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## UNIT 19 MARXISTS AND SUBALTERN\*

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### 19.0 OBJECTIVES

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Our main purpose in this Unit is to make you familiar with the main ideas of Marxist and Subaltern historiographies with reference to the works of some important historians belonging to these two streams of history-writing. After reading this Unit, you will learn about:

- the basic ideas of Marxist historiography in India,
- ideas and works of some important Indian Marxist historians,
- the main features of Subaltern historiography, and
- views of some important historians of the Subaltern School on history and historians.

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### 19.1 INTRODUCTION

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Marxist historiography in India developed primarily in the 1940s onwards. From around the 1960s to 1990s, it had been a dominant presence in the field of Indian historiography. A lot of Indian historians came under its influence in some form or the other. Here we will discuss its main ideas and some important historians related to this trend.

The Subaltern Historiography refers the trend of history-writing initiated by the *Subaltern Studies* and the group of historians associated with it. Beginning in the early 1980s, the *Subaltern Studies* consist of a series of volumes published under several editors, beginning with Ranajit Guha who edited the first six volumes. In this Unit, we

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will take into account the development of this trend along with some important historians who have contributed to these volumes and also written several books.

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## 19.2 MAIN IDEAS OF MARXIST HISTORIOGRAPHY

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In most fields of Indian history, the role of Marxist historians has been very significant. Whether we look at the various periods of Indian past, such as ancient, medieval or modern period, or take into account different topics, such as economic history, nationalism, political history, or social history, the Marxist historians have contributed enormously. In fact, in certain areas, their works have changed the course of history-writing. Although there have been a lot of disagreements among the Marxist historians, there still are certain common elements which are as follows:

- 1) Even though the Marxist historians work with concrete sources and empirical material, they adopt a broader view to analyse and present their material.
- 2) This broader view generally takes into account modes of production and conflict between various classes.
- 3) Thus, studies of larger socio-economic structures such as feudalism, colonialism, and capitalism were undertaken.
- 4) Marxist historiography interprets political, economic and social changes not in terms of individuals but in terms of socio-economic systems and class struggles. We can say that Marxist history-writing rejects the 'great man' theory about social and political transformation.
- 5) The history of kings and dynasties was replaced by the history of social and economic structures and the history of the common people. Consequently, more attention is paid to the study of social and economic histories than to political history.
- 6) At the level of method, the Marxist historians adopt an interdisciplinary approach which mixes archival research with archaeology, linguistics, anthropology, numismatics, statistics, etc.
- 7) In Marxist historiography, analysis, explanation, causation and interpretation are more valued than simple description or narration.

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## 19.3 SOME IMPORTANT MARXIST HISTORIANS

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Considering the fact that Marxist historiography has been the most important trend in Indian history-writing, the number of historians belonging to it has also been enormous. In this Section, however, we will restrict our discussion to only four historians.

### 19.3.1 R.P. Dutt

R. P. Dutt may be said to be the initiator of Marxist historiography in India. His book *India Today*, originally written in 1940, was considered by him as 'a survey from a Marxist standpoint of the record of British rule in India and of the development of the Indian people's struggle, both the national movement and the working class movement, up to the eve of independence, as seen at that time'. It gives a broad coverage of many facets of Indian economy, politics and society under colonial rule. It applies Marxist analysis to the changes in the colonial

economy, to the nationalist movement, to communalism, and to the problems of peasantry.

Following Marx's own comments on the issue of the economic impact of colonial rule on India, Dutt regards colonialism as both a 'destructive' and a 'regenerative' force. However, Dutt emphasises that the 'regenerating' role of colonialism was very limited and it changed to 'destructive' very soon:

Today imperialist rule in India, like capitalism all over the world, has long outlived its objectively progressive or regenerative role, corresponding to the period of free trade capitalism, and has become the most powerful reactionary force in India, buttressing all the other forms of Indian reaction.

Dutt squarely holds colonialism and capitalism responsible for the poverty of the country, and stresses the role which colonial loot played in funding the capitalist development in Britain. Using the economic criteria, he divides the entire period of imperialist rule in India into three phases, a periodisation which has become quite common now, particularly among the Marxist historians. The first phase was that of the mercantile capital 'represented by the East India Company, and extending in the general character of its system to the end of the eighteenth century.' The second phase was dominated by industrial capital 'which established a new basis of exploitation of India in the nineteenth century'. In the third phase, financial capital became the important force which started in the last years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and flourished in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

During the phase of merchant capitalism, the East India Company exercised monopolistic control over the Indian trade. This became easy because of its increasing territorial control since 1757. Apart from this, Indian wealth was also plundered directly by the colonial government and by the servants of the Company in their private capacities.

