dwelt on the heavy land tax upon the peasants, the destruction of the handicrafts, the recurrence of famines, and the annual drain to Britain in his economic critique of British rule. The British, he said, had given India peace, but not prosperity. Colonial administration did not accept his nationalist contentions, but one claim he made is indisputable: ‘No study is more interesting and instructive in the history of nations than the study of the material condition of the people from age to age.’ Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, before he became the Mahatma, wept as he read Dutt’s *Economic History* and, in the next generation, the doctrine that the most fundamental impact of British rule upon India was a destructive economic impact, became axiomatic with Marxist intellectuals, such as R.P. Dutt. A member of the Communist Party of Great Britain, he wrote a radical critique of colonial rule entitled *India Today*. Published by the Left Book Club from London in 1940, it was promptly banned in India. In this book, R.P. Dutt sought to show that the industrial imperialism which R.C. Dutt had criticised in his day had since then made a transition to financial imperialism, and that the drain had become more enervating for the economy in the latest phase of imperialism in India.

26.3 PRE-COLONIAL ECONOMY AND COLONIAL TRENDS

The debate on the colonial impact on the economy and the question of impoverishment under British rule brought forth a new issue : what was the state of the economy before British rule? Was India more prosperous then, and had she already embarked on an endogenous path of development that was cut off by the British ascendancy? Was national income higher at the time? Valuable official reports on the state and structure of the indigenous economy had been written in early colonial times, the most notable among these being the reports on eastern and southern India by Francis Buchanan- Hamilton. His voluminous and statistical surveys of agriculture, manufactures and inland trade were partially printed in Francis Buchanan, *A Journey from Madras through the Countries of Mysore, Canara and Malabar 1801* (2nd ed. Madras 1870); and Francis Buchanan, *An Account of the*

Districts of Bihar and Patna in 1811 – 1812, 2 vols. (Bihar and Orissa Research Society, n.d.). Later on, historians directed their curiosity to the economic conditions in Mughal Times, some early studies being Edward Thomas, *The Revenue Resources of the Mughal Empire in India* (1871) and Jadunath Sarkar, *The India of Aurengzeb: Topography, Statistics and Roads* (1901). It was, however, a British revenue official of UP, W.H. Moreland, who first ventured into a general economic history of pre-colonial India in *India at the Death of Akbar* (1920), *From Akbar to Aurangzeb* (1922), and the *Agrarian System of Moslem India* (1929). In Moreland's estimate the national income of India at the time of Todar Mal's survey in Akbar's reign was not perceptibly higher than what it was at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Moreland concluded that a parasitic agrarian despotism had driven India to an economic dead end, despite the considerable expansion of foreign trade that the Dutch and English East India Companies brought about in the seventeenth century. The conclusion that the foreign companies operating in Mughal India brought in a lot of silver and stimulated textile exports was later confirmed by K.N. Chaudhuri's econometric study, *The Trading World of Asia and the English East India Company 1660-1760* (Cambridge, 1978). A soviet author named A. I. Chicherov presented an argument in *Indian Economic Development in the Sixteenth to Eighteenth Centuries* (Moscow, 1971) which Moreland would not have supported: that Mughal India was undergoing an endogenous capitalist development which was cut off by the ascendancy of foreign monopoly capital under the English East India Company. That this is unlikely to have been the case is shown by the reputed Marxist historian Irfan Habib in 'The Potentialities of Capitalist Development in the Economy of Mughal India', *Journal of Economic History*, vol. XXIX, 1969. Habib demonstrated the sophistication of the Mughal urban economy, but like Moreland he emphasized its parasitic relationship with the heavily taxed rural economy.

For the colonial period, R.C. Dutt's *Economic History* was followed by a series of works: D.R. Gadgil, *The Industrial Evolution of India in Recent Times* (1924); Vera Anstey, *The Economic Development of India* (1929); and D.H. Buchanan, *The Development of Capitalistic Enterprise in India* (New York 1934). More recently, there has been a collective two-volume survey; Tapan Raychaudhuri and Irfan Habib (eds.), *The Cambridge Economic History of India, Vol 1, C.1200 – C.1750* (Cambridge 1982); and Dharma Kumar (ed), *The Cambridge Economic History of India, vol. 2 C.1757 – C.1970* (Cambridge, 1983). Daniel Houston Buchanan, an American author, was of the opinion that other-worldly values and the caste system inhibited economic development in India. D.R. Gadgil, who updated his near classic work several times, emphasised, on the contrary, more strictly economic factors: the difficulties of capital mobilisation on account of the absolute smallness of capital resources in respect to the size of the population, the late development of organised banking, and the seasonal fluctuations of a monsoon economy. A dispassionate economist, he did not blame either foreign rule or the Indian social structure for the absence of an industrial revolution in India; some of the Western contributors to the

second volume of *The Cambridge Economic History*, on the other hand, showed a disposition to challenge R.C. Dutt's vision of the negative impact of colonialism, and they dwelt instead on the technological backwardness of the Indian economy. This, in their view, inhibited industrial development and capitalist enterprise during the colonial period.

26.4 STATISTICAL INQUIRIES

The colonial administration had produced vast body of annual official statistics. After independence, economic historians utilized these statistics to interpret long-term trends in national income and agricultural and industrial production. The two seminal works in this respect were by George Blyn on agricultural production and by S. Sivasubramonian on national income. Both authors based their conclusions on detailed statistical information set out in tabular form, so that other historians might draw their own conclusions from the tables. George Blyn's work was entitled *Agricultural Trends in India 1891-1947: Output, Availability and Productivity* (Philadelphia, 1966). S. Sivasubramonian's thesis at the Delhi School of Economics. 'National Income of India 1900-01 to 1946-47, (1965) was later published in expanded form, including the post-independence period, as *The National Income of India in the Twentieth Century*, (New Delhi, 2000).

Blyn discovered that agricultural production in India showed adverse trends after 1920. The negative trends were especially pronounced in what he called the Greater Bengal region, which included Bihar and Orissa. There was declining per capita food availability in the late colonial period. S. Sivasubramonian demonstrated that the national income of India grew slowly in the period between 1900-1947, since agriculture, which was the principal sector in the economy, did not perform well. Industrial production expanded more perceptibly, especially because of the rapid growth of factory industry. On S. Sivasubramonian's evidence, there is no question of any 'deindustrialisation' having occurred in India between 1900-1947.

There is no comparable statistical series for the nineteenth century. The issue of deindustrialisation is therefore very much alive as regards the nineteenth century. Since factory industry did not account for an appreciable part of industrial production at the time, the issue boils down to the question whether cottage industries declined in that century. In a well-publicized controversy during the 1960's, Morris David Morris argued, against his opponents, that the cotton weavers benefited from the cheaper threads from Britain, but since neither side could produce any statistical series, the controversy, embodied in M.D. Morris et al, *Indian Economy in the Nineteenth Century: a Symposium* (Delhi, 1969), produced more heat than light. In yet another controversy, later on, Amiya Kumar Bagchi, in an article entitled 'Deindustrialization in Gangetic Bihar 1809 – 1901', produced statistical evidence from Buchanan Hamilton's survey that the proportion of people employed in cottage industries went

down drastically in the nineteenth century. The article, published in Barun De (ed.), *Essays in Honour of Professor Susobhan Chandra Sarkar* (New Delhi, 1976), provoked a critique by Marika Vicziany, who doubted the reliability of the statistical data from Buchanan Hamilton. Her critique, entitled 'The Deindustrialization of India in Nineteenth Century: A Methodological critique of Amiya Kumar Bagchi', along with 'A Reply' by Amiya Kumar Bachi, came out in *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, vol 16, 1979. Subsequently, J. Krishnamurty, in 'Deindustrialization in Gangetic Bihar during the nineteenth Century: Another Look at the Evidence', *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* 22, 1985, argued that the qualitative evidence was in favour of Bagchi's decline thesis. More recently, Tirthankar Roy, in *Traditional Industry in the Economy of Colonial India* (Cambridge, 1999), has once again argued against any decline in the nineteenth century, but except for Bagchi, nobody else in this controversy has been able to adduce any statistical data from contemporary sources. As regards the eighteenth century, when the East India Company imposed a monopoly on textile exports, the Bangladeshi scholar Hameeda Hossein has produced evidence of terrible coercion upon the weavers in *The Company Weavers of Bengal: The East India Company and the Organisation of Textile Production in Bengal 1750 – 1813* (Delhi, 1988).

26.5 TOWN AND COUNTRY

The beginnings of modern Indian business enterprise in the early 19th century have been traced by Blair B. Kling in *Partnership in Empire: Dwarkanath Tagore and the Age of Enterprise in Eastern India* (Berkeley, 1976), and by Asiya Siddiqui in 'The Business World of Jamsetjee Jeejeebhoy' (*Indian Economic and Social History Review*, vol 21, 1982). Private European enterprise in the colonial port cities of the nineteenth century has been sketched in Amales Tripahi, *Trade and Finance in the Bengal Presidency 1793-1833* (Calcutta, 1979) and, for the subsequent period, when managing agency houses became dominant, in Radhe Shyam Rungta, *The Rise of Business Corporations in India 1851-1900* (Cambridge, 1970). Big Indian enterprise on the model of Dwarkanath Tagore and Jamsetjee Jeejeebhoy suffered a setback in the colonial port cities as European capital became gradually monopolistic, but as C.A. Bayly has shown in an influential work entitled *Rulers, Townsmen and Bazaars: North Indian Society in the Age of British Expansion 1770 – 1870* (Cambridge, 1983), Indian traders fared better in the inland markets by adjusting to colonial rule.

Essays by several historians regarding the colonial impact upon the Indian economy are collected together in K.N. Chaudhuri and C.J. Dewey (eds.), *Economy and Society* (New Delhi, 1979), and C.J. Dewey and A.G. Hopkins (eds.) *The Imperial Impact: Studies in the Economic History of India and Africa* (London, 1978). Some of these essays presented new conclusions, especially on markets, industrial policy, and agrarian society. Many regional economic histories have appeared over time, two well-known works being N.K. Sinha, *The Economic History of Bengal*, 3 vols.

(Calcutta, 1965, 1970) and C.J. Baker, *An Indian Rural Economy: the Tamil Nad Countryside 1880 – 1950* (New Delhi, 1984). There is also one micro-history of economic and social change in a single Punjab Village over time by Tom Kessinger, entitled *Vilayatpur 1848 – 1968: Social and Economic Change in a North Indian Village* (Berkeley, 1974).

The biggest British investments in the Indian economy, designed for imperial rather than national benefit, were in railways and canals. These investments did not bring about the sort of industrial growth witnessed in Germany, Russia and Japan in the nineteenth century, and hardly improved per acre agricultural productivity over the land as a whole. There were harmful ecological side effects, and famines continued to visit the rural population time and again. These themes are explored in Daniel Thorner, *Investment in Empire* (Philadelphia, 1950); Daniel Thorner. 'Great Britain and the Economic Development of India's Railways', *Journal of Economic History*, vol XI, 1951; Elizabeth Whitcombe, *Agrarian Conditions in Northern India: the United Provinces under British Rule, 1660 – 1900* (Berkeley, 1972); and Amartya Sen, *Poverty and Famines: an Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation* (International Labour Organisation, 1981), a brilliant essay by the Nobel Laureate economist showing that famines could occur because of adverse movements in prices and wages even when the food stocks were available.

