UNIT 5 HISTORICAL RESEARCH

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5.1 INTRODUCTION

The recognition, within contemporary social science/humanities theories of gender as an important analytical category has revolutionary potential. Apart from uncovering the diverse ways in which people’s lives are modified by their gender identities, the use of gender as an analytical category questions the taken-for-granted assumptions in each discipline. The critical interrogation of various disciplines from the standpoint of women’s experiences has grown out of the contemporary feminist struggles for gender equality. Feminist attempts to understand the roots of women’s subordination and the reasons why their knowledge/experiences are not reflected within established theories have indicated the politics of knowledge creation. It points out that the invisibility of women in the data-sets of each discipline is not inadvertent; it is a product of hegemonic politics that seeks to privilege men and reinforce the subordination of women. Feminist attempts to theorize women’s lived experiences and the factors that shape these experiences has also led to a search for new research methods that would capture women’s agency and powerlessness.
Located within this quest for the recovery of women’s lives, feminist historians have questioned the reasons for the invisibility of women from historical frames; it has also asked why the sources of historiography do not capture women’s lived experiences. Apart from indicating the politics of knowledge generation, these efforts by feminist historians aim to deepen our understanding of our past.

This unit begins by discussing historiography and subsequently recording the dissent expressed by women and other subaltern communities regarding official historiography. These are challenges that emerged since the 1960s as part of the struggles of various subaltern communities to claim equality. Subsequently, indicating the ways in which feminist historiography transforms our historical knowledge, it indicates some of the non-conventional sources used by feminist historians to recover women’s histories.

Let us now go through the objectives of this unit.

5.2 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit, you will be able to:

- Discuss the politics of exclusion in dominant historiography;
- Explain that gender, race, caste and class locations of people alter their historical experiences;
- Compare versions of the historical experiences of different communities and categories of people; and
- Develop skills in the use of some key feminist research methods.

5.3 WRITING OF HISTORY

Before we discuss the methodological challenges of feminist historiography, we need to examine what is history and what are the sources of history. At the outset it must be clarified that history is not a chronicle of past events; it is about interpretations. This suggests that historians reveal their personal politics—their ideologies, philosophies and ethics as well as their understanding about the world and human motivation in their historical writings. The idea that historiography is about interpretations is in variance with the dictates of Leopold Von Ranke, the father of modern historiography. He demanded that historians produce “scientific and objective history” to represent what he described as “how it really was” through a diligent study of documentary sources. (Arnold, 2000, p.34)
The fact that history writing is an objective exercise which does not reveal the politics of the writer is being questioned by historians, particularly those writing from the margins of history. Historians make choices in the selection of what is construed as authentic historical fact and in the selection of sources. They must inevitably decide what can be said, or what should be said. History, therefore, comprises that aspect of the past that has caught the historian’s attention and is based on his/her decisions about its historical value. Additionally, in response to the changing intellectual understanding about knowledge construction, ideas about what is history have also changed. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century some historians sought to rigorously present nuggets of historical information without attempting to interpret the data. Such books are important sources of historical data, but contemporary historians would like to go beyond presenting vignettes of information about the past to interpreting it. Finding and interpreting the larger context for the story is an important part of historiography. (Arnold, 2000, p.8)

Before discussing various nuances of feminist historiography, let us first look into the politics of Indian history.

### 5.4 THE POLITICS OF INDIAN HISTORY

The writing of modern Indian history is a product of the colonial interlude in India. Aimed at justifying the enlightening mission of British rule, 19th-century colonial writers (such as James Mill, Collin Mackenzie and Alexander Dow) created an image of Indian past that was static and unchanging, wherein people were defined in terms of mutually hostile, monolithic religious communities; and historical events were placed in a neat chronological sequence, based on the dynasties that ruled the country at those given points of time. This colonial version of Indian history was (with marginal changes) reinforced by Orientalist scholars like Max Muller, who glorified the ancient Vedic Aryan civilization in India as arising out of the Aryan migration into the subcontinent. These attempts at “knowledge management” of India’s past highlighted certain historical events over others to serve certain political ends.