With the Industrial Revolution in England, the search for a free market for the products of English industries began. Now India was sought to be transformed 'from an exporter of cotton goods to the whole world into an importer of cotton goods'. So, the monopolistic control of the East India Company had to end and this happened in phases since 1813 culminating in 1858 when the government of India was transferred to the British Crown.

Finally, after the First World War (1914-1918), the new stage of finance capitalism was inaugurated. There was now an emphasis on direct capital investment in India, although the older forms of getting 'tribute' and seeking India as a market for British goods still continued.

Dutt also applies Marxist analysis to Indian nationalism. On the revolt of 1857, he thought that it was essentially 'the revolt of the old conservative and feudal forces and dethroned potentates'. So, he traces the beginning of the Indian national movement only from the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

According to him, the premier organisation of this movement was the Indian National Congress which was established in 1885. According to Dutt, although the Congress arose from the earlier activities of the Indian middle class, it was effectively brought into existence through British official initiative as a safety-valve. In detail Dutt writes about the role of A.O. Hume and his alarm at the impending rebellion. However, it soon outgrew its official and loyalist origins

under the pressures of popular nationalist sentiments. The anti-colonial feelings and activities of the common masses propelled the Congress to take stand against colonialism and assume the leadership role in people's movements.

Dutt analysed Congress and nationalist movement according to its changing class base over the years. In his analysis, the Indian nationalist movement, in its earliest phase represented the interests of the big bourgeoisie which consisted of the 'progressive elements among the landowners, the new industrial bourgeoisie and the well-to-do intellectual elements'. This was the Moderate phase of the Congress and Indian nationalism. In the second phase, the urban petty bourgeois class asserted itself as was clear in the 'Extremist' phase of Indian nationalism. In the third phase, the Indian peasantry and working classes also made their presence prominent in the ongoing movement.

However, the leadership of the Congress remained effectively in the hands of the propertied classes who checked the growing radicalisation of the nationalist movement and successfully kept it from becoming dangerous to moneyed classes. Dutt is particularly critical of Gandhi whom he considered as the prominent conservative influence within the Congress. He dubbed him as the 'Jonah of revolution, the general of unbroken disasters ... the mascot of the bourgeoisie' because he tried 'to find the means in the midst of a formidable revolutionary wave to maintain leadership of the mass movement', and keep it within confines. Thus the Non-cooperation Movement was withdrawn as it was feared that the militant masses would upset the applecart of the wealthy classes. Similarly, the Civil Disobedience Movement was also 'suddenly and mysteriously called off at the moment when it was reaching its height' in 1932. Dutt calls it the dual character of the Congress. On the one hand, the Congress assumed the leadership role in the mass movement, while, on the other hand, it tried to restrict and even sabotage the growing militancy to save the propertied classes by cooperating with the colonial government.

Dutt's analysis of the colonial economy and of the nationalist movement proved to be the foundational statements of Indian Marxist historiography for a quite some time to come and it influenced the works of many subsequent Marxist historians in some ways.

### **19.3.2 D.D. Kosambi**

D.D. Kosambi is regarded as a foremost Marxist historian, particularly on early Indian history. Romila Thapar argues that Kosambi actually created a 'paradigm shift' in the field of Indian historiography. According to her, such paradigmatic changes were earlier effected by James Mill and Vincent Smith. While Mill divided Indian history into three parts which he considered as civilisational divide – the Hindu, the Muslim and the British, Vincent Smith mostly emphasised on dynastic history along chronological lines. While Mill castigated Indian, particularly Hindu, civilisation in strongest terms, Smith generally avoided value judgements and stuck to chronological dynastic narratives.

Kosambi, on his part, had an entirely different view of history. He almost completely disregarded Mill's religious periodisation and Smith's chronological accounts of dynasties. He considered political history as superficial. Instead, he emphasised that the 'Society is held together by bonds of production'. Therefore, for him, history is

‘the presentation, in chronological order, of successive developments in the means and relations of production’. This, according to him, is ‘the only definition known which allow a reasonable treatment of pre-literate history, generally termed “pre-history”’. Moreover, he adds, history should be viewed in terms of conflict between classes: ‘The proper study of history in a class society means analysis of the differences between the interests of the classes on top and of the rest of the people.’

He says that this approach to history is ‘dialectical materialism, also called Marxism after its founder’. However, Kosambi remains quite flexible in his application of Marxism. He emphasises that ‘Marxism is far from the economic determinism which its opponents so often take it to be’. He basically considers Marxism as a method which one can profitably use for the study of Indian history and society. He adopted comparative method and inter-disciplinary approach to analyse Indian history and society since the early times. The results of his researches were published in his four major books: *An Introduction to the Study of Indian History* (1956), *Exasperating Essays: Exercises in the Dialectical Method* (1957), *Myth and Reality: Studies in the Formation of Indian Culture* (1962) and *The Culture and Civilisation of Ancient India in Historical Outline* (1965).

Kosambi’s non-dogmatic approach to history is evident in his rejection of two basic Marxist concepts on Indian history – the Asiatic Mode of Production and Slavery. He accepted the Marxist concept of feudalism in Indian context but denied the existence of serfdom. Instead, he thought the Indian society should be viewed in terms of the transition from tribe to caste. According to him, ‘The entire course of Indian history shows tribal elements being fused into a general society’. This explains ‘the most striking Indian social feature, namely caste.’

However, on the issue of literature and culture, Kosambi adopts the conventional Marxist approach about base and superstructure. According to him, the cultural and literary production can be directly related to the economic structure of a particular period. Thus, he argues that the teachings of *Bhagavad Gita* can be explained only by considering it as a product of the feudal society in which it originated. For him, *Gita* preached the ideology of the feudal ruling classes which stressed ‘the chain of personal loyalty which binds retainer to chief, tenant to lord, and baron to king or emperor’. Kosambi, therefore, regards the bhakti movement as a product of feudal ideology which preached loyalty to the god which meant, in the worldly sense, loyalty and devotion to the kings and rulers (citations from Upadhyay 2016: 489-94).

### 19.3.3 Bipan Chandra

Bipan Chandra is a major historian of modern India and the Indian nationalist movement. He disagrees with the views of R.P. Dutt on Indian nationalism and mounted a major critique of Dutt’s views. In his very first book, *The Rise and Growth of Economic Nationalism in India* (1966), Bipan Chandra argued that ideas should not be regarded as a direct reflection of the economic base. In his opinion, ideas had certain autonomy and can act as vehicles of action and change. Moreover, the intellectuals in any society maintain a relative independence from the interests of the class in which they are born. So, he emphasises that it is ‘sheer crude mechanical materialism’ to explain the actions of the intellectuals only on the basis of their class of origins. Thus, according to Chandra, the Indian nationalist leaders, as intellectuals, were also above the narrow interests of particular classes

in which they were born. It is true, however, that they also represented certain class interests. But these may not be the interests of the class of their birth. The representation of the class interests was done on the ideological level and not for personal gain. He argues:

Like the best and genuine intellectuals the world over and in all history, the Indian thinkers and intellectuals of the 19th century too were philosophers and not hacks of a party or a class. It is true that they were not above class or group and did in practice represent concrete class or group interests. But when they reflected the interests of a class or a group, they did so through the prism of ideology and not directly as members, or the obedient servants, of that class or group.

Thus, the economic thoughts of the early nationalist leaders, both the so-called moderates and the extremists, represented ideologically capitalist tendencies. This means that 'In nearly every aspect of economic life they championed capitalist growth in general and the interests of the industrial capitalists in particular'. However, this did not mean that they were working for the individual interests of the capitalists, but only that at a general level they desired India to develop along capitalist path. They believed that 'industrial development along capitalist lines was the only way to regenerate the country in the economic field, or that, in other words, the interests of the industrial capitalist class objectively coincided with the chief national interest of the moment'.

This was an important and different interpretation of Indian nationalist movement. He further developed his criticism of Dutt's thesis. In his book *Nationalism and Colonialism in Modern India* (1979), he argues that the basic objectives of the nationalist leaders were 'to generate, form and crystallize an anti-imperialist ideology, to promote the growth of modern capitalist economy, and in the end to create a broad all India national movement'. In his later book, *India's Struggle for Independence, 1857-1947* (1988), he further moves away from conventional Marxist thinking and adopts the Gramscian perspective for the study of the national movement. In this, he views the strategy of the nationalist leaders against colonialism in terms of Gramscian 'war of position' in which a prolonged struggle is waged for the attainment of goal. As he puts it:

The Indian national movement ... is the only movement where the broadly Gramscian theoretical perspective of a war of position was successfully practised; where state power was not seized in a single historical moment of revolution, but through prolonged popular struggle on a moral, political and ideological level; where reserves of counter-hegemony were built up over the years through progressive stages; where the phases of struggle alternated with "passive" phases.

Chandra conceived nationalist movement as an all-class movement which was fully inclusive and provided opportunity and space for any class to influence the movement. Moreover, he says that the Congress, which the most important organisation of the nationalist movement and which led 'this struggle from