
UNIT 4 DALIT HISTORIOGRAPHY

Contents

- 4.0 Objectives
- 4.1 Introduction
- 4.2 Definition and Scope of Historiography
- 4.3 Subaltern Historiography
- 4.4 Emergence of Alternative Historiographies
- 4.5 Contributions of Dr B. Ambedkar to an Alternative Dalit Historiography
- 4.6 Rationality, Moral and Community as Principles of Dalit Historiography
- 4.7 Historiographical Relevance of Caste and Religion
- 4.8 Major Thrusts of Dalit Alternative Historiography
- 4.9 Foucault's Deployment of Nietzschean Genealogy as a Tool of Dalit Historiography
- 4.10 Pregnant Time and Pregnant Space as Symbols of History of the Dalits
- 4.11 Historiography as Re-Membering the Lack
- 4.12 Remembering Identity and Agency
- 4.13 Celebrating the Dalit Agency in the Choice of Alternative Religiosities
- 4.14 Overcoming the Eclipse of the Subaltern Contribution to Political Economy
- 4.15 Let Us Sum Up
- 4.16 Key Words
- 4.17 Further Readings and References
- 4.18 Answers to Check Your Progress

4.0 OBJECTIVES

This section intends:

- to introduce the students to the discipline of Historiography and the different approaches to Historiography.
- to present an overview of the Historiographies, which have been embraced by different Schools of History in approaching the history of our nation.
- to help the students to see how Dalit Historiography can be tool of empowerment for the Dalits, in its significant thrust, goals and concerns.
- to understand how and why history and historiography, have of late, become sites of contestation of power.

4.1 INTRODUCTION

Among the many functions the study of the past performs, its ability to create a consciousness of the common cultural and political heritage, and thus to create the ability to imagine that the nation is very important. Among the many factors that enable the imagination, history has a central role. During the last few decades, history, as a discipline among the social sciences, has gone through a phase of intense soul-searching and self-critique. This process of self-engagement was

triggered off by the hermeneutical turn of the sciences and facilitated by the new epistemological frameworks, created by the forces of Post-colonialism and Post-Modernism. Historiography is one of the most contested sites, in terms of equations of power-relationships and identity-politics. Consequently, various historiographies are in emergence. History, which had hitherto been playing the role of a ‘fact-finding’ mistress, sees itself instrumentalized, constructed and de-constructed by the various dominant and subaltern communities. It is imperative that the students come to know the importance of historiography and its role in the reimagination and the reinvention of the Nation, whether it is in the guise of rewriting of the textbooks of history, the demand for smaller states or attempts at homogenization of pluralistic and multicultural identities, through the tool of cultural nationalism.

4.2 DEFINITION AND SCOPE OF HISTORIOGRAPHY

Historiography is the history of history, the aspect of history and of semiotics that considers how knowledge of the past, either recent or distant, is obtained and transmitted. Formally, historiography examines the writing of history, the use of historical methods, drawing upon authorship, sources, interpretation, style, bias, and the reader. Moreover, historiography also denotes a body of historical work. Scholars discuss historiography topically, i.e. the “historiography of Catholicism”, the “historiography of China”, etc., and the approaches and genres include oral history and social history. Beginning in the nineteenth century, at the ascent of academic history, a corpus of historiography literature developed, including *What is History?* (1961), by E. H. Carr, and *Metahistory* (1973), by Hayden White.

Historiography is predicated on the assumption that important questions arise concerning the reliability of the knowledge of the past produced by historian and whether history is a science or an art. It is concerned with the study of the writing of history with particular reference to the style of historical writing, the methods of interpretation and the tools of investigation employed. It can also refer to a specific a body of historical writing (for example, ‘medieval historiography during the 1960s’ meaning ‘medieval history written during the 1960s’). Historical method comprises the techniques and guidelines by which historians use primary sources and other evidences to research and then to write history. Historiography takes into account of the processes by which, history as a mere archival record grows into history as conscious cultivation and construction of his/her/their stories, and a simultaneous critique of this very process of constructing histories. Issues engaged by critical historiography include:

What constitutes a historical “event”? In what modes does a historian write and produce statements of ‘truth’ and ‘fact’? How does the medium (novel, textbook, film, theatre, comic) through which historical information is conveyed influence its meaning? What inherent epistemological problems does archive-based history possess? How do historians establish their own objectivity or come to terms with their own subjectivity? What is the relationship between historical theory and historical practice? What is the “goal” of history? What does history teach us?