26.6 INDUSTRIALISATION

The twentieth century in its first half witnessed a certain degree of industrialisation, but there was no industrial revolution, nor any economic break-through despite an appreciable growth of large-scale industry before 1947. Historians have differed on why there was no 'take-off'. The Marxist economist Amiya Kumar Bagchi, in *Private Investment in India 1900 – 1939* (Cambridge, 1972), and the non-Marxist historian, Rajat K. Ray, in *Industrialization in India: Growth and Conflict in the Private Corporate Sector 1914 – 1947* (New Delhi, 1979) both argued that colonial policies were responsible for this. Morris D. Morris, an American economic historian of note, argues, on the contrary, in his contribution to the second volume of the *Cambridge Economic History of India* (1983), that the technological backwardness of the Indian economic structure blocked the sustained growth of investment in large-scale industry. Subsequently B.R. Tomlinson, a historian who hardly took a side in the dispute, nevertheless observed, in his *The Economy of Modern India 1860 – 1970* (*New Cambridge History of India*, Vol III, Cambridge, 1993), that 'a ruthless insistence by government on strategic priorities limited the expansion' of Indian industry during the Second World War, when there were new opportunities. By then, there was a large Indian capitalist class locked in a struggle with European capital in India. Its growth, and internal tensions, is studied in Claude Markovitz, *Indian Business and Nationalist Politics 1931-1939. The Indigenous Capitalist Class and the Rise of the Congress Party* (Cambridge, 1985). By common consent, the explanation

of backwardness is no longer sought in social values and customs. The political factor in economic backwardness or growth is still, however, a matter of dispute.

26.7 SUMMARY

The economic policies of the colonial rulers were at the centre of a controversy in the late 19th century India. Whereas the colonial administration sought to project its policies as beneficial to the country, the nationalist writers and sympathetic British commentators attacked these policies as exploitative and oppressive. Dadabhai Naoroji, R.C. Dutt and William Digby were some of the famous critics of government policies. The economic history of India, as we know it, may be said to have begun during this period. D.R. Gadgil, Vera Anstey and D.H. Buchanan followed in their footsteps in taking up the economic history of the colonial period. Jaduanth Sarkar and W.H. Moreland wrote about the Mughal economy. In the post-independence period, economic history became an established field of study and several studies were undertaken on various periods of Indian history covering several aspects of economy.

26.8 EXERCISES

- 1) Discuss the views of various authors on the economic history of pre-colonial India.
- 2) What are the differences between colonialist and nationalist works on Indian economic history? Answer with examples.
- 3) Write short notes on the following with reference to the economic history of India :
 - a) Industrialisation
 - b) Town and country.

UNIT 27 : PEASANTRY AND WORKING CLASSES

Structure

- 27.1 Introduction
- 27.2 Historiography before 1947
- 27.3 The Left Paradigm and its Critics
- 27.4 The Longer Term Perspective
- 27.5 Peasant Movements
- 27.6 Labour History
- 27.7 Summary
- 27.8 Exercises

27.1 INTRODUCTION

The Leftist movement in twentieth century Indian politics brought the focus to bear upon peasants, workers and their movements during the freedom struggle. Attempts to write the histories of these movements involved a closer study of class relations in Indian society, especially peasant-landlord relations and worker-capitalist relations. There had been earlier studies of related aspects, especially a voluminous historical literature on industry. The aim of radical historiography, however, was to treat the peasants and workers as historical subjects in their own right. Soon, it became evident that the history of workers and peasants might not be grasped fully without taking their evolving relationship with the superior classes into account. As these realisations dawned, the new labour historians emphasised the importance of treating labour and capital together. By the very nature of the subject, moreover, the older colonial historiography had tended to treat agrarian relations as a whole, keeping in view the mutual relations of tenants and landlords in any investigation of the condition of peasants.

The terms 'peasant' and 'worker, it may be noted in this context, were somewhat novel terms in Indian history. Colonial historiography had usually used the terms 'tenant' and 'ryot' rather than the 'peasant'. The term 'ryot' was a distortion of the Persian term '*raiyyat*', which meant, literally, 'subject'. In Mughal times, all subordinate classes of villagers, including the tillers of the land who were liable to pay the land tax, were referred to as 'ri'aya' (plural of *raiyyat*) or subjects. While the peasants were very much there in the pre-colonial period, the class of industrial

workers did not exist then. The people who did exist were the artisans, farms servants, field labourers, tanners, distillers, and the miscellaneous class of the labouring poor including sweepers, scavengers, palanquin bearers and so on. The industrial proletariat was a new class that emerged along with the rise of large-scale industry in the later nineteenth century. Worker's history, in the stricter sense of the term, could not have existed before then. **The conceptualisation of the peasant as a separate class and the emergence of the workers as a distinct new class led to the emergence of peasants' and workers' history in the course of the twentieth century.** The Marxist concept of the class and the spread of the communist ideology in India constituted a factor in the emergence of the radical historiography relating to workers and peasants.

The leftist historiography of workers and peasants grew especially in the period after independence. A. R. Desai, a Marxist intellectual, edited *Peasant Struggles in India* (Bombay, 1979). Sunil Kumar Sen, a CPI historian and himself an active participant in the Tebhaga or Sharecropper Movement in late colonial Bengal, wrote an eye-witness historical account entitled *Agrarian Struggle in Bengal 1946-47* (Calcutta, 1972), and later produced *Working Class Movements in India 1885-1975* (Delhi, 1994). Another straightforward Marxist account was by Sukomal Sen, *Working Class of India: History of Emergence and Movement 1830-1970* (Calcutta, 1977).

27.2 HISTORIOGRAPHY BEFORE 1947

It would be a mistake to think that peasant and workers constituted an entirely new subject, nor would it be right to say that there was no interest in the subject before the emergence of socialism. That there was an early interest in the conditions of the poor is shown by Reverend Lal Behari Day's English language fictional work, *Govinda Samanta* (2 vols., 1874). It was brought out in a new edition entitled *Bengal Peasant Life* (1878), which contained important material on the peasantry of the nineteenth century. Furthermore, the Brahmo social reformer, Sasipapda Banerjee, launched the Bengali magazine *Bharat Sharmajibi* (The Indian Worker) as early as 1874, and this magazine contained important historical material.

One may, indeed, go back to the eighteenth century, and find English and Persian accounts of agriculture and the agriculturist. H.T. Colebrooke, a senior East India Company servant, wrote his *Remarks on the Husbandry and Internal Commerce of Bengal in 1794* (new ed. Calcutta 1804). Recently, historians have traced an important Persian manuscript entitled *Risala-i Zirat* (Treatise on Agriculture), written by a late Mughal official of Bengal for a company servant in 1785, in which he set out four distinct categories of cultivators; (1) *muqarrari* cultivator, a tenant with a permanent deed (2) *khudkasht* cultivator, a tenant with understood rights in his own village, (3) *paikasht* cultivator, a tenant residing in a village other than the one in which his field was located, and (4) *kaljanah*, or 'one who tilled land as the

subordinate of another cultivator', (see Harbanb Mukhia, 'The *Risala-i Zirat* [a Treatise on Agriculture]', included in Harbanb Mukhia, *Perspectives on Medieval History* (New Delhi, 1993). From later records, it becomes clear that the fourth type of agriculturist might be an under-tenant, a sharecropper or a plain farm servant. The distinction between the resident (*khudkasht*) peasant and the migrant (*Paikasht*) peasant slowly disappeared during the colonial period due to increasing population pressure, but the same factor kept alive the more fundamental distinction between the peasant and the agricultural servant. The latter was entered in the censuses of colonial India as farm servant or field labourer, and he was a man even below the sharecropper, who still had the status of a peasant.

Because of the British authorities' dependence on the land revenue, the colonial administration kept the ryot constantly in its view and therefore in its records. The same cannot be said of the agricultural labourer, for he was not a tenant and was not liable to pay land revenue from any tenancy. Only the ryot, therefore, is treated along with the zamindar in B. H. Barden-Powell's *Manual of Land Revenue System and Land Tenures of India* (Calcutta, 1882), later republished in the well-known three volume *Land Systems of British India* (Oxford, 1892). Another official, W.H. Moreland, drew up the *Notes on the Agricultural Conditions and Problems of the United Provinces, Revised up to 1911* (Allahabad, 1913), and later on he produced the classic *Agrarian System of Moslem India* (Cambridge, 1929).

From the works of Baden Powell and W.H. Moreland, it emerged clearly that the land revenue of the state and the rent of the landlord had been the traditional mechanisms of the appropriation of the peasant surplus, not only in the colonial period but also in precolonial times. Yet another traditional mechanism of surplus appropriation, indebtedness and the charges upon it, assumed a novel importance in the colonial period, and drew the attention of the British officials in due course. As the ryot began to lose land, and riots broke out against the money-lender, two Punjab officers wrote important works on the ryot's indebtedness, and on the social tensions generated by money lending operations: S.S. Thorburn, *Musalman and Money-lenders in the Punjab* (1866) and Malcom Darling, *The Punjab Peasant in Prosperity and Debt* (London, 1932).

The colonial administration also generated works on labour employed in cottage and small-scale industries. Two important official works relating to Uttar Pradesh were William Hoey, *A Monograph on Trade and Manufactures in Northern India* (Lucknow, 1880), and A.C. Chatterjee, *Notes on the Industries of the United Provinces* (Allahabad, 1908). Logically, a mid-day point in the transition from the cottage to the factory was the workshop employing several artisans, and this important development was touched on in an unofficial work: N.M. Joshi, *Urban Handicrafts of the Bombay Deccan* (Poona, 1936).

The emergence of large-scale industry produced two new social forces: labour and capital. Among the works of the colonial period relating to these new developments may be mentioned S.M. Rutnagar, *Bombay Industries: the Cotton Mills* (Bombay, 1927); D.H. Buchanan, *The Development of Capitalistic Enterprise in India* (New York, 1934); and Radhakamal Mukherjee, *The Indian Working Class* (Bombay, 1945). It will be evident that by the late colonial period the worker had found his place beside the peasant as a force to reckon with in the economic life of the country. The involvement of these types of people in the growing political unrest included the UK Government to dispatch two royal commissions that generated important reports on their conditions: *The Royal Commission on Agriculture in India, Report* (1928) and *The Royal Commission on Labour in India, Report* (1931). The colonial period generated great body of evidence on the peasant and the worker for research after independence.

27.3 THE LEFT PARADIGM AND ITS CRITICS

The left identified the working class as the vanguard of the class struggle and the most progressive political force in Indian society. The overwhelming mass of the population still lived off agriculture, and the leftist historians were therefore induced to pay some attention to the peasantry. They came up with a paradigm, or framework of understanding, in order to make sense of change in agrarian society during the colonial period. The paradigm was worked out soon after independence in such works as S.J. Patel, *Agricultural Workers in Modern India and Pakistan* (Bombay, 1952) and Ramkrishna Mukherjee, *The Dynamics of a Rural Society* (Berlin, 1957). On this view of the matter, colonial rule in India produced a series of related changes in agrarian society: the creation of landed property by law; forced commercialisation of crops; land brought to the market as a commodity; the spread of peasant indebtedness and land alienation; the disintegration of the peasantry into rich peasants and poor peasants; depeasantisation, landlessness and the emergence of a pauperised class of landless labourers; the collapse of the village community of self-sufficient peasants and a far reaching process of social stratification in the countryside.