Further focusing on the political events enacted in the public arena, the discourse not only ignored social history, but also legitimized certain sources of historical knowledge over others. Discussions on social history revolved around the caste system and the notions of village communities, while studies of the political economy seem to confirm the prevalence of an endemic society that was governed by oriental despotism. (Thapar, 2005, pp. 1442-8) As affirmed by Bernard Cohn, colonialism was as much a project mediated through the control of knowledge as by military strength.
To quote Dirks in the foreword to Cohen’s book *Colonialism and Its forms of Knowledge: The British in India*:

‘Colonial conquest was not just the result of the power of superior arms, military organization, political power or economic wealth—as important as these things were. Colonialism was made possible, and then sustained and strengthened, as much by cultural technologies of rule as it was by the more obvious and brutal modes of conquest that first established power over foreign shores. The cultural effects of colonialism have often been ignored or displaced into the inevitable logic of modernization and world capitalism. It must be recognized that colonialism itself was a cultural project of control. Colonial knowledge both enabled conquest; in important ways, knowledge was what colonialism was about.’ (Cohen, Bernard S. 1997, p.9)

In order to counter the negative portrayal of India in colonial accounts, nationalist history sought to interpret Indian history differently. **Nationalist history** aimed at establishing that Indian customs, such as sati, child marriage and ascetic widowhood did not exist in ancient times but was a response to foreign aggressions during the medieval period. Such a portrayal of ancient Indian history was aimed at justifying the political struggle for Independence from colonial rule. **Cultural nationalism** had selectively borrowed from those strands of Orientalism that glorified India’s ancient past. The political equations of the nationalist struggle, legitimized this kind of romanticism of Indian history—a romanticism which continues to colour mainstream history. In essence the history of India represented the European view of Indian history. (Chakravarti, 1989, pp. 27-87; Thapar, 2005, pp. 1442-1448)

By attributing all the prevailing social evils to the medieval period, cultural nationalism created images of conflict between religious communities. For instance, the destruction of Somanath temple by Mohammed of Ghazni in the eleventh century is presented as a watershed in the history of India by conservative historians. **Romila Thapar** (2004) in her book *Somanatha: The Many Voices of History*, points out that the image is created through the selective use of Persian without reference to sources that contradicted this discourse to create this image of conflicting religious communities.

Now, before proceeding further, attempt the following questions to assess your learning from the text that you have just finished reading.
Check Your Progress:

i) What was the political agenda of colonial historiography?

ii) How did the political agenda of nationalist history differ from that of the colonial history?

iii) How has Ranke defined historiography?

In the next section you will read how the domain of historiography has been challenged by voices from the margin.
5.5 SUBALTERN CHALLENGES TO DOMINANT HISTORIOGRAPHY

After reading why it is important to know what is history, what are its sources and understanding the politics of Indian history, we now discuss another insightful perspective of how status, stand and position of certain communities and groups in the society have been marginalized in documentation of history.

The unfreezing of Indian history can be traced to the protest politics that emerged in the political landscape since the 1960s. It grew out of the felt-need of subaltern communities to gain historical space and a say in the construction of history. This process of recovering history from the standpoint of various marginalized groups challenged the claims of objectivity made by the dominant construction of Indian history. The emergent subaltern historiography decisively shifted the focus of history as a narration of past politics to the lived experiences of people. It raised serious theoretical and methodological questions regarding the interpretations of historical events and the legitimate tools of its enquiry.

The central argument was that dominant history was elitist; it not only made invisible the voices and experiences of the ordinary people but was also politically motivated to maintain elite hegemony. The reconstruction of history from below had the dual purpose of extending historical knowledge and empowering people’s struggles. It created a rich mosaic of historical consciousness to challenge a monolithic understanding of past events. In the process, history became more interdisciplinary drawing from a variety of historical sources. Actions and events were seen as arising out of multiple causes and priorities.