4.3 SUBALTERN HISTORIOGRAPHY

The subaltern history was conceived as an alternative to all existing historiographies. Dismissing all of them as elitist in character, the subaltern history set out to recover the voice of the subaltern, a social group identified as representing the ‘demographic difference between the total Indian population and all those who are described as the elite’. The people’s history – the history of the oppressed and the exploited – was nothing new in Indian historiography; the concern of the Marxist historians has been precisely that. What could have distinguished the subaltern history from the earlier genres of people’s history was a qualitative change in its methodology by ushering in a history from below. This however was not to be, as most of the essays collected in the series failed to recover the voice of the marginalised by using unconventional sources drawn from Indian languages. In fact, two major marginalised groups in Indian society, the Dalits and women, hardly appeared in these studies. Moreover, despite the obvious inspiration from the writings of Antonio Gramsci, the Italian Marxist theoretician, the entire project lacked theoretical coherence and conceptual precision. It is therefore not surprising that the project soon took a linguistic turn, and lost much of its radical rhetoric.

4.4 EMERGENCE OF ALTERNATIVE HISTORIOGRAPHIES

Today, we stand particularly before the challenge of re-defining both nationalism and historiography in relation to the marginal peoples and groups. The question they raise is: *Whose nation? Whose history?* To be able to come to terms with these questions, we need to migrate to another level of experience in historiography, which has great potential for enduring unity and peace.

A positive trend in Indian historiography is the emergence of Dalit and women’s history. The former contests the social power of the upper castes and the latter the patriarchal authority of the male. The Indian historiography, whichever genre it belonged to, have been silent, either consciously or unconsciously, about the history of these groups. Ranajit Guha, in his introduction to the Subaltern studies has stated that the ‘history of Indian nationalism has been written up as a sort of spiritual biography of the Indian elite’. In fact the entire history of India has been written as the saga of the upper castes and the male heroes. The history of the Indian Renaissance, for instance, has been encapsulated in the socio-religious efforts of upper caste leaders from Rammohan to Dayanand. For a long time, people like Jyotibha Phule, Narayana Guru, Ayyankali or Ramaswamy Naicker did not figure at all. Pandita Ramabhai or Tarabhai Shinde are still not included. This is true of the national movements as well. Ambedkar has only begun to be noticed, thanks to the attempts to recover the role of the Dalits in order to gain their rightful place in the national life.

Check Your Progress I
Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer.
b) Check your answer with those provided at the end of the unit.
1) What is the relevance of Alternative Historiography?
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4.5 CONTRIBUTIONS OF DR B. AMBEDKAR TO AN ALTERNATIVE DALIT HISTORIOGRAPHY

Ambedkar's contributions are not only significant in writing Indian history but in evolving a method which is more relevant even for contemporary historians of different schools. Ambedkar came to forefront in Indian academics from the decade of nineties with the intensified struggles of Dalits. The struggles of the ordinary people forced the centers of power and knowledge to consider the importance of Ambedkar and his ideas in social reconstruction of the nation. With Ambedkar as the source of inspiration, Dalits are struggling to write their own history by interrogating the dominant Brahminical traditions. The relevance of Ambedkar has to be read with the fifty years developments of Post-Ambedkar of post independent India. His approach to Indian society and its history are crucial in understanding contemporary India and the struggles of the oppressed.