Subsequent research revealed that these notions were misinformed, and based on an inadequate acquaintance with the vast documentation in the colonial archives. The work of serious historical investigation and revision began with Dharma Kumar's pioneering work, *Land and Caste in South India, Agricultural Labour in Madras Presidency during the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1965). She proved with rich documentation that pre-colonial and early-colonial India already possessed a vast agrarian under-class of bonded labourers who traditionally belonged to the untouchable castes. Landlessness here was function of caste and not of the market. Rajat and Ratna Ray followed with an article in *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* (vol. 10, 1973), entitled 'The Dynamics of Continuity in Rural Bengal under the British Imperium: a study of Quasi-Stable Subsistence Equilibrium in

Underdeveloped Societies in a Changing World', in which they contended that a group of rich peasants who had their lands cultivated by sharecroppers and bonded labourers existed even at the beginning of colonial rule, and were beneficiaries of economic change in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Yet another attack on the Marxist paradigm of polarisation between rich and poor peasants during the colonial period came from a contrary direction. There had earlier been a debate in Russia between V.I. Lenin and A.V. Chayanov on stratification with the peasantry. As against Lenin's thesis that growth of agrarian capitalism and the emergence of a class of *kulaks* (rich peasants) had permanently stratified the Russian peasantry into rich and poor, Chayanov contended that the Russian peasantry remained a homogeneous and subsistence-oriented community of small-holders among whom differences of farm size were cyclical and not consolidated into permanent distinctions. Eric Stokes, in his contribution to *The Cambridge Economic History of India, vol.2, C.1757-c.1970*, edited by Dharma Kumar (Cambridge, 1983), expressed the opinion that there was no agrarian polarisation. If divisions did occur in the countryside, it was 'more because of the slow impoverishment of the mass than the enrichment of the few' (contribution entitled 'Agrarian Relations: Northern and Central India'). Opinion on this complex issue has remained divided. Did the peasants remain an undifferentiated class of poor small holders? Neil Chalesworth, in *Peasants and Imperial Rule: Agriculture and Agrarian Society in the Bombay Presidency, 1850 – 1935* (Cambridge, 1985) contended that a certain degree of commercialisation of agriculture in colonial India had the effect of pushing up a number of peasants. Sugata Bose, on the other hand, maintained, in *Agrarian Bengal: Economy, Social Structure and Politics 1919-1947* (Cambridge, 1986), that rich farmers were to be seen only among reclaimers of land in a few frontier areas. In the more settled districts of East Bengal, the egalitarian peasant small holding system remained intact for most of the colonial period. More recently, Nariaki Nukazato, in *Agrarian System in Eastern Bengal C. 1870-1910* (Calcutta, 1994), has found that even there, at least a quarter of the land had come under the unequal relationship of cultivating employers and sharecropping under-tenants. He lends support to an earlier thesis to this effect in Binay Bhushan Chudhuri, 'The Process of Depeasantization in Bengal and Bihar, 1885-1947,' *Indian Historical Review*, Vol. 2, 1975. Chaudhuri's article made the important point that the growing number of sharecroppers among the peasants indicated an incipient process of depeasantisation even while outwardly the small-holding system appeared to be intact.

Historians, moreover, came to concede that class was not the only factor in differentiation among the peasantry. Studies such as M.C.Pradhan, *The Political System of the Jats of Northern India*, David Pocock, *Kanbi and Patidar: a study of the Patidar Community of Gujarat*, and Stephen F. Dale, *Islamic Society on the South Asian Frontier: The Mappilas of Malabar 1498-1922* (1980) showed that caste and community were capable of producing important rural solidarities among the members, setting them apart from other peasants.

27.4 THE LONGER TERM PERSPECTIVE

W.H. Moreland had set the agenda for a long-term visualisation of the role of the state in the life of the rural population. Marxist historians at Aligarh, following in his footsteps set about exploring aspects of agrarian life and the state formation in both the precolonial and colonial periods. In the early 1960s, Irfan Habib, a formidable Aligarh historian, demonstrated the overwhelming presence of the Mughal state in the life of the heavily taxed peasantry in *The Agrarian System of Mughal India 1556-1707* (Bombay, 1963). He depicted several peasant rebellions that occurred in the reign of Aurangzeb. The two ends of the spectrum, the state and the village, were also portrayed with the help of rich Marathi documentation by the Japanese historian Hiroshi Fukazawa, whose essays were collected together in *The Medieval Deccan; Peasants, Social Systems and States, Sixteenth to Seventeenth Centuries* (New Delhi, 1991). The American historian, Burton Stein, maintained that the state, rooted in the life of the peasant community, had a weaker and more segmented character than Irfan Habib had allowed, at least in the south. This non-Marxist perspective was set forth in Stein's *Peasant State and Society in Medieval South India* (New Delhi, 1980). Another American historian, David Ludden, undertook a long-term study of local rulers and villagers in Tirunelveli district in the deep south. The micro-study spanned the pre-colonial and colonial periods and was entitled *Peasant History in South India* (Princeton, 1985). The history of peasants now had a broader perspective than the initial Marxist studies of peasant movements.

27.5 PEASANT MOVEMENTS

The above perspective lent a growing sophistication to the study of peasant struggles. A growing band of non-Marxist historians entered the field with new concepts. The pioneer in this sophisticated new variety of history was Eric Stokes, whose essays on the conditions and movements of peasants paid due attention to caste, markets, tax burden and a variety of other factors. His essays were collected together in *The Peasant and The Raj: Studies in Agrarian Society and Peasant Rebellion in Colonial India* (Cambridge, 1978). The sociologist D. N. Dhangare's *Peasant Movements in India* (Delhi, 1983) represented another breakaway from the older one-dimensional Marxist perspective. Ranjit Guha, at the same time, brought a subalternist perspective to bear on the subject in *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (New Delhi, 1983). He showed that peasant actions were typically circumscribed by the locality, based on caste or communal ties, and oriented towards an inversion of existing hierarchy rather than a revolutionary breakthrough on the Marxist model.

27.6 LABOUR HISTORY

The older leftist history of the trade union movement in India assumed, uncritically, that the working class in India was practically the same, in its social constitution and outlook, as the European working class. Closer examination of the sources by the historians threw doubt on the revolutionary potential and socialist outlook of the so-called 'proletariat'. It was demonstrated by the new labour historians that the mentality and the consciousness of the industrial workers did not differ all that much from the outlook of the poor who depended on the casual labour market in town and country. Among the works that revised labour history substantially may be mentioned Morris David Morris, *The Emergence of an Industrial Labour Force India: A Study of the Bombay Cotton Mills 1845-1947* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1965); R.K. Newman, *Workers and Unions in Bombay 1919-29: a Study of Organisation in the Cotton Mills* (Canberra, 1981); Sujata Patel, *The Making of Industrial Relations. The Ahmedabad Textile Industry 1918-1939* (Delhi, 1987), a study of the Gandhian model of trade unionism based on the cooperation of capital and labour; Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Rethinking Working Class History: Bengal 1890-1940* (Princeton, 1989), a study of jute mill labour from the Subalternist point of view; and Rajnarayan Chandavarkar, *The Origins of Industrial Capitalism in India: Business Strategies and the Working Classes in Bombay 1900-1940* (Cambridge, 1994). Dipesh Chakrabarty noted that the 'hierarchical precapitalist culture' of the workers made them prone to communal violence and inclined them to dependence on the 'Sardars' who recruited them. Rajnarayan Chandavarkar, in his wide ranging study, noted the dependence of the workers on the 'Dadas' in the neighbourhood. Instead of organising themselves into effective modern trade unions, the rural migrants to the mill towns depended on jobbers and on communal solidarities. They were prone to unorganised easily-suppressed violence. Communal riots displaced prolonged, successful strikes all too often in labour unrest.

In a book entitled *Village Communities in the East and West* (London, 1871), Sir Henry Maine conceived old Indian society in terms of status and community, as against contract and class. The picture of isolated, self sufficient village communities might have been overdrawn even then. As colonial rule progressed, so did the understanding of Indian society, and this is reflected in the title of a recent work: Kapil Kumar (ed.), *Congress and Classes: Nationalism, Workers and Peasants* (New Delhi, 1988). The long-term effect of colonial rule was to bring the classes into play in a new national area.

27.7 SUMMARY

The land and the peasantry had been an object of attention by the colonial officials since the early days of colonial rule. Land revenue was the most important source of

government's income and the peasants were the people who worked the land and occasionally rose in rebellion against the landlords and the government. The dependence of the colonial government on land revenue necessitated that the peasantry was kept under close scrutiny. Several early works, therefore, focused on the land-revenue systems. However, in the course of time, academically oriented and impartial studies about the land settlement and the peasantry, both for the colonial and pre-colonial periods, began to appear.

The industrial working classes were of more recent origins. The establishment of modern factories and their ancillaries, the railways, ports and construction activities were the source of the new working class. Studies related to the themes of the modern industries and the modern working class began to appear since the early 20th century. The evidences generated by the colonial government on various aspects of labour in different regions of the country helped the scholars in this field.

Although many of these studies and done by the leftist scholars, there were several other scholars who differ with them on various issues, such as the increasing polarisation within the peasantry, the non-existence of a significant number of agricultural workers during pre-colonial period and on the revolutionary potential of the modern working class.

27.8 EXERCISES

- 1) How did the peasant and working class histories begin? Discuss the histories related to these classes before independence.
- 2) Give an account of the histories of peasants and working classes after independence.

UNIT 28 : CASTE, TRIBE AND GENDER

Structure

- 28.1 Introduction
- 28.2 The Discovery of Caste
- 28.3 Colonial Ethnology and the Tribes
- 28.4 Low Caste and Tribal Protests
- 28.5 Are Caste and Tribe Real?
- 28.6 Gender
- 28.7 Summary
- 28.8 Exercises

28.1 INTRODUCTION

When modern anthropological and historical writings on Indian society began, the close relationship between caste, tribe and gender became evident. Colonial historians and anthropologists saw that the peculiarity of Indian society lay in caste. They also saw that there was a section in Indian society, namely the aboriginal tribes, which had not been brought into caste society. The constitution of caste society differed from tribal society in many respects. Gender was one important respect in which the organisation of a tribe differed from that of a caste. It is not merely that the tribal economy differed from that of castes. It is also true that the marriage systems differed radically in the two types of society. Outwardly, it was the sexual organisation of society which made it easy to set caste apart from tribe. The polarity of purity and pollution, which characterised caste society, was absent among the tribes. The tribes were no part of ritual hierarchy. And in a related way, the gender system of the tribes also differed from the marriage structure of caste society. In fact, a unique organisation of gender lay at the heart of the caste system. In general, it may be said that there is a hidden connection between gender, caste and tribe which must be kept in view when studying Indian's society and history.

The historical and anthropological literature on caste is voluminous and of long standing. There is also a new and burgeoning literature on gender studies and women's history. The tribes do not figure so importantly in Indian historical writing. There is, however, a considerable body of anthropological literature on the tribes which includes some historical material.

The dalits or untouchables have become an important force in Indian politics. It is not a matter of surprise, therefore, that historical inquiries into their condition have attracted several researchers. The *adivasis* or aboriginal tribes do not have that sort of importance in politics, except in the north-eastern hill states. There are, consequently, fewer researchers in tribal history. Women, on the other hand, have attracted a growing number of historians. This is because of the feminist movement. The movement has had the effect of focusing public attention upon the subject.

28.2 THE DISCOVERY OF CASTE

The colonial British administration in India used the concept of caste in a principal way to understand the society it administered. The British derived the term ‘caste’ from the Portuguese word *casta*. The Portuguese observation of a social institution called *casta* during early maritime voyages led in due course to the elaboration of the concept of ‘caste system’. This happened in the nineteenth century, in course of which the colonial administration came to understand the entire social formation (minus the tribes) in terms of the caste system. Colonial administrators commented on the existence of the institution of caste, in an imperfect form, even among the Muslims and Christians.

The Portuguese travelogue, *The Book of Duarte Barbosa An Account of the Countries Bordering on the Indian Ocean and their Inhabitants. Written by Durate Barbosa and completed about the year 1518 A.D.*, trans M.L. Dames (London, 1916) was among the first works to touch upon the institution. But the first to conceive ‘the caste system’ was the French Missionary, Abbe Dubois. In a work of 1816, entitled ‘Description of the Character, Manners and Customs of the People of India, and of their Institutions, Religious and Civil’, (translated by Henry K. Beauchamp subsequently as *Hindu Manners, Customs and Ceremonies* (Oxford, 1906)), he referred to the caste system of India. He said, ‘I am persuaded that it is simply and solely due to the distribution of the people into castes that India did not lapse into a state of barbarism and that she preserved the arts and sciences of civilization whilst most other nations of the earth remained in the state of barbarism.’ Other Christian missionaries did not share his favourable view of the civilisational value of caste and the Madras Missionary Conference of 1850 held caste to be ‘one of the greatest obstacles to the progress of the gospel in India.’ Indian social reformers, while unwilling as yet to condemn the caste system as a whole, also dwelt on some of the harmful social consequences of the institution.

Colonial social ethnology debated the origin and function of caste extensively in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. On the basis of the census of 1881, two colonial administrators speculated in their reports from the Punjab and North-Western Provinces and Oudh that caste was basically a frozen occupational system. These early official reports are Denzil Ibbetson, *Report on the Census of the Punjab* (1883),

subsequently re-published as *Punjab Castes* (Lahore, 1916), and John C. Nesfield, *Brief View of the Caste System of the North-Western Provinces and Oudh, together with an Examination of Names and Figures Shown in the Census Report* (Allahabad, 1885). A brilliant Bengal official named H.H. Risley disagreed with this view and put forth the influential contention that caste had a racial origin, to be found in the Aryan conquest of India's darker original inhabitants. Not all colonial officials agreed with this view which was set forth in Risley's *The Tribes and Castes of Bengal*, 2 vols. (Calcutta, 1892), and *The People of India* (Calcutta, 1908). William Crooke, an official in sympathy with Ibbetson and Nesfield in his matter, argued against Risley's race theory, and emphasised occupational criteria for understanding caste in *The Tribes and Castes of the North-Western Provinces and Oudh*, 4 vols. (Calcutta, 1896). Risley and Crooke based their official reports on the census of 1891. Whatever their difference on the origin of caste, the colonial census had by then officially established caste as the principal concept for analysing Indian society. Risley's attempt to establish the social ranking of caste through the census set off a keen competition among various caste groups about matters of rank.

In due course the colonial administration fostered political rivalries among the various castes and the proposal for separate legislative representation of 'the depressed classes' led to Mahatma Gandhi's fast unto death and a compromise between the caste Hindus and the untouchable leader B.R. Ambedkar. The keen interest regarding caste at this time is reflected in works by both Indians and foreigners: Nripendra Kumar Dutt, *Origin and Growth of Caste in India* (London, 1931); J.H. Hutton, *Caste in India: Its Nature, Function and Origins* (Cambridge, 1946); and G.S. Ghurye, *Caste and Class in India* (Bombay, 1950). Though none were professional historians, all three speculated about the origin and meaning of caste. Hutton, who was the Census Commissioner of 1931, was dissatisfied with the race and occupation theories of caste. He speculated:

'The fact is, many roads of migration have led to India - and have ended there. This has resulted in the accumulation of a large number of societies of very different levels of culture and very varying customs in an area in which they have neither been mutually inaccessible nor without some measure of individual isolation. The mere inescapable necessity of finding a *modus Vivendi* on the part of a number of different cultures has probably played a not unimportant part among the various factors that have combined to cause the caste system to develop.'

Speculation about the nature of caste continued in the period after independence. Louis Dumont's modern sociological classic, *Homo Hierarchicus: Essai sur les systems des castes* (1967, English translation 1970) argued that the purity-pollution hierarchy, by which all castes are placed in relation to each other, was the central feature of the caste system. Morton Klass, in his *Caste, The Emergence of the South Asian Social System* (1980), argued on the other hand that a caste, in its irreducible

essence, was a marriage circle, common occupation or other features being secondary to the system.

28.3 COLONIAL ETHNOLOGY AND THE TRIBES

Colonial speculation about the origins of the caste system included the assumption that various tribes had at different times been given a specific caste ranking and had thus been absorbed into the caste system. The colonial administration also discovered, however, that several aboriginal tribes had not been so absorbed and had maintained a separate existence of their own. These tribes, which had remained apart from the rest of society, were thought to be dependent on forest produce and shifting cultivation, and were supposed to be simple, backward people prone to violence. Closer acquaintance with the tribes showed, however, that their conditions varied, and that many had taken to settled agriculture. Early colonial ethnology included speculations about the origins and history of the tribes. Colonel E.T. Dalton, who was Chota Nagpur Commissioner and had close acquaintance with that wild country which today constitutes, along with the Santhal Parganas, the new state of Jharkhand, was among the first to venture into the history and present condition of the tribes. His work was entitled *Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal* (Calcutta, 1872). It was a pioneering work.

After Colonel Dalton, an amateur Bengali ethnologist who lived in Bihar became interested in the tribes of the same area where Dalton had served as Commissioner. His name was Sarat Chandra Roy. His inquiries were more detailed and he showed a remarkable academic grasp of the new discipline of anthropology. He wrote a number of works on the tribes of Chota Nagpur. It may be noted that the area, along with the Santhal Parganas, was included in his time in the province of Bihar and Orissa. In Colonel Dalton's time, the whole area, today the state of Jharkhand, had been part of the huge Bengal Presidency. In whatever administration the area might be included at different times, it had a distinctive habitat. It was a wild plateau, and the caste system had not developed there into a predominant social system. Some of the wild tribes had their own Rajas, some lived under their local chiefs. The Santhals of the Santhal Parganas and the Mundas of the Chota Nagpur division were numerically large population blocs. In a famous work on agrarian history, *The Annals of Rural Bengal* (1868), W.W. Hunter had earlier touched on the Santhal insurrection of 1855. Sarat Chandra Roy turned his attention to the Mundas, and produced an anthropological work on them entitled *The Mundas and their Country* (Calcutta, 1912). He went on with his detailed researches and produced two more works: *The Oraons of Chota Nagpur: Their History; Economic Life and Social Organisation* (Ranchi, 1915); and *The Birhors: a Little – known Jungle Tribe of Chota Nagpur* (Ranchi, 1925). Dalton had commented on the joyous life of the tribals. Roy added that every bachelor had his sweetheart among the maidens.

It was clear by this time that the sexual organisation of society was very different among the tribals compared to the more familiar caste society. A missionary named Verrier Elwin who had developed empathy with the tribals of Central India turned his attention to the matter. He touched on an institution called the *ghotul* which permitted free mixing. 'Throughout tribal India', he said, 'divorce is easy and generally the wife has the same rights as her husband'. Among his works may be mentioned *The Baiga* (1939), *The Muria and their Ghotul* (Bombay, 1947) and the *Bondo Highlander* (London, 1950). A novel feature of his work was the use of tribal songs as primary material for depicting their condition and mentality. A Baiga song which he collected runs as follows:

In some houses there is food

In other houses there is money

But in every house there is youth and desire.

There is a hint here that the material condition of the tribals might not be easy, but their social organisation left scope for the natural joys of life.

Some of the early colonial anthropologists speculated about the history of the tribes, but actual historical materials were not forthcoming from a non-literate society. A.R. Radcliffe Brown, in his influential anthropological work entitled *The Andaman Islanders* (1922), disapproved of such speculative history and urged that tribal society should be studied as it appeared in the present before the anthropologist. The inherent difficulties in constructing the history of the tribals meant that the main body of research work regarding them was anthropological. The work of the Anthropological Survey of India accentuated this tendency. However, these same anthropological reports on current conditions among the tribals became valuable historical documents when, as it happened in independent India, their condition changed beyond recognition, and for the worse.

28.4 LOW CASTE AND TRIBAL PROTESTS

When historians turned to studying the conditions of low castes and tribals, they devoted a good deal of attention to the question of oppression and protest during the colonial period. Both groups were marginal, and were discriminated against. Yet from time to time ideological leadership emerged from amongst them and there were movements of protest which figured in the colonial archives. Among the low castes at least, statements of their own point of view were also sometimes available. Two recent works which have made interesting use of such material, telling the story from the point of view of the group concerned, are: Rosalind O' Hanlon, *Caste, Conflict and Ideology: Mahatma Jotirao Phule and Low Caste Protest in Nineteenth Century*

Western India (Cambridge, 1985); and Shekhar Bandyopadhyay, *Caste, Protest and Identity in Colonial India: the Namasudras of Bengal 1872-1947* (Richmond, 1997). The gender mores of the low castes and the tribals differed from the high caste ethic, and in their studies of protest. O'Hanlon and Bandyopadhyay did not forget the gender factor. They also showed how the Non-Brahman movement in Maharashtra and the Namasudra movement in Bengal negotiated terms with the broader issues of social reform and political nationalism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

It should be noted that the Non-Brahman movement in the peninsula of India, especially as it developed in the Maharashtra region and the Tamil country, did not necessarily represent the lowest of the low. The distinction between the Non-Brahman movement and the Dalit movement has become clearer in the historical literature relating to the matter. Eugene F. Irschik, an American historian, who suggested that caste played an important role in colonial Indian politics, dealt with the Non-Brahman castes, as distinct from the untouchable Adi Dravidas, in *Politics and Social Conflict in South India: the Non-Brahman Movement and Tamil Separatism* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1969). He showed that the Non-Brahman movement in Tamil country was a protest movement of the middling castes against the Brahman-dominated nationalist movement of the Congress. Below the middling Non-Brahman castes, which suffered from a sense of discrimination, there were untouchable castes that were even more oppressed. It is from this section of society that the Dalit movement emerged in late colonial India under the leadership of B.R. Ambedkar. The Maharashtra region witnessed both the Non-Brahman movement and the Dalit movement and the distinction stands clear in two separate works, both by Gail Omvedt, *Cultural Revolt in a Colonial Society: The Non-Brahman Movement in Western India, 1873-1930* (Bombay, 1976); and *Dalits and the Democratic Revolution: Dr. Ambedkar and the Dalit Movement in Colonial India* (New Delhi, 1994). Another work dealing with the Dalit movement is Eleanor Zelliot, *From Untouchable to Dalit: Essays on the Ambedkar Movement* (New Delhi, 1992).

Movements of protest turned violent more readily among the tribals, at least among those tribes living in the remoter jungle regions. The tribals were not integrated with the rest of the society, and they did not fully comprehend the might of the colonial state. Invariably their rebellions were drowned in blood. We have seen that W.W. Hunter left an account of the Santhal rebellion in his *Annals of Rural Bengal*, written not long after the event happened. Tribal movements of protest did not draw much attention afterwards. The focus was upon the more organised politics of nationalist and low caste protest. The focus upon history from below has resulted in greater attention to tribal revolts in more recent years. Among such studies may be mentioned K.S. Singh, *Dust Storm and Hanging Mist: The Story of Birsa Munda and His Movement* (Calcutta, 1966); and J.C. Jha, *Tribal Revolt of Chota Nagpur, 1831-32* (Patna, 1987). Dealing with the Munda and Kol rebellions respectively, both works related to the Chota Nagapur plateau. Historians of India have paid little attention to the tribes of the north-eastern hill states. Many years ago, the anthropologist

Christophe von Furer- Haimendr of wrote the well-known work, *The Naked Nagas: Head Hunters of Assam in Peace and War* (Calcutta, 1946). Recently research in the history of the northeastern hills has begun in the north-east itself, and in pace with the trends in current research, social factors such as gender have begun to figure in this research. For instance, there is Frederick S. Downs, *The Christian Impact on the Status of Women in North East India* (Shillong, 1996).

28.5 ARE CASTE AND TRIBE REAL?

Post-modernist historians have recently questioned whether categories such as ‘caste’ and ‘tribe’ are real. In their opinion, colonial administrators invented these categories in their discourses upon India and Africa. The argument that ‘tribe’ is a figment of the colonial imagination appeared in Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (eds.), *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge, 1983). Terence Ranger, a historian of Africa, argued this in relation to the Dark Continent, but there were resonance of ‘the invention of tribalism’ in the Indian subcontinent, too. That caste, too, was a product of colonial discourse and not a natural growth of pre-colonial history, was argued by Ronald Inden, *Imagining India* (Oxford, 1990), and by Nicholas B. Dirks, *Castes of Mind : Colonialism and the Making of Modern India* (Princeton, 2001). These arguments have not found general acceptance outside post-modernist circles. Historians are aware of the dangers of ‘essentializing’ categories such as tribe, caste and religious community, and are also conscious of the constructed element in the colonial ethnology regarding these groups. Nevertheless, they have not been able to dispense with ‘tribalism’ or ‘casteism’ in interpreting Indian history. That tribal society is a real social category has been reasserted by Binay Bhushan Chaudhuri in his essay, ‘Tribal Society in Transition: Eastern India, 1757-1920’, in Mushirul Hasan and Narayani Gupta (eds.), *India’s Colonial Encounter : Essays in Memory of Eric Stokes* (New Delhi, 1993). That caste assumed new forms in colonial India was recognised several years ago by Lloyd I. Rudolph and Susan H. Rudolph, *The Modernity of Tradition: Political Development in India* (Chicago, 1967). Thus there was recognition that caste might have ‘re-invented’ itself in colonial India. That it was often a smoke-screen for others interests in the politics of the colonial period is an argument that figures in John Gallagher, Gordon Johnson and Anil Seal (eds.), *Locality, Province and Nation: Essays in Indian Politics, 1870 to 1940* (Cambridge, 1970). But that caste became a real factor in politics, at least in the colonial period, is not denied even by post-modernist historians such as Dirks. The point is not to essentialise these categories too readily. Dirks observes, ‘Caste as we know it today is not in fact some unchanged survival of ancient India...Rather...Caste... is a modern phenomenon, that is specifically the product of an historical encounter between India and Western Colonial rule’. However, feminist historians, in their studies of pre-colonial Indian society, have found caste to be very much an oppressive presence in the lives of women even them. Uma Chakravarti in *Rewriting History: The Life and Times of Pandita Ramabai* (New Delhi, 1998) found this to be the case with regard to

Maharashtra in the age of Peshwas, as well as in the time of Pandita Ramabai in the late nineteenth century. This takes us to the question of gender.