Additionally, it initiated a search for alternative sources of historical knowledge through the use of oral sources borrowed from anthropology and sociology (for example proverbs, oral histories, folk songs, etc.) as well as literary sources such as fiction, autobiography, letters, diaries and even private letters. (Mukherjee S.N., 1996) These ideas about the need to use alternative to reconstruct the past was not entirely new. It is reflected in historiography of D.D. Kosambi, who said that ancient Indian history could not be constructed only through reference to the Dharmashastric sources (Syed A.J., 1985).

In the following section of the unit you will read about how the feminist historiography evolved over a period of time.
5.6 THE GROWTH OF FEMINIST HISTORIOGRAPHY

It was not perhaps unreasonable to expect that the development of subaltern history would accommodate gender as a category of historical analysis along with caste, class and race. Since this did not happen, feminist historiography developed. Forbes writes:

‘At the outset feminist scholars welcomed subaltern studies as a challenge to elitist colonialist, nationalist and Marxist historiography. The subaltern collective, however, neglected women/gender issues until Gayatri Spivak joined the group and addressed the problem of writing the history of colonized women who suffered not only the double oppression of colonialism and patriarchy but also the oppression of western scholarship in her article ‘Can the Subaltern Speak.’ (2005, pp. 155-171)

Committed to the recovery of women’s history, feminist historiography grew out of the political agenda of gender justice of the new women’s movement in the late 1960s. The rationale for the reconstruction of the past from the vantage point of women’s lived experiences is because their current invisibility in mainstream history serves to justify their continued exclusion from the public arena. It is posited on the understanding that the exclusion of women from the focus of mainstream history is not inadvertent, for it creates the erroneous image that the subordination of women in society was pre-ordained and true for all times. It also makes evident that the trivialization of women’s lived experiences is inevitable, if women do not claim their right to construction of historical knowledge.

Box No.5.1

To sum up, feminist historiography makes evident the socio-political, economic and cultural factors that denied women access to the public domain, as well as the patriarchal conspiracy of silence over women’s contributions to the making of history. Therefore, feminist historiography plays the dual role of restoring women to history and recovering women’s history. (Lewis, 1981, pp.55-72; Scott, 1987, pp. 34-52)

Feminist historiography also broadened the scope of history. History was no longer about past politics, but also raised questions about economy, society and culture. As Thapar writes:

“Gender history becomes an essential category of historical analysis when history moves from being the narrative of personalities and the historian starts analyzing the institutions and structures that go into making of society. Gender history need not neutralize patriarchy. It can enhance the potential of viewing women as agencies or as instruments in the hierarchies of power and exclusions.” (Thapar, 2005, p.6).
After reading about how the feminist historiography has become important in studying history, in the following section you will read how past can be seen through a feminist lens.

5.7 REVISIONING THE PAST THROUGH FEMINIST HISTORIOGRAPHY

This process of recovering women’s history entailed the rediscovery of the foremothers of the feminist movement, whose voices of protest against the mistreatment of women were erased by the patriarchal politics of knowledge management. This necessitated the recovery of biographies, autobiographies and writings of women, such as Pandita Ramabai, Tarabai Shinde, Lakshmibai Tilak, etc., to uncover the unbroken history of feminist resistance to patriarchy. The effort made evident the long history of resistance and subversion of patriarchy by women.

It has also resulted in the critical re-reading of history to challenge the politics of knowledge generation. Feminist historiography for instance has questioned the basis on which nationalist history laid claims to the high status of women during the Vedic Aryan period. Uma Chakravarti’s (1989, pp. 27-87) study, Whatever Happened to the Vedic Dasi, points out the rather flimsy evidence on which nationalist historians, such as Altekar and R.K. Mukherjee made such assertions about the high status of women during the Ancient Indian period. They do not at the same time examine the evidence to the contrary also found in the same texts. Chakravarti argues that by not paying attention to the evidence to the contrary also found in the texts, these writers give greater evidence of their patriotism than their objectivity.

These attempts to recover voices of protest and subversion, have revolutionized our conceptualization of the past. For the process transforms our understanding of conventional history as follows:

• periodization;
• categories of social analysis;
• theories of social change.

Underlying this conceptualization is the assumption that the notion that the relationship between the sexes is a social, and not a natural one. This perception forms the core idea that upsets traditional thinking in all three cases (Kelly, 1986).
• **Periodization**

This would require that the historical moments of greatest social change be assessed on the basis of their potential for women’s liberation or subordination. Joan Kelly (1986) writes that from such a perspective some of the periods in history described as moments of human liberations (such as the Renaissance and the French revolution), were nothing more than periods of male liberation. **But, these historical moments imposed greater constraints on the lives of women.** By asking these questions, feminist history has unsettled accepted valuation of historical periods. **It indicates that history of women is not the same as that of men.** Focusing on Indian history, we can question whether the Gupta period (described as the Golden Age, because of its art and literature) was a period of liberation for women as even then seclusion of women prevailed.

• **Categories of Social Analysis**

It argues that the invisibility of women in traditional history is not to be ascribed to female nature; but rather to the conceptualization of history as a discipline, which has largely focused on the public domain. By raising questions about the nature of the family and the prevailing sexual/reproductive controls over women as well as their work force participation, it is possible to radically alter our understanding of the past. In which case, the greatest periods of historical growth would not necessarily be those that saw the flourishing of art and literature, but rather the periods when the controls imposed upon women by patriarchy were least apparent. (Kelly, 1986)

• **Theories of Social Change**

This would indicate that precisely those periods in history, which circumscribed women’s lives, were those that created the distinctions between the public and private spheres. To elaborate, the economy in the pre-colonial society was centered in the household and women’s productive roles were well integrated within it. The introduction of industrial capitalism under the colonial rule disrupted this well integrated role of women by introducing the spatial separation between the household and the economy. This disjuncture between the private and the public relegated women to the private sphere and created structures of gender inequality in society (Kelly 1986).

At this point it has again become imperative to assess your understanding after reading the text of the last couple of sections.
Check Your Progress:

i) What impact does feminist historiography have on official history of a country?

ii) What are the underlying assumptions of feminist historiography?

After reading about how feminist historiography brought in a new perspective to the traditional construction of past, let us now look into how the feminist consciousness questions the prevalent methodology to document history.

5.8 METHODOLOGICAL CHALLENGES OF FEMINIST HISTORICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

The development of feminist historical consciousness poses serious theoretical and methodological questions about the interpretation of historical events and the legitimate tool of its enquiry. The job of a historian begins with the source. Historians rely on documentary and material sources (such as architecture, artifacts, coins, etc) of evidence in their attempt to interpret the past. Documentary sources are of two kinds:
• primary documents produced at or near the events; and
• the works of other, later writers.

The preferred documentary sources are the narrative documents, chronicle accounts memoirs, government records, past histories wills, letters, records of sale fiscal accounts, taxation documents and the court records. (Arnold, 2000, p. 59)

The problem of reconstructing women’s history is because the records that have been selected and preserved in archives do not contain information about women’s lives or concerns. Doing feminist history requires a search for evidence and re-reading the existing, accepted historical documents. The recovery of documents would, therefore, be the first step to the writing of women’s histories (Forbes, 2004). However, women are not a homogenous category. The writing of gender histories will need to take into account how women’s identities are differentiated through their differential access to power, resources and belief systems. (Thapar, 2005)

Box No.5.2

Feminist historians have therefore gone beyond documentary sources to search for women’s voices through biographies, autobiographies, fiction, private diaries, letters, photographs, household accounts and other non-conventional sources, such as oral/life histories, myths and legends etc. The search for sources of women’s histories no doubt is defined by the period of study. The recovery of women’s histories in the ancient and medieval periods would necessarily be constrained by the lack of documentary and other material sources. It will require the critical reading of available primary and secondary sources of history to understand women’s gendered experiences.

To illustrate the point that how critical reading brings in feminist perspective, we can cite Thapar’s work Shakuntala: Texts, Readings, Histories. It is a valuable account on how the normative construction of gender relationships has been transformed over a period of time. It examines the many versions of the well-known story of Shakuntala to indicate the changing contours of gender relationships through history. In the process, it explores the links between culture, history and gender, and between history and literature.

Recovery of women’s history in the more recent times may need to go beyond documentary sources to draw upon other sources—even anthropological records—to create and document women’s lives. It also seeks to create new sources of historical information through oral histories and life writings of women. This kind of historiography begins at the experiential level. Taking women’s experiences as central, the process of inquiry (in order to draw out how women articulate their experiences)
Qualitative Research seeks to empower them. It does not (as would happen in a court of law) attempt to arrive at an objective truth, but rather to conceptualize truth as subjective (influenced by the perspectives of the researcher and the researched as well as their socio-cultural economic and political location). An important component of this process of recovering women’s histories is the recognition that the context of discovery is as important as the content. The researcher must consciously identify his/her locations. (Poonacha, 2004)

In the following section you will read about the tools that are useful in reconstructing women’s histories.

## 5.9 TOOLS TO RECONSTRUCT WOMEN’S HISTORIES

By now you must have understood that for construction of women’s histories we need tools and methods that are not limited to only the traditional methods. In this section, you will read about some of the non conventional sources used by feminist historians to recover women’s histories.

### 5.9.1 Textual Sources

The first step to do women’s histories is to recover documentary sources. This is not easy as the existing documents preserved in archives do not reflect women’s lived experience. Archives are not simply storehouses, they are systemized repositories of information, cared for and nurtured by professionals. Since the preservation of these documents has largely been in the hands of men, documents that reveal women’s world of experiences are scarce. The recovery of women’s histories is, thus, constrained by the paucity of documents on women’s lives. Nonetheless, it has been possible to recover women’s histories by searching through private papers of families and the dusty corners of libraries.

An important example of such efforts is the recovery of women’s literary traditions in the various languages of India. Edited and complied by Susie Tharu and K. Lalitha (1993), The volume of Women’s Writings in India: 600B.C to the Early 20th century indicate that contrary to our assumptions. Women have had a long tradition of writing through which they subverted patriarchy. The metaphors of their resistance may have been couched differently and through metaphysical poetry.

Explaining the use of text in the reconstruction of gender history, Nabaneeta Dev Sen (2001) examines many versions of Ramayana in her paper Alternative Interpretation of the Ramayana: Views from Below. Capturing women’s voices of resistance, she points out to the existence of women’s versions of the Ramayana story. The empathy evident in the women’s versions of the Ramayana for Sita’s experiences as a daughter, wife and mother, reflects the realities of their lives.
Attempt the following questions to review your understanding of the sections that you have just read.

**Check Your Progress:**

i) What are the methodological challenges of feminist history?

ii) What are the unconventional sources of feminist historiography?

iii) How do historians use literary sources to indicate changing gender relationships?

After studying how various texts can be analysed differently to bring about women’s histories, let us now discuss another tool that provide rich account of women’s histories.
5.9.2 Folklore

Folklore contains many elements like myths, tales, legends, proverbs, riddles and verses. Its use as historical source is more because of its reflection of the existing social conditions and the perceptions of reality of the group. Folklore is situated in the communicative practices of society and serves to reproduce the social order or to undermine/critique it. Some writers see them as “stratified pieces of social history” although it may be difficult to place these glimpses of history in a time frame. An analysis of the structure and content of folklore show that apart from the power differences between the speaker and the listener, there are differences in men and women’s use of them. Therefore, folklore analysis is rarely de-contextualized and depoliticized. Women’s speech and oral traditions have been dismissed as powerless and ineffective because they are seldom unambiguous oppositions to male discourse and practices. It makes evident the internal cleavages in communities on class, caste and gender lines. Through recovery of voices of women’s resistance, it is possible to deconstruct colonial and post-colonial recordings of the community. (Raheja-Godwin, 2003)

According to Thapar (2005, p.8),

“myths are of interest to historians, not because they narrate events that have actually happened, but because they encapsulate the hidden assumptions in society. They provide clues, for instance, as to how a community disguises the breaking of normative rules.”

Given below are two examples of how through an imaginative interpretation of folklore and history, it is possible to recreate histories of marginalized communities.

In Women Heroes and Dalit Assertion in North India: Culture, Identity and Politics, Narayan, (2006, p.62) points out through the interweaving of nineteenth century colonial ethnographic accounts and oral narratives (Jati kathas) how subaltern groups are able to symbolically explain their subordination and express their dissent against the existing social order. Similarly drawing upon a wide range of popular sources such as folk songs, oral traditions, interviews as well as statistical and archival materials, Chowdhry (1994) seeks to recover women’s histories in Rural Harayana in her book The Veiled Women: Shifting Gender Equations in Rural Haryana. She discusses how the use of folklore poses serious methodological challenges to the writing of history. She further explains, but the question that arises is why, for instance, are some sources of history considered authentic and others dismissed as myths and legends of a community? Why are puranas seen as a possible source of history, while jati kathas are relegated to anthropology? Why are epigraphic inscriptions, documentary sources seen as a legitimate historical record, but the oral traditions of the community dismissed?
Let us now read about other useful tools, oral histories and life narratives that help in constructing women’s histories. In Unit 2 and 3 of this Block you have already read how oral history is both a tool and source of data in qualitative research. Here, the attempt is to make you understand how this tool and source of data constructs women’s histories.

5.9.3 Oral Histories and Life History

To overcome the invisibility of women in history, feminist historiography has experimented with the use of oral histories and life history methods to reconstruct women’s histories.

Oral history is a method of data collection that places the tools of research and analysis in the hands of the researched. It is particularly useful in recovering the voices of the downtrodden and in recording their struggles. It requires creativity on the part of the researcher to use her/his skills to record the socio-economic context of their lives and their struggles. Doing oral history requires that the researcher builds a rapport with the researched. It may take several interviews to record the story. The time and location of the narration has a bearing on the recording. In a formal work environment, the narration may reveal one kind of recall, but in a more private and informal setting the story may have other details. The story might also be stilted if there are listeners. Similarly, cultural practices and notions of family/community honour may make her gloss over incidents and events in her life.

Closely allied with the oral history method is the life history method. This method is best understood as a mode of investigation that blends history with biography in order to explore the effects of social structures on people and to portray the ways in which people themselves create culture. This method provides in-depth material on the course of an individual’s life over a period of time and within his/her historical context. Life histories are autobiographical, based on oral and written documentation. It involves participant observation, in-depth interviews strongly supported by historical and documentary histories. (Sheridan and Salaff, 1984)

Box No.5.3

Doing oral/life histories requires that the researcher knows the language, understands the socio-cultural ethos and the levels of meaning in relationships. Writing oral/life histories require several considerations. This is because lives are rarely recounted chronologically and the information necessary to understand the story may be taken for granted or omitted by the informant. The writing of oral history calls for judgment in assessing the material for writing.
There is no single way to portray the lives. It also calls for stylistic decisions such as, should the narrative be written in the first person or third? Thus, doing oral/life narrative is a process of self transformation for by reflecting on the lives of others, we become aware of our own lives. A few examples of work in this genre are as follows:

1) **Bhave, Sumitra** (1988) *Pan on Fire: Eight Dalit Women Tell Their Story*;

2) **Vasantha, Kannabiran** (1989) *That Magic Time: Women in the Telangana People’s Struggle*; and

3) **Urvashi Butalia** (1998) *The Other Side of Silence: Voices from the Partition of India*

The following account given in the box will give you deeper insight about how oral history constructs silence by subalterns.

**Box No. 5.4**

**Speech and Silence**

In the process of utilizing oral history sources one comes to understand the quality of silence. By silence I don’t mean the absence of sound. I mean the silence that result from abstaining to put into language events, experiences, opinions, ideas and thoughts. It is silence that is the result of non-mention. Whatever is put into language has to be constantly understood in terms of this absence of language.

In oral history sources there are a lot of unsaid things. Whatever is spoken is in constant dialogue with the silence. Like the musical notes in a rag. Even if a raga is composed of 5 notes or 6 notes the missing note exercises the power of absence on the raga.

I once interviewed a musician who spoke to me for six hours without once mentioning her husband. But I understood the silence as a positive one for further direct questioning revealed, that her married life had been a happy one and she felt no need to make any specific mention of this. Her husband was absent in her interview, but it was an absence that was present.

In order to understand the spoken word one has to understand silence.... To understand oral history material one has to remember that concepts like pain, suffering and power are not fixed concepts. They change according to the process of life and according to history. The nature of the material will also vary according to the time, place and period one has chosen to intervene into a person’s life. What seemed unbearable and oppressive can change its nature at a later interview. Likewise, what constituted happiness, can also change. Often suffering is woven into one’s life and creeps into it without
any calamitous beginning, and one does not then remember the causes of the suffering itself.... Memories have to be put in the context of the entirety of one’s life and life in general.

This would make it clear that some events and persons are central and some are marginal in a personal life. It is important of the researcher to understand where the events or persons or feelings have figured in a person’s life. (C.S. Lakshmi, 1988, p. 53)

After reading how speech and silence provide a peep into the lives of women, undertake the following exercise to assess your learning.

Check Your Progress:

i) Why are oral history and life history methods useful in feminist historiography?

ii) What are the important principles of oral histories?

In the following section you will revisit what all the aspects that have been dealt with in the unit that you have just finished reading.

5.10 LET US SUM UP

Beginning with a discussion of the understanding of historiography, this unit has delineated the feminist challenge to history. It locates feminist historiography within the larger struggles of various marginalized communities for historical representation that emerged on the political landscape since the 1960s.
Subaltern and feminist historical consciousness has decisively shifted the focus of history from a narration of past events to the lived experiences people who have largely been ignored as the actors of history. It has posed serious theoretical and methodological questions to historiography, regarding interpretations of historical events and the legitimate tools of its enquiry. Underscoring the politics of knowledge generation, the process thereby questions the validity of official versions of history: it points out that the construction of history from above, largely serves to make invisible the voices and experiences of the vast majority of people. The lack of historical representation for women and other marginalized groups in official history denies them political agency. Attempts to reconstruct history of excluded groups serves the dual purpose of extending the boundaries of historical knowledge and the political empowerment of people. It challenges the prevailing monolithic understanding of our past and initiates a search for alternative sources of historical knowledge through the use of oral sources borrowed from anthropology and sociology (such as proverbs, oral histories, folk songs, etc.) as well as literary sources (such as fiction, autobiography, letters, diaries and even private letters).

As one of the important strands of resistance to official versions of history, feminist historiography has questioned the invisibility of women in history. It argues that women’s absence in history creates images of women’s passivity and such images are political: for it serves to justify male dominance and deny women their socio-political and economic entitlements. By shifting the focus of attention from past politics to the lived experiences of people, feminist historiography asks new and exciting questions. For instance, what was the prevailing family organization at a given point of history? How was gender identities and relationships shaped? It indicates that these relationships are shaped by the prevailing socio-economic and political exigencies of each age. Pointing out the factors that define/shape women’s lives and the ways in which women circumvent the constraints imposed on them, it indicates that women are not a homogenous category. Their multiple identities grow out of differentiations in their access to power, resources, belief systems and out of their perceptions of the world around them.

5.11 UNIT END QUESTIONS

1) How does women’s version of the Ramayana differ from accepted source of Ramayana? Explain.

2) Discuss the factors that led to the growth of subaltern history.

3) Why is history seen as interpretation? Discuss, with the help of examples.

4) Discuss how the use of gender as a category of historical analysis influences the historical framework.
5.12 REFERENCES


5.13 SUGGESTED READINGS