4.6 RATIONALITY, MORAL AND COMMUNITY AS PRINCIPLES OF DALIT HISTORIOGRAPHY

Ambedkar's notion of history is identified with 'moral community' imbued with the principles of equality, liberty and fraternity. His historical method borrows tools from Marxism in understanding the ancient history. Rather than mechanically applying Marxism, he had creatively used it in keeping the specific context of Indian society. He approached Indian society from the point of religion and finds the religion as source for the different ideological position. For instance, Buddhism is considered as revolutionary and Hinduism as counter revolutionary. 'Rationality' is the guiding principle in evaluating the principles and practices of religion. For the claims of religion he applied rationalistic principle. He brings the religion as a focal point in reference to caste system. To construct the Indian history in proper perspective, he availed of all the convincing ideas of his times, from liberal to Marxist. This may go in tune of pragmatism, especially John Dewey

The pragmatism of Ambedkar differs from the context of Western societies. The pragmatic method of Ambedkar came out of his social responsibility and in presenting the history from the victim's point of view. In essence he made a serious attempt in constructing the Indian history in which one finds dignified place for 'Sudras' and 'untouchable communities'. Ambedkar is a source of inspiration for contemporary Dalit movement and so for constructing history from Dalit point of view. Dalit historiography establishes its own method by challenging the Colonial, Nationalist, Marxists and Subaltern approaches of Indian historiography.

4.7 HISTORIOGRAPHICAL RELEVANCE OF CASTE AND RELIGION

Ambedkar appears very much aware of the role of historian's social affinity, especially the caste, in dealing the material in relation to the problems of social history. In an introduction to '*Who are the Shudras?*' he made this point more clear. Ambedkar is the first thinker who systematized the conception of caste in analytical way. All the human activities are determined by the caste. Caste has

social, political and economical implications. In truth, caste is the primary institution of Indian society and other institutions like family, state, nation, school are directly or indirectly related to/influenced by it.

Ambedkar had more focus on philosophy of religion in understanding the socio-historical phenomenon and the moral basis of Indian society, than exclusively depending on either religion or philosophy. He developed it as a method. It seems in evolving this method; he got influenced by John Dewey. He felt that Hindu religion need to undergo a reform. Caste is a natural outcome of certain religious beliefs which have the sanction of *shastras*. To abolish the sanctity and sacredness of caste, one has to destroy the authority of the *shastras* and *Vedas*. Ambedkar not only proposed the religion that should stand for reason, but also tries to link it up with the governing principle of politics. In simple terms, he thought reason and critical analysis as a method used for the study of religion.

For Ambedkar, religion had become important category in constructing/interpreting Indian history. Further he proceeds by understanding religion in historical dialectical way. He borrowed the tools of Marxism in understanding Indian history in this fashion. Buddhism had been considered as revolutionary strand against Brahminism and against the triumph of Brahminism. Moreover, he made a systematic attempt to bring in view the history of victims of Indian society, where one finds no trace of any historical evidence in official records or narratives of dominant Brahminical class.

He is critical about the Brahminical past and at the same time he valorizes the democratic past of the oppressed sections of India. Altogether he gave different meaning for nationalism of oppressed. Although Ambedkar was lenient towards Marxism, he is against mere economic reductionistic approach of it. He forcefully argues that other factors like culture and religion too influence the world view of people. He throws a challenge to Marxists on understanding the issue of caste. Ambedkar’s method had potential to counter religious nationalism of Hindutva kind and in place of it proposes democratic nationalism of the oppressed. Ambedkar’s idea of history came out of the struggles of the oppressed communities and had the imagination of better future by owning the reasoned/democratic past.

4.8 MAJOR THRUSTS OF DALIT ALTERNATIVE HISTORIOGRAPHY

In the present intellectual and cultural climate in India, a major desideratum is the historiography of resistance, both the articulate and hidden forms of resistance. The implicit and silent forms of resistance have not attracted the same scholarly treatment. This is to a large measure, due to the relatively underdeveloped state of cultural history, as silent resistance generally manifests itself in the domain of culture. Recovering the meaning of silence, along with the articulate, and contextualizing it in relation to the social forces should therefore form the agenda of new alternative historiographies, especially of the Dalit Historiography, as distinct from the textual analyses that currently crowd the cultural studies. The following sections deal with the main philosophical and hermeneutical thrusts and signposts, which would make of the Dalit Alternative Historiography, grounded, contextualized and related to the flesh and blood concerns of the marginalized of the society.

4.9 FOUCAULT’S DEPLOYMENT OF NIETZSCHEAN GENEALOGY AS A TOOL OF DALIT HISTORIOGRAPHY

For Michael Foucault, Genealogy is a tool of investigation into the events that have led us to constitute ourselves and to recognize ourselves as subjects of what we are thinking and doing. It is contrasted with the Historical Schools of the Dominant Historiography. Genealogy looks at history from below, from the bottom to top and not from top to bottom. Foucauldian genealogy is indeed a Dalit historiographical tool for recording the histories of Dalit everydayness. Genealogical method helps to overcoming the privileging of time as a metaphor of history and progress, to privileging space. This, in turn, helps us to overcome the gap between history and memory, especially in the context of the everydayness of the Subalterns.

4.10 PREGNANT TIME AND PREGNANT SPACE AS SYMBOLS OF HISTORY OF THE DALITS

In the context of our discussion on the Dalit historiography, we have to think not only with the metaphor of time but also with space. In the spirit of Foucauldian genealogy, the shift from Time to Space as a metaphor for history has also to do with rethinking history, in the context of coping with contingencies, especially in the Dalit context. Foucault too as indicated by his genealogical approach, has also been a major voice in drawing our attention to the challenge of contingencies in the study of society and history. He interrogates Kant’s construction of a harmonious rapport between the three domains of knowledge—scientific, political and religious. He posits contingency in the dynamics and work of these three bodies of knowledge. This responsibility of the historian has to be a creative historiographical engagement with and for the Dalits.

4.11 HISTORIOGRAPHY AS RE-MEMBERING THE LACK

As we consider the role of memory, relation to history and its role in a history and historiography of the Dalits, we may take up certain specific examples that show how history was understood as a ‘lack’, especially the lack of history. . This notion of history, interpreted in relation to a ‘lack’ becomes the major argument of the theorization of slavery. The historiographical problematic is to encounter how in the context of social movements in modernity, the slave experience was recalled, and made on par with authentic histories, that contest the textual representation of slavery, as academic histories. This is achieved by fictionalizing the history of slave experience or by erasing the difference between fiction and history. By ritual rendering of the slave experience, it enters the consciousness of the people, making them aware of the horrors of slavery that existed historically.

It is through this process of selective appropriation/erasure and reinscription that particular versions of the past have been created, and circulated. This has gone too much into the making of an identity for the people who have not

experienced slavery in their lived experience. It is significant to note that there is a tension involved in the memories of individuals, where the personal life history does not validate slave experience, while the collective memory that pertains to the historical past recreates images of slavery. In other words, the situatedness of individuals in contemporary cultural milieu, which is far removed from slavery as a social experience challenges the historians to analyse how these visual images of slavery are created through some kind of ‘ritual rememory’. The concept of rememory is used in other contexts to analyse slave experience’. “Rememory is something which possesses (or haunts) one, rather than something which one possess.” It is absolutely necessary to ask what happens to history in this context. ‘History’ is imaginatively recreated, through various strategies. It has been observed in other contexts that, if individuals and collectivities have been produced in discourses, it is possible to imagine discourses that will produce ‘new selves’. The experience recounted produces new selves by providing a different version of their history, in which slavery assumes centrality.

4.12 REMEMBERING IDENTITY AND AGENCY

The narratives of everyday lives of slaves are nothing but a history of oppression, and the notion of suffering body, which is unclean, that requires to be salvaged. More intense stories are being made out that underpin the ravages caused by the cruelties of slavery. Landlords forced women to work in the fields even before they completed postnatal care. They were forced to work for hours together transplanting and weeding paddy fields for longer hours without respite, even in torrential rain or scorching sun. They were not even permitted to feed their newborns, who were usually kept in the cradle hanging from the branches of the nearby trees. In one such instance, when the mother came back after hours of work, what awaited her were the ant-eaten mortal remains of her tender one.

The staggering problem here is to analyze the real functions of the histories of oppression. It is equally significant to ask, to what extent is it history and non-history. It is history even to a conventional historiographer as they are well documented and repeated in several histories of Kerala. But in our context of the Dalits and the re-membling of their slavery, it does perform an extra function, in that it helps achieve subjectivity and agency for people who recall this collective memory. In fact, such rationalized critical theorization definitely helps transgress the ‘social lacks’ to which we are referring.

4.13 CELEBRATING THE DALIT AGENCY IN THE CHOICE OF ALTERNATIVE RELIGIOSITIES

Another area where the Subaltern historiographies can inhabit as their space is the Subaltern agency expressed by the Dalits and other Subalterns, in their opting for alternative religiosities. Very often, an alternative soteriological idiom has been at work in these passages to alternative religiosities. But the Subaltern agency at play there has been instrumentalized, or eclipsed by dominant historiographical constructs. Subaltern historiographies have to re-deem and celebrate this agency. As the Madigas of Konaema, who opted for the alternative religiosity of Catholicism, expressing their agency, remarked:

We are proud to say that ours is the very first Madiga enclave in Konaseema to have received Catholicism. When we went over to Bhimavaram as migrant harvesters, we met Fr. Pagano and invited him to our village. Mr. Jonnada Paul was our leader. He was the most educated among us. Later, he along with Mr. Marri Ganapathi, a military man, who was a Mala, went over to Gunadala during the Gunadala *Matha* Feast. Mr John had contact with Christianity in the military. At Gunadala, they impressed upon Fr. Pagano once more on the need of coming to Konaseema and almost fixed a date on which he could come over to our village. Protestants were here but we did not join them because their doctrine and approach to life seemed to uproot us from our tradition. They used to frighten us by saying “No bangles, no *bindi/bottu* and no ornaments.” But Fr. Pagano’s words were “You can have and wear everything. *Atme alankaram*. God looks at the heart. Adore God with happiness and joy.

The above passage gives us an inkling into the circumstances of the option by the Dalit Madigas for Catholicism and its entry into Konaseema, at their express invitation around 1942. What Kooiman noted about the nineteenth century Christian converts from among the Shanars and Pariahs of South Travancore can be extended to the situation of the Madigas of Konaseema of mid-twentieth century. “One of the main characteristics of the nineteenth century mass movements was precisely that material, political and spiritual motives were blended together in one complex whole, making it next to impossible to isolate one single factor.”

4.14 OVERCOMING THE ECLIPSE OF THE SUBALTERN CONTRIBUTION TO POLITICAL ECONOMY

In one of the many plays performed by the Madigabhigamvallu (the wandering group of Madiga performers and ritual prostitutes of the Madigas), Veerabahudu, a Madiga is on his way to the market, to buy none other than *Harischandra*, who has run into penury, and is selling himself. On the way, the Madiga is singing himself away to glory and the lyric of his song, can be roughly translated as follows:

Please give some way, make some space for me. I am from an *esteemed* family.

If I don’t tell you the truth, you will tell me to get out of sight

If I deliberately refuse to tell you the truth, even then you will cast me away.

If I cross you without asking, you will blame me, “Don’t Pollute”

If I ask your leave and then go, even then you will question me

I am going to buy somebody, who is on sale, on the road - it seems he is good

I am going to buy him, since my wife has told me so.

Though these lines are taken from a wandering troupe’s enactment of an oft-enacted common scene, it is pregnant with self-assertion and protest against an existing oppressive order of things. It is an artist’s signature on his creation, especially, the first line “*Please give me some way, make some space for me. I am from an esteemed family.*” In words couched in irony and protest, he is expressing his resistance to the existing order, in the context of the enactment, removed from the real life situation, but very much reflecting it.

Like the folk-drama, *Harischandra*, *Kulapuranas* are identity markers of any caste. They are inherited oral texts, not a piece of recitation, but as cultural metaphor, an interactive text, which explicitly relates members of a social group to its own self and to the other social groups. Jambavadu is the focal identity symbol of the Madiga caste, and the central figure of their caste. In the performance of their *Kulapurana*, he becomes a symbol of protest, of their being denied their due share in the political economy of the land, and the de-valorization of their traditional skills.

Historiographies of/for the Dalits will be fulfilling their task, if they become sites where the performative and the oral protests of the Dalits, vis-à-vis their eclipse from the political economy are highlighted, as survival is the primordial subaltern posture.

Check Your Progress II

Note: a) Use the space provided for your answer.
b) Check your answer with those provided at the end of the unit.

1) What is Genealogy according to Michael Foucault ?

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2) What is meant by historicizing the ‘lacks’ by the Dalits?

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4.15 LET US SUM UP

As we outlined in the Objectives and Introduction, our task in this section had been to bring out the salient features of a Dalit Historiography, which would empower them, both as communities and identities. Reaching up to the task, we have critically defined historiography and its scope. We have brought into relief, the unique features of the Dalit historiography, against the background of the other historiographies, which have been vogue in India. The contributions of Ambedkar towards the methodology of an Alternative and Dalit historiography have been placed as a link between the earlier mainline historiographies and the forward thrust of Dalit Historiography. In the process, we have also brought out the relevance of the Dalit Historiography, as an Alternative historiography of protest, identity assertion and culture of silence, aimed at the empowerment of

Dalits. In the final section, we have delineated the major philosophical and hermeneutical thrusts of the Dalit historiography in prospect.

4.16 KEY WORDS

- Historiography** : is the history of history, the aspect of history and of semiotics that considers how knowledge of the past, either recent or distant, is obtained and transmitted. Formally, historiography examines the writing of history, the use of historical methods, drawing upon authorship, sources, interpretation, style, bias, and the reader.
- Subaltern Historiography** : is an alternative to all existing historiographies. Dismissing all of them as elitist in character, the subaltern history is set out to recover the voice of the subaltern, a social group identified as representing the ‘demographic difference between the total Indian population and all those who are described as the elite’.

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4.18 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Answers to Check Your Progress I

- 1) The Alternative Historiographies give voice to the silent protest of the sections of society, which has been hitherto eclipsed and not heard. A positive trend in Indian historiography is the emergence of Alternative Historiographies like those of the Dalits and Women. The former contests the social power of the upper castes and the latter the patriarchal authority of the male. The Indian historiography, whichever genre it belonged to, have been silent, either consciously or unconsciously, about the history of these groups. Ranajit Guha, in his introduction to the Subaltern studies has stated that the 'history of Indian nationalism has been written up as a sort of spiritual biography of the Indian elite'. In fact the entire history of India has been written as the saga of the upper castes and the male heroes. The history of the Indian Renaissance, for instance, has been encapsulated in the socio-religious efforts of upper caste leaders from Rammohan to Dayanand. For a long time, people like Jyotibha Phule, Narayana Guru, Ayyankali or Ramaswamy Naicker did not figure at all. Pandita Ramabhai or Tarabhai Shinde are still not included. This is true of the national movements as well. Ambedkar has only begun to be noticed, thanks to the attempts to recover the role of the Dalits in order to gain their rightful place in the national life. The Alternative Historiographies take into account of the culture of silent protest.

Answers to Check Your Progress II

- 1) For Michael Foucault, Genealogy is a tool of investigation into the events that have led us to constitute ourselves and to recognize ourselves as subjects of what we are thinking and doing. It is contrasted with the Historical Schools of the Dominant Historiography. Genealogy looks at history from below, from the bottom to top and not from top to bottom. Foucauldian genealogy is indeed a Dalit historiographical tool for recording the histories of Dalit everydayness. Genealogical method helps to overcoming the privileging of time as a metaphor of history and progress, to privileging space. This, in turn, helps us to overcome the gap between history and memory, especially in the context of the everydayness of the Subalterns. He also helps us to understand how space can be understood as a tool in analyzing structures of power/knowledge along with time, which was the privileged category of Modernity in analyzing power/knowledge relationships.
- 2) As we consider the role of memory, relation to history and its role in a history and historiography of the Dalits, we may take up certain specific examples that show how history was understood as a 'lack', especially the lack of history. This notion of history, interpreted in relation to a 'lack' becomes the major tool of the theorization of slavery and the sufferings of the Dalits. The historiographical problematic is to encounter how in the context of social movements in modernity, the slave experience was recalled, and made on par with authentic histories, that contest the textual representation of slavery, as academic histories. This is achieved by fictionalizing the history of slave experience or by erasing the difference between fiction and history. By ritual rendering of the slave experience, it

enters the consciousness of the people, making them aware of the horrors of slavery that existed historically. In this process, the historicizing the 'lacks', whether it be the absence of history or other structures which prevented their well-being can be appropriated and made tools of a reversal of roles. This helps in the assertion of Dalit identities and contesting hierarchy.

Dalit Historiography