28.6 GENDER

During the colonial period, two controversial works focused international attention upon the women's question in India. Highly critical of the condition of the Indian women, these two works were: Pandita Ramabai, *The High Caste Hindu Woman* (1887) and Katherine Mayo, *Mother India* (1927). At an early date serious historical interest on the subject of women in Indian civilisation was indicated by B.C. Law, *Women in Buddhist Literature* (1927); I.B. Horner, *Women under Primitive Buddhism* (1930); and A.S. Altekar, *The Position of Women in Hindu Civilization from the Prehistoric Times to the Present* (1938).

The feminist movement and the International Women's year, 1975, set off a wave of women's studies, beginning with such works as B.R. Nanda (ed.), *Indian Women: from Purdah to Modernity* (New Delhi, 1976). Soon however, women's history broadened out and assumed the more complex shape of gender history. Instead of studying women as such, gender historian studied the problem in terms of the power relations between the sexes in society. An influential work edited by Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid, entitled *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History* (New Delhi, 1989) indicated the transition to gender history. This was followed by more collections of articles that exhibited the new sophistication of gender history: J. Krishnamurty (ed.), *Women in Colonial India: Essays on Survival, Work and the State* (New Delhi, 1989); Bharati Ray (ed.), *From the Seams of History: Essays on Indian Women* (New Delhi, 1995); and Aparna Basu and Arup Taneja (eds.), *Breaking out of Invisibility: Women in Indian History* (New Delhi, 2002). The voices of women through the ages were collected together in the important anthology edited by Susie Tharu and K. Lalita and entitled *Women Writing in India 600 B.C. to the Present* (2 vols., New Delhi, 1991-1993). Two authoritative, male produced texts for the guidance of Hindu and Muslim women respectively were critically examined in Julia Leslie, *The Perfect Wife: the Orthodox Hindu Woman according to the Stridharmapaddhati of Tryambakayajvan* (1989), and Barbara Metcalf, *Perfecting Women, Maulana Ashraf Ali Thanawi's Bihishti Zewar* (1990).

Bengal took the lead in the women's movement. Not surprisingly, a large number of works relate to the gender relations in colonial Bengal. These works include: Usha Chakraborty, *Condition of Bengali Women around the Second half of the Nineteenth Century* (Calcutta, 1963); Ghulam Murshid, *Reluctant Debutant: Response of Bengali Women to Modernization 1949-1905* (Princeton, 1984); Malavika Karlekar, *Voices from within* (Delhi, 1991); Barbara Southard, *The Women's Movement and Colonial Politics in Bengal : The Quest for Political Right, Education and Social Reform Legislation* (1921-36) (Delhi, 1996); and Sonia Nishat Amin, *The World of Muslim*

Women in Colonial Bengal 1876-1939 (Leiden, 1996). Other provinces of India have been covered more recently. For instance, Prem Chowdhury, *The Veiled Woman: Shifting Gender Equations in Rural Haryana 1880-1990* (Delhi, 1994); Sita Anantharaman, *Getting Girls to School: Social Reform in the Tamil Districts 1870-1930* (1996); and Gail Minault, *Scheduled Scholars: Women's Education and Muslim Social Reform in Colonial India* (Delhi, 1998), which covers North India. There is also a general study of Indian women in the modern period in *The New Cambridge History of India* series: Geraldine Forbes, *Women in Modern India* (Cambridge, 1996).

More recently, gender history has broadened out and taken up the study, not merely of femininity, but also of masculinity. An example is Mrinalini Sinha, *Colonial Masculinity: the "Manly Englishman" and the "Effeminate Bengali" in the late Nineteenth Century* (Manchester, 1995). Gender history now pays attention to race, community, caste and tribe. An inter-related field of social studies has emerged, and has enriched history writing.

28.7 SUMMARY

Caste was probably the most important category used by the colonial administration to understand the Indian society. The entire Indian society, including the Muslims and Christians, though barring the tribes, was viewed in terms of the caste system. While some of the early writers viewed caste as the occupational system, H.H. Risley, a colonial official posted in Bengal, put forward a radically different view which contended that the caste system had a racial origin, dating since the Aryan conquests of the early inhabitants of India.

In the early days of colonial rule, the tribes were also considered as part of the caste system by the colonial administrators. However, they later realised that the social organisation of the tribes was quite different from that of the caste society. The academic exploration of the tribes initiated the new discipline of anthropology in India. Several anthropological studies were undertaken by both the Indian and foreign scholars on the Indian tribes.

The non-Brahman and Dalit movements have also attracted the attention of the historians and many important books, particularly by Rosalind O'Hanlon, Eugene Irschik, Gail Omvedt and Eleanor Zelliot, have been published on them.

The gender question has also attracted a lot of attention, particularly because of the rise of the feminist movement in post-independence period. However, two important books on the conditions of women by Pandita Ramabai and Katherine Mayo focused attention on women's problem during the colonial period. Now, of course, we have a lot of literature on this issue covering various aspects of gender relations.

28.8 EXERCISES

- 1) How will you define caste? Discuss the writings of various scholars on caste.
- 2) Give an account of the colonial understanding of tribe.
- 3) Discuss the historical works related to gender.

UNIT 29 : RELIGION AND CULTURE

Structure

- 29.1 Introduction
- 29.2 Pre-colonial and Colonial Historiography
- 29.3 Post-colonial Research in Religion
- 29.4 The Study of Indian Culture
- 29.5 Culture Studies and Religious Identities
- 29.6 Mentality and History of Culture
- 29.7 Summary
- 29.8 Exercises

29.1 INTRODUCTION

The nationalist movement in colonial India led to an important reconstruction of the concept of history. History at the time was understood to be a history of the British state in India. The history of the pre-colonial period was understood to be a political narrative of the dynasties and their wars and alliances. For Mohandas Karamch and Gandhi, this was a history of violence. There was no history of ‘soul-force’, or nonviolence. He put the matter quite explicitly in *Hind Swaraj* (1909). Rabindranath Tagore made the same point somewhat differently. In his view, the true history of India was not a catalogue of its dynasties, warfare and the resultant bloodshed, but rather its inner history. It lay in the quest for the accommodation of differences, and in the synthesis of diverse elements, including clashing religious beliefs. The history of India’s unique culture, in his view, was evolution of harmony out of variety. Religious history was on this analysis central to the inner history of the country’s culture. It was a history of syncretism.

British Orientalism had also regarded religious history as the most important part of India’s cultural history. Nor was this a colonial view alone, for there was an earlier recognition of the importance of religion in the cultural heritage of the country. Badauni’s *Muntakha-ut-Tawarikh*, bearing upon the reign of Akbar, devoted considerable space to religious matters and Sufi doctrines.

There was also a recognition, however, that not all of India’s culture was religious culture. British Orientalism had a keen appreciation of secular Sanskrit poetry, and

earlier, Badauni had devoted many pages of his history to Persian poetry in India, not all of which was religious. However, Indian historiography was quick to recognise that there was no hard and fast distinction between the religious and the secular in the history of India. Even in the modern period, it was recognised that the Indian awakening had an important component of religious reform / revival.

29.2 PRE-COLONIAL AND COLONIAL HISTORIOGRAPHY

What P.J. Marshall calls ‘the British discovery of Hinduism’ was preceded long ago by the Muslim discovery of Hindu sacred and secular learning. As early as C.1030, the Muslim scholar of Ghazni, Al Biruni, had written extensively and sufficiently on Hindu beliefs in *Kitab -ul- Hind*. The Tibetan lama, Taranatha, wrote a history of the Buddhist faith in India, *rGya - gar - chos - ‘Gyun* (The History of Buddhism in India), around 1608, by which time Hinduism had already triumphed over Buddhism. In the same century, the Mughal Prince, Dara Shikoh, sought to show that the monotheistic fundamentals of both Hinduism and Islam were capable of mingling together. His work, entitled *Majma - ul - Bahrain* (Mingling of Two Oceans), was based on inquiries into authoritative texts such as the *Upanishads* and the Sufi work *Gulshan Raz*. It was written in a philosophical vein, but yet another important work of the seventeenth century, the *Dabistan - l Mazahib* of Mushin Fani, clearly exhibited the historical and comparative method. This work, translated as *The Dabistan or School of Manners. The Religious Beliefs, Observances, Philosophical Opinions and Social Customs of the East* by David Shea and Anthony Troyer (Washington, 1901) treated the major faiths and sects of India comprehensively.

The work of the British Orientalists on the ‘great traditions’ of Hinduism and Islam resulted in the codification of ‘Hindoo law’ and ‘Anglo Muhammadan law’, but at least one major Orientalist, H.H. Wilson, pushed his researches into areas beyond the orthodox religious traditions. His ‘Sketch of the Religious Sects of the Hindus’, published in *Asiatic Researches* (Vol. 16, 1828, Vol.17, 1832), recorded the history of various *bhakti* sects, including obscure ones. Following Wilson, the Brahmo reformer Akshay Kumar Datta wrote in greater historical detail on a large number of unorthodox popularsects in his Bengali work, *Bharatbarshiya Upasak Sampraday* (2 parts, 1870 and 1883). It is the same popular cults, such as the Bauls, that Rabindranath Tagore brought into the limelight in his Hibbert lectures at Oxford, published as *The Religion of Man* (London, 1931). He drew upon the historical work of a colleague at Santiniketan whom he had asked to research the subject. The Santiniketan teacher, Kshitimohan Sen, wrote an important work in Bengali, entitled *Bharatiya Madhya Yuge Sadhanar Dhara* (1930), which he translated subsequently as *Medieval Mysticism in India* (London, c. 1935). Later on, Sashi Bhushan Dasgupta dwelt on the unorthodox sects of early colonial Bengal in *Obscure Religious Cults* (Calcutta, 1946). The development of the Sufi cult in Bengal was treated in a thesis of the 1930s by Muhammad Enamul Huq, who subsequently published it in independent

Bangladesh as *A History of Sufiism in Bengal* (Dacca, 1975). Yet another important work of the colonial period covering the history of an important sect was George Weston Briggs, *Gorakhnath and the Kanphata Yogis* (Calcutta, 1838). The Jogis were an unorthodox sect and were found from Bengal right up to the Punjab. The works of Wilson, Datta, Tagore and other established that there was, at the popular level, a number of heterodox sects, both Hindu and Muslim, which represented a radical syncretistic religious tradition going back to late antiquity. In other words conflict between antagonistic religions was not all there was to the religious tradition of the subcontinent.

Even as research into the obscure aspects of Indian religion made important advances in the colonial period, religious and social reform was changing the tradition in several aspects. This was a new area of investigation, and a pioneer in this field was J.N.Farquhar. A sympathetic Christian Missionary, he wrote a work entitled *Modern Religious Movements in India*. First published in 1919, it still remains an important reference work with first hand information. After 1947, the subject would become a major topic of research, but Farquhar's sympathetic account still retains its fresh quality.

29.3 POST-COLONIAL RESEARCH IN RELIGION

Research in both the orthodox and unorthodox aspects of the religions of the subcontinent made major advances after Partition, and there was a new focus on Islam in its specific South Asian context. Comprehensive surveys of Islam in India emerged from different perspectives: S.M. Ikram's *History of Muslim Civilization in India and Pakistan* (Lahore, 1961) and Muhammad Mujeeb's *The Indian Muslims* (London, 1967) presented the Pakistani and Indian perspectives respectively, while Anne-Marie Schimmel's *Islam in the Indian Subcontinent* (London, 1980) presented an external perspective on the subject. On the Sikh community, W.H. McLeod, a sympathetic historian from New Zealand, wrote the widely accepted and objective work, *The Evolution of the Sikh Community* (Delhi, 1975). The southern peninsula was the focus of new community studies such as Stephen Frederic Dale, *The Mappilas of Malabar 1498-1922: Islamic Society on the South Asian Frontier* (Oxford, 1980) and Susan Bayly, *Saints, Goddesses and Kings: Muslims and Kings: Muslims and Christians in South Indian Society 1700-1900* (Cambridge, 1989). These works showed the distinctive regional forms of Islam and Christianity. The syncretic local forms imported to Islam by popular Fakirs were imaginatively explored by Richard M. Eaton in *The Sufis of Bijapur: Social Roles of Sufis in Medieval India* (Princeton, 1978), and by Asim Roy in *The Islamic Syncretistic Tradition in Bengal* (Princeton, 1983).

The Research in the esoteric and popular forms of Hinduism made a major advance with Mircea Eliade's classic study for Yoga in French : *Le Yoga: Immortalité et*

Liberté (Paris, 1954). Other important books that explored forms of Hinduism outside the orthodox Brahmanical mould included : Edward C. Dimock, *The Place of Hidden Moon : Erotic Mysticism in the Sahajiya Vaishnva Cult of Bengal* (Chicago, 1966); Wendy Doniger O'Flahery, *Asceticism and Eroticism in the Mythology of Siva*(Oxford, 1973); Sanjukta Gupta, Dirk Jan Hoens and Teun Goudriaan, *Hindu Tantrism* (Leiden, 1979); and Charlotte Vaudeville, *A Weaver Named Kabir: Selected Verses with a Detailed Biographical and Historical Introduction* (Delhi, 1993).

The religious and social movements of reform in colonial India emerged as an important focus of research after independence. The movement of Islamic revival went back to the eighteenth century and was studied by S.A.A. Rizvi in *Shah Wali-Allah and His Times* (Canberra, 1980). The Brahmo movement in Bengal, one of the most important form movements in the nineteenth century, was treated by David Kopf in *The Brahmo Samaj and the Shaping of the Modern Indian Mind* (Princeton, 1979). The movement of reform in Islam in the nineteenth century was treated by Christian W. Trall in *Sayyid Ahmad Khan: a Reinterpretation of Muslim Theology* (New Delhi, 1978). More generally, themes of religious reform were treated in synthetic general works such as Charles H. Heimsath, *Indian Nationalism and Hindu Social Reform* (Princeton, 1966), and Kennath W. Jones *Socio-Religious Reform Movements in British India: The New Cambridge History of India 3.1*. (Cambridge, 1994). The movements of revival and reform fostered a new kind of politics of religious identity. In Pakistan, Ishtiaq Husain Qureishi claimed, in *The Muslim Community of the Indo-Pakistan Subcontinent 610-1947: A Brief Analysis* (The Hague, 1962), that the Muslims had always constituted a separate nation in the subcontinent. Religion tended to become a matter of politics in the twentieth century historiography.

29.4 THE STUDY OF INDIAN CULTURE

The colonial period produced important studies of Indian culture, beginning with the Orientalists. Sir William Jones discovered the Indo-European language group and thus transformed notions of Indian culture. There was a keen Orientalist interest in Indian art, evident in such works as James Ferguson, *History of Indian and Eastern Architecture* (1876). The Orientalists were sometimes unjustly critical of early Indian historiographical efforts in this direction, as is evident in Ferguson's criticisms of Rajendralal Mitra's highly original study of the temples of Orissa in *The Antiquities of Orissa* (1868-69). This did not stop Indian intellectuals and in due course Ghulam Yazdani wrote a wonderful account of Ajanta paintings entitled *Ajanta* (1930). Around this time Indian historians exhibited an interest in the culture of people as distinct from the chronicles of the Kings. Muhammad Habib wrote *Hazrat Amir Khusrau of Delhi* in 1927, and K.M. Ashraf wrote an account of popular culture during the Delhi Sultanate in *Life and Condition of the People of Hindustan* (1935).

By this time English education had brought about an important change in the mentality of the middle class, a theme explored by the American intellectual B.T. McCully in *English Education and the Origins of Indian Nationalism* (1940). Indian intellectuals themselves studied the impact of the West on the new vernacular literatures, for instance, Sushil Kumar De, *Bengali Literature in the Nineteenth Century* (1919), and Sayyid Abdul Latif, *The Influence of English Literature on Urdu Literature* (1924). One of the intellectual achievements of this time was Surendranath Dasgupta's *History of Indian Philosophy*, 5 vols. (1922).

Independence and Partition brought a renewed interest in the subcontinent. The synthetic surveys of the time deserve mention: A.L. Basham, *The Wonder that Was India: A Survey of the History and Culture of the Indian Subcontinent before the Coming of the Muslims* (1954), and S.M. Ikram, *History of Muslim Civilization in India and Pakistan* (Lahore, 1961). In recent years, the Western cultural impact has been studied in new and sophisticated ways, for instance, Meenakshi Mukherjee, *Realism and Reality: The Novel and Society in India* (New Delhi, 1985), and Partha Mitter, *Art and Nationalism in Colonial India* (Cambridge, 1994). Such works explore the emergence of modern Indian culture from fresh perspectives and have broadened our understanding of the process dubbed the Indian Awakening. The phenomenon is now studied from a more critical angle of vision and culture is now more closely related to the emerging forms of consciousness and society.

29.5 CULTURE STUDIES AND RELIGIOUS IDENTITIES

Post-modernism, colonial discourse analysis and culture studies have focused attention on the question of religious and cultural identities in Indian history. Post-colonial theory questions such identities and argues that they are 'constructed' by colonialism, nationalism and other motivated forces. The validity of religious identities, especially Hinduism, has been doubted by the post-colonial deconstructionists. Poststructuralist literary criticism, deriving from such intellectuals as Jacques Derrida and Edward Said, has been a key factor in such deconstructionism.

The deconstructionists contend that the British Orientalists constructed Hinduism out of diverse religious practices, and that even Islam in British India was too diverse to be the basis of one Muslim community across the subcontinent. As an instance of Orientalism and the fictitious identities it created, the post-colonial critics point to such works as Sir Monier Monier-Williams's *Hinduism* (1877). He spoke of Hinduism as one religion despite its many sects because of the fact that there was 'only one sacred language and only one sacred literature, accepted and revered by all adherents of Hinduism alike.' Indian nationalists, too, as for instance K.M. Sen, who wrote the standard work *Hinduism* (Penguin, 1961), are thought to have followed in the footsteps of the Orientalists in relating the history of a non-existent single religion.

In a typically post-modernist vein, Brian Smith contended in *Reflections on Resemblance, Ritual and Religion* (New York, 1989): ‘Just who invented “Hinduism” first is a matter of scholarly debate. Almost everyone agrees that it was not the Hindus.’ In his opinion it was the British who did this in the early part of the nineteenth century, ‘to create and control’ a diverse body of people. This made it possible to speak of ‘a religion when before there was none or, at best, many.’ Among other works which have dwelt on the constructed nature of religious boundaries in India may be mentioned Harjot S. Oberoi, *The Construction of Religious Boundaries: Culture, Identity and Diversity in the Sikh Tradition* (Chicago, 1994); and Vasudha Dalmia and Heinrich von Stietencron (eds.), *Representing Hinduism: the Construction of Religious Traditions and National Identity* (New Delhi, 1995). Barbara Metcalf has argued, for her part, that identities such as the ‘Indian Muslims’ are neither primary, nor of long standing, and are, in fact, the products of colonial history (Barbara Daly Metcalf, *Perfecting Women: Maulana Ashraf Ali Jhanawi’s Bihishti Zewar* (Delhi, 1992). In an article entitled ‘Imagining Community: Polemical Debates in Colonial India’, she goes so far as to say that ‘India’, ‘Hindus’ and ‘Muslims’ are not just imagined communities, they are, in her view, ‘imaginary communities’ (in Kenneth W. Jones, ed., *Religious Controversy in British India: Dialogues in South Asian Languages*, Albany, NY, 1992).

Not all historians accept these arguments, and they have continued to write religious, cultural and social history in terms that imply the real existence of such communities from pre-colonial times. As instances of this contrary view may be cited: C.A. Bayly, ‘The Pre-history of “Communalism”? Religious Conflict in India, 1700-1860’ (*Modern Asian Studies*, Vol.19, 1985); Cynthia Talbot, ‘Inscribing the Other, Inscribing the Self: Hindu-Muslim Identities in Pre-colonial India’ (*Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 37, 1995); Rafiuddin Ahmed, *The Bengal Muslims 1871-1906: a Quest for Identity* (Oxford, 1981); Stephen Dale, *The Mappilas of Malabar 1498- 1922: Islamic Society on the South Asian Frontier* (Oxford, 1986); Richard M. Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier 1204-1706* (Delhi, 1994); David Lorenzon (ed.), *Bhakti Religion in North India: Community Identity and Political Action* (Albany, NY, 1995). Not surprisingly, the disagreements among the scholars have given rise to a wide-ranging controversy on the nature of identities in colonial and pre-colonial India, and on the question whether patriotism and communalism have deep roots in Indian history. The development of the controversy may be followed through the following works: Gyanendra Pandey, *The Construction of Communalism in Colonial North India* (Delhi, 1990); C.A. Bayly, *The Origins of Nationality in South Asia: Patriotism and Ethical Government in the Making of Modern India* (Delhi, 1998); Brajadulal Chattopadhyaya, *Representing the Other? Sanskrit Sources and the Muslims* (New Delhi, 1998); Rajat Kanta Ray, *The Felt Community: Commonalty and Mentality before the Emergence of Indian Nationalism* (New Delhi, 1003). Whereas Pandey and Chattopadhyaya have

emphasised the construed nature of the identities in Indian Society, Bayly and Ray have seen religious and patriotic loyalties in old India as more real.

A solid body of research in religious and cultural history has emphasised that identities and loyalties in Indian society must not be seen as hostile and monolithic blocs. Richard Eaton's work on the Sufis of Bijapur and Asim Roy's work on the Islamic syncretistic tradition in medieval Bengal, referred to earlier, have brought out the very large extent to which Islam in the subcontinent was shaped by syncretic interaction with the Hindu religion. The Bhakti movement, which also made an extremely significant contribution to the syncretic tradition, has been studied, among other works, in Karine Schoemer and W.H. McLeod (eds.), *The Sants: Studies in a Devotional Tradition of India* (Delhi, 1987) and Friedhelm Hardy, *Viraha-Bhakti: the Early History of Krishna Devotion in South India* (Delhi, 1983). Apart from the spiritual Sufi and Bhakti movements, there was a persistent *Lokayata* tradition, with a materialistic and popular orientation, which worked against the hardening of religious identities into antagonistic blocs. This significant tradition is explored in D.P. Chattopadhyaya, *Lokayata: a Study in Ancient Indian Materialism* (New Delhi, 1959). The continuation of this materialistic tradition among the Bauls of Bengal, who set aside the Hindu-Muslim divide as false spiritualism, has been traced to recent times by Jeanne Openshaw in *Seeking Bauls of Bengal* (Cambridge, 2002). Such movements were more radical in nature than the Sufi and Bhakti movements and they undermined gender, religious, caste and class distinctions even more thoroughly. Miranda Shaw, in her *Passionate Enlightenment: Women in Tantric Buddhism* (Princeton, 1994), has dwelt on this radical strand, too. The atheistic strand in the Indian religious tradition, it has been demonstrated, has tended to subvert the existing distinctions in Indian society.

Notwithstanding all this, modern India has experienced a distinct tendency towards religious polarisation. Peter van der Veer has dwelt on this theme in *Religious Nationalism: Hindus and Muslims in India* (Berkeley, 1994). The public life of the emerging nation(s) has been influenced to a large extent by religious controversy.

29.6 MENTALITY AND HISTORY OF CULTURE

Cultural history has been enriched by the study of *mentalite* or mentality, a term coined by the *Annales* School of Historians in France. This goes beyond conventional intellectual history and explores the popular attitudes and subconscious categories of thought. A related area of research, also exploring the mind, is psycho-history, which seeks to uncover the unconscious level of the mind with the help of Sigmund Freud's technique of psycho-analysis. This kind of history is not concerned with the conscious emotions of the individual or the group. Psycho-history probes repressed impulses rather than open sentiments. The study of emotion in cultural history, including conscious sentiment, is a wider field that may be called emotional history.

Historical studies of mentality in India's culture and civilisation have come to embrace these different strands of history. They include popular attitudes and symbols of thought, unconscious mental processes, and the history of culturally shaped sentiments and emotions.

At the same time, intellectual history continues to flourish. An important study of the interaction of European and Indian thought from the pre-colonial period onwards is Wilhelm Halbfass, *India and Europe : an Essay in Understanding* (Albany, New York, 1988). There is also a huge literature on how the West affected the mind and thought of India in the colonial period. This keen interest among scholars is reflected in such works as Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse?* (Delhi, 1986). This is a Subalternist work by a political scientist. Another work is Tapan Raychaudhuri, *Europe Reconsidered: Perceptions of the West in Nineteenth-Century Bengal* (New Delhi, 1988). This is a study of the thought of Bhudev Mukhopadhyay, Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay and Swami Vivekananda by an eminent liberal historian.

Studies of mentality going beyond strict intellectual history began to appear from around the 1970s. The wide range of works include: David Kopf, *The Brahma Samaj and the Shaping of the Modern Indian Mind* (Princeton, 1979); Kenneth Ballhatchet, *Race, Sex and Class under the Raj* (New York, 1980); Judith Walsh, *Growing up in British India* (New York 1983); Carol Breckenridge and Peter van der Veer (eds), *Orientalism and the Postcolonial Predicament: Perspectives on South Asia* (Philadelphia, 1983); Mrinalini Sinha, *Colonial Masculinity: the 'Manly Englishman' and the 'Effeminate Bengali' in the Late Nineteenth Century* (Manchester, 1995); Rajat Kanta Ray (ed.), *Mind, Body and Society: Life and Mentality in Colonial Bengal* (Calcutta, 1996); Sumit Sarkar, *Writing Social History* (Delhi, 1997); and Sudipta Kaviraj, *The Unhappy Consciousness: Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay and the Formation of a Nationalist Discourse in India* (Delhi, 1998). What these works have done is to bring out some of the tensions embedded in the emerging mental formation during the colonial period.

Psycho-history, with its use of insights from Freudian psycho-analysis, is a more technical and closely focused exercise. In relation to India, it may be said to have started off with the famous psycho-analyst Erik Erikson's *Gandhi's Truth: On the Origins of Militant Non-violence* (New York, 1968). In India, Sudhir Kakkar, a practising psycho-analyst, has specialised in this kind of history, and has written such works as *Intimate Relations: Exploring Indian Sexuality* (Chicago, 1989). Another writer who has made psycho-history his field and has demonstrated its relevance to Indian culture is Ashis Nandy. He has explored the colonial impact on the unconscious mind in *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism* (Delhi, 1983). The discipline of psycho-history, established by Erikson, is now applied to specific subjects by non-specialists. This is especially notable in the subjects of religion, eros and sexuality. For instance, here are two highly

controversial psycho-analytical studies of Ramakrishna Paramhansa's mind and life: Jeffrey J. Kripal, *Kali's Child: The Mystical and the Erotic in the Life and Teachings of Ramakrishna* (Chicago, 1995); and Narasingha P. Sil, *Ramakrishna Revisited: A New Biography* (Lanham, Md, USA, 1998). In their studies of religion and culture, they have focused on the psychosexuality of the saint. Psycho-analysis is so well-established in India from the time of Freud himself that there are now histories of it. The Austrian author Christiane Hartnack has written *Psychoanalysis in Colonial India* (New Delhi, 2001), where she examines the birth and growth of psycho-analysis in India from the angle of culture theory.

As opposed to the psycho-analysts and psycho-historians, there is a group who call themselves 'social constructionists' (of post-modernist persuasion), who approach emotion from the angle of poststructural anthropology, critical theory and culture studies. They hold that emotion is totally relative to culture and have rejected Freud. In relation to Indian society, we may mention here Owen M. Lynch (ed.), *Divine Passions: the Social Construction of Emotion in India* (Delhi, 1990). Lynch argues that in India the conception of emotions and emotional life itself differ so radically from what prevails in the West that Westerners may never understand 'an Other, such as India.' This position has been rejected by some historians who, while locating emotion in primary impulses, trace its impact on culture as a real factor. Their treatment of emotion in history is broader than that of the psycho-historians in the sense that they explore not merely unconscious emotion, but also conscious sentiment. This newly emerging emotional history may be seen in Tapan Raychaudhuri, *Perceptions, Emotions, Sensibilities: Essays on India's Colonial and Post-Colonial Experiences* (New Delhi, 1999); and Rajat Kanta Ray, *Exploring Emotional History: Gender, Mentality and Literature in the Indian Awakening* (New Delhi, 2001).

29.7 SUMMARY

Contending schools, such as psycho-history, social constructionism, history of *mentalite*, emotional history, and so on, have added many strands to the historical explorations of religion, culture and mentality in India. The history of the mind is no longer simply the old intellectual history. The study of culture, religion and the mind, relating them to their broader contemporaneous societal context, has enriched Indian history. This has broadened it out beyond the sort of historiography that at one time equated general history with the history of the state alone. In the process, intellectual history itself has been transformed. It is no longer confined simply to the ideas of the elite. The perceived identities and unconscious symbols of the mass of the population, and the emotional drives in whole societies, are being taken into consideration by historians.

29.8 EXERCISES

- 1) Discuss recent trend of using the history of mentality for the study of Indian culture.
- 2) Write a detailed note on the historical writings on Indian religion and culture.

UNIT 30 : ENVIRONMENT, SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

Structure

- 30.1 Introduction
- 30.2 Early Historiography
- 30.3 Recent Historiography
- 30.4 Role of Technology in Modern History
- 30.5 Summary
- 30.6 Exercises

30.1 INTRODUCTION

In the history and the historiography of modern India, science, technology and environment are closely related subjects. Massive demographic change, aided by science and technology, has changed the landscape beyond recognition. Neither Babar nor Warren Hastings would be able to tolerate the present aspect of the country. The transformation has recently attracted the attention of historians of India. It is not that technology, science and ecology as fundamental factors in Indian history escaped the notice of the past generations of historians. Nevertheless, it is only in the 1990s that a fair number of historians in India took these themes up as independent topics of research. However, there is no agreement among them about the impact of science and technology on the welfare of the population and the climate of the country. Their disagreements reflect deep divisions within public opinion, and in the government and politics of the country. There is science lobby, an economics and planning lobby, and an environment lobby. There are cries of coming disaster, and hot denials that there is cause for alarm. It is said that because of greenhouse effect of global industrialisation, the glaciers from which our rivers descend are receding fast. Historians have been sensitised to the problems of science and environment by these public debates. From the 1990s, independent historical monographs on these subjects have begun to appear. Even before that, however, certain historical questions had figured in their discussions as regards science and technology : was modern science and technology distorted by the phenomenon of colonial rule? What were the state of the sciences and the level of technology before the establishment of British supremacy? Such questions have been renewed recently.

30.2 EARLY HISTORIOGRAPHY

The British rule over India found a moral justification for itself by virtue of the benefits of reason and modern science it had extended to the colony. The British view of Indian civilisation was that it was long on religion and short on science. Seven centuries ago, early Muslim visitors to the country had a different view of the civilisation then prevailing in the land. Al Beruni gave equal and serious attention to both the religion and science of Hind around 1030. The Muslims themselves brought with them several new technical products, such as paper and the Persian wheel. Europe, which at that time borrowed several techniques from China and the Islamic world, later strode ahead in course of the scientific revolution of the seventeenth century and the industrial revolution in the eighteenth century. This constituted, upon the British conquest of India, the ground for the European claim of scientific and civilisational superiority. The Indian scientists who emerged during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in the colleges and universities of British India did not deny the positive role the British had played in bringing modern science to India. At the same time, they maintained that India had an ancient scientific tradition. This dual attitude is reflected in the work of the Chemistry Professor of the Presidency College of Bengal, Dr. P.C. Ray, who, besides making major chemical discoveries in the field of nitrates, wrote a work on *The History of Hindu Chemistry*. Published in two volumes in 1902 and 1908, this was a world-renowned scientist's historically substantiated refutation of the imperialist idea of science as the achievement of Western enlightened thought alone. That science had multicivilisational origins would be argued by many other historians in the future, including Joseph Needham of *Science and Civilization in China*.

Within the leadership of the nationalist movement in India, two distinct attitudes crystallised at about this time as regards modern science and its historical effect on Indian civilisation. Mohan Das Karamchand Gandhi denounced railways, lawyers and doctors, and declared machinery to be a 'great sin'. He said in *Hind Swaraj* (1990) : 'It is machinery that has impoverished India'. Jawaharlal Nehru, his disciple, could not agree with this view of the matter. In a tract entitled *The Unity of India* (1941), he declared: 'Politics led me to economics, and this led me inevitably to science and the scientific approach to all our problems of hunger and poverty.' As Prime Minister he transformed the landscape of India by means of the Five Year Plans, the great dams and the steel plants. Modern day radical environmental historians invoke Gandhi rather than Nehru in the debate about science, technology and the ecological question.

In the later colonial period, an ecological query emerged: how far had the face of the country changed over time? The economist Radhakamal Mukherjee, who wrote a work on *Social Ecology* (London, 1942) in this period, examined historical evidence of riverine and ecological change in an interesting work entitled *The Changing face of Bengal: a Study in Riverine Economy* (Calcutta, 1938). Nor was he the first to record

ecological evidence of change. Even in the early nineteenth century, the British official D. Butter, in a report entitled *An Outline of the Topography and Statistics of the Southern Districts of Oudh* (Calcutta, 1839), had reported the ‘unremitting advance’ of the hot summer wind (*loo*) in recent decades. It may be noted that the northern Gangetic plains, the area he reported on, had experienced large-scale deforestation from the Mughal period onwards. But in the other areas, agriculture was still considerably mixed with jungle in the early nineteenth century, a fact commented on, for instance, by James Taylor in the *A Sketch of the Topography and Statistics of Dacca* (Calcutta, 1840). Colonial officials showed an interest in historical geography, and a pioneering work in this respect was Alexander Cunningham, *The Ancient Geography of India* (London, 1871). Later Jadunath Sarkar wrote *The India of Aurangzeb (Topography, Statistics and Road)*, (Calcutta, 1901) Such works recorded evidence that even before modern science and technology intervened, demographic and commercial factors had been changing the face of the country over time. It is only recently, however, that this issue has been explored by historians in a self conscious ecological manner.

30.3 RECENT HISTORIOGRAPHY

In the new historical studies of science, technology and environment that emerged in the 1990s several key themes and questions provided a sophisticated framework of discussion. What was the politics of science and technology? Were they the means of imperial domination and / or national reconstruction? What was the technological impact upon the economic organisation of life – to enrich or impoverish? What was the popular reception of science – acceptance or resistance? What was the impact of ecological change upon the question of welfare – partially beneficial or wholly negative?

Commentaries on recent historical writings have pointed out that the above-mentioned concerns were not entirely new. In fact, the same issues had implicitly formed a part of imperial, nationalist and popular discussions and sayings. Let us take a few instances. For one, imperial planners who laid down the railways, among them Bartle Frere of Bombay in 1863 proclaimed clearly that the railways would quadruple the British Military strength in India. For another, one strand of nationalist opinion, represented by Gandhi in 1908, declared openly: ‘Railways, lawyers and doctors have impoverished the country, so much so that, if we do not wake up in time, we shall be ruined.’ To take a third and rather interesting instance, there had been attempts to study the popular response to the innovations of the modern age among the nineteenth century folk songs collected by William Crooke. One was on the train and it ran as follows: ‘Eating no corn, drinking water / by the force of steam it goes / it goes on no plain road, on rods of iron it goes / In front of the engines, behind the cars, *bhak, bhak* they go.’ The attitude reflects neither approval nor rejection, just a strange new addition accepted as part of the landscape, it has been argued. What was new about

the new historiography was that it dealt with all these questions in a connected way, in analytical frame. Earlier discussions of science and technology had not always shown good, critical sense. On the one hand, patriotic Indians sought to upstage Western Science and Technology by claiming to have discovered everything in the Vedas. On the other hand, colonial statements on scientific and technological progress were simply and approvingly reproduced by some historians without examining the motives behind those statements.

Among recent works on science and technology which have all focused in one way or the other on the question of power and politics may be mentioned Dipak Kumar, *Science and The Raj* (New Delhi, 1995); David Arnold, *Colonizing the Body: State Medicine and Epidemic Disease in Nineteenth Century India* (Berkeley, 1993), Gyan Prakash, *Another Reason : Science and The Imagination of Modern India* (Princeton, 1999); David Arnold, *Science. Technology and Medicine in Colonial India* (Cambridge, 2000). Arnold and Prakash, both belonging to the Subalternist school, regarded science as an integral part of the political sphere. Arnold brought science under the technique of colonial discourse analysis; Prakash on the other hand, treated science as part of the discourse of imagining the nation as a modern, rational body of people. Both saw the new technology as a means of forging ‘a link between space and the state’ (Prakash, *Another Reason*), and science, therefore, as very much a matter of power and domination. In the name of science, the colonial administration pursued policies of domination biased towards maintaining imperial authority and not the welfare of the colonised. In the name of science again, the nationalist movement and the Indian scientists sympathetic to that movement sought an alternative centre of power, an imagined community called the nation that would liberate itself by means of the modern spirit of scientific rationality. As for the colonised themselves (the so-called subalterns), the subalternists speculated that popular resistance to colonial domination might arise from the people’s mental association of railways and telegraphs with calamities such as famines and epidemics. There emerged historical studies of the mortality caused by plague, malaria, small-pox, cholera and the influenza epidemic of 1918; the political unrest and administrative chaos caused by disease; and the popular response to harsh colonial public health policies.

Ecological history, which emerged as a separate branch of history in the 1990s, was a response to the world-wide environmental movement. In 1987, C.A. Bayly declared in *Indian Society and the Making of the British Empire, New Cambridge History of India, Vol II*, (Cambridge, 1987): ‘Ecological change in India is the coming subject, but no overview has appeared.’ Bayly himself concluded that the hundred years following 1780 witnessed ‘the beginnings of extensive deforestation in the subcontinent. The first work of the new ecological history, Ramchandra Guha’s *The Unquiet Woods: Ecological Change and Peasant Resistance in the Himalaya* (Delhi, 1991), concerned itself with the Sublternist theme of domination and resistance rather than with the actual tracking of environmental change over the long duration. It was a study of the emergence of a popular movement in the Himalayan foothills against the

commercial exploitation of the forest resources of the Himalayas. The next work, Ramchandra Guha and Madhav Gadgil's *This Fissured Land: an Ecological History of India* (Delhi, 1992), was wider in scope, and it took the following position: 'In India the ongoing struggle between the peasant and industrial modes of resource use has come in two stages: colonial and post-colonial. It has left in its wake a fissured land, ecologically and socially fragmented beyond belief and, to some observers, beyond repair.' Other works, which focused on conservation and the adverse ecological consequences of colonial policies, included Richard H. Grove, *Green Imperialism : Colonial Expansion, Tropical Island Edens, and the Origins of Environmentalism 1600 – 1860* (Cambridge, 1994) and Mahesh Rangarajan, *Fencing the Forest: Conservation and Ecological Change in India's Central Provinces 1860-1914* (New Delhi, 1996). The loss of the rights of the forest-dwellers was a principal theme of ecological history, as was the development of resistance and of efforts at conservation.

More conventional economic histories had already focused on the impact of colonial rule on the environment. The advance of the agricultural frontier and irrigation canals, with the attendant problems of salination, water-logging and spread of disease, were studied, among others, by Elizabeth Whitcombe, *Agrarian Conditions in Northern India: the United Provinces under British Rule, 1860-1900* (Berkeley, 1972); Ian Stone, *Canal Irrigation in British India: Perspectives on Technological Change in a Peasant Economy* (Cambridge, 1984); and M. Mufakharul Islam, *Irrigation, Agriculture and the Raj: Punjab 1887-1947* (New Delhi, 1997). It emerged that the roads and canals interrupted the natural watercourses, yet on balance it could not be denied that irrigation increased agricultural productivity. A study of the impact of the railways, by Robert Varady among others, shows that the railways depleted the Himalayan timber region, wiped out the remaining jungles on the plains, and could carry on only because of the advent of cheap coal. Roads and railways formed disease-laden puddles, spread epidemics and speeded up soil erosion. Nevertheless, economic historians such as John Hurd and Mukul Mukherjee, have concluded that the railways promoted internal trade, reduced seasonal fluctuations and inter-market price differentials for grain and cotton, and integrated the market in bulk commodities.

Economic historians, rather than ecological historians, have mapped the long-term recession of forest and pasture under the onslaught of agriculture in Indian history. Shireen Moosvi, in her *Man and Nature in the Mughal Era* (Symposium paper, Indian History Congress, 1993), established that cultivation doubled between 1601 and 1909 at the expense of pasture and waste in Northern India.

A balanced picture emerges when we take together the work of the mainstream economic historians and the new historians of science, technology and environment. New dimensions of history have emerged, the harmful effects of modern science and

technology on environment have been highlighted, yet the benefits have also been stressed.

30.4 ROLE OF TECHNOLOGY IN MODERN HISTORY

The emergence of environmental history has induced historians to rethink the role of science and technology in modern Indian history. This is because environmental historians have drawn attention to the manner in which technological progress has affected the natural environment, sometimes quite adversely in certain areas, during the colonial and post-colonial periods. The earlier uncritical attitudes to technological progress have given way to a more critical treatment of the theme of science and technology. British colonial historians were quite certain that British rule in India had worked to the betterment of the lot of the Indians through the introduction of science and technology. They were also convinced that Indians, at least initially, were resistant to the radical technical innovations such as railways and telegraph. This formed part of J.H. Kaye's explanation of the revolt of 1857 in his famous book, *A History of the Sepoy War in India* (London, 1867). The Hindu priesthood, said Kaye, were confounded by the railways cars, which travelled, without horses or bullocks, at the rate of thirty miles an hour, and the electric wires, which in a few minutes carried a message across a whole province. The prodigious triumphs over time and space achieved by these 'fire carriages' and 'lightning posts' put to shame the wisdom of the Brahmans and, in his view, produced a reaction resulting in the revolt. The British colonial view was that, after the suppression of the revolt, there was genuine progress brought about by the improvements in technology, communications and transport. In the well-known book *Modern India and the West: a Study of the Interactions of their Civilizations* (London, 1941), the editor, L.S.S.O' Malley, who was a colonial official, devoted a whole chapter to 'Mechanism and Transport'. In this chapter he surveyed the new forms of communication, including railways, broadcasting and films, and his estimation of the consequences for India were clearly positive.

It took some time after Independence for studies of technology to acquire an analytical historical perspective. A preliminary venture in this direction was a series of lectures by leading scientists and technical educators at the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, edited by B.R. Nanda as *Science and Technology in India* (New Delhi, 1977). Here, too, the impact was judged in somewhat uncritically positive terms, with an emphasis on the progressive leadership of Jawaharlal Nehru. Technology was treated in such preliminary works as part of the history of science. It took some time to give more complex and critical attention to technological history on its own. Many historians in the West continued to emphasise the progress brought about by technology transfer from the West to non-Western societies. Daniel R. Headrick's *The Tentacles of Progress: Technology Transfer in the Age of Imperialism, 1850-1940* (New York, 1988) dwelt on the transfer of a range of new technologies, such as railways, botany, urban infrastructures, metallurgy, technical

education, etc., with special attention to India. A more critical assessment for India specifically was made in Roy McLeod and Dipak Kumar (eds.), *Technology and the Raj* (New Delhi, 1995). An important article in this collection, 'The Building of India's Railways: the Application of Western Technology in the Colonial Periphery', by Ian Derbyshire, pointed out that railway development in India, unlike UK, secured few direct, 'backward linkage' benefits. Labour market conditions discouraged greater mechanisation. Technical development remained 'colonial-dependent'. In comparative terms, India lagged behind not only the USA, but also Russia, where innovation in constructional, equipment and operational spheres was conspicuously greater.

Backward linkage effects relate to the stimulation of activities in the economy that ensure supply to a new line of production. Forward linkage effects, on the other hand, mean the stimulation of demand for other products resulting from the new product. In the case of railway construction in India, a forward linkage benefit might have come about with the construction of locomotives. This hardly happened during the colonial period on an appreciable scale. In a pioneering article entitled 'Great Britain and the Supply of Railway Locomotives in India: a Case Study of "Economic Imperialism"', first published in *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* (October, 1965), F. Lehmann calculated that during the entire period of British rule in India, not more than 700 locomotives were built in the country, despite the vast railway network that existed by 1947. All the other locomotives came from abroad, and, predictably, most were constructed in Great Britain. Had the railway authorities gone in for building locomotives in India on a bigger scale, this might have laid the basis of a heavy engineering industry before Independence. As it happened, such a development had to await the coming of the Nehru era. One noted author who analysed the limited economic stimulus resulting from colonial technological innovation was Daniel Thorner. He noted the limited effect of colonial railway and steamship enterprise on India's capital market in *Investment in Empire: British Railway and Steam Shipping Enterprise in India 1825-1849* (Philadelphia, 1950). In yet another notable contribution entitled 'The Pattern of Railway Development in India' first published in *Far Eastern Quarterly* (1955), he went even further, and noted: 'India alone of the countries with great railway networks is unindustrialized.'

It may be noted that such critical observations of the historical role of the transfer of science and technology from Britain to India were still formulated in economic rather than environmental terms. The emergence of environmental history added a new dimension to the existing criticism of the role of technology and science. Both the economic and environmental arguments have been brought together by Ian J. Kerr, the editor of an important anthology of articles on the railroads entitled *Railways in Modern India* (New Delhi, 2001). Kerr has faithfully included the criticisms of the railway network by both the new environmental historians and the more conventional economic historians. At the same time, he has not forgotten to emphasise the positive benefits of railways in particular and technology in general. One aspect of science and

technology is the import of Western medicine in India. Here, too, recent research has highlighted not merely the positive effects, but also some of the negative developments. Over all, however, the new research, even when at its most critical (as in the works of David Arnold referred to above), has still not dislodged the impression that technology brought important benefits. Without science, technology and modern medicine, India's vast and growing population would have been more (and not less) vulnerable to famines and epidemics.

30.5 SUMMARY

The progress of research has established the history of science, technology and ecology as viable branches of the discipline of history. This has added new and important dimensions to general history. At the same time, detailed research has demonstrated the close inter-relationship between the histories of science, technology and environment. All this has altered the shape of history.

30.6 EXERCISES

- 1) Write a note on the role of technology in modern history.
- 2) What are the views of the nationalists on the nature and role of modern technology?
- 3) Discuss some of the historical works on science and technology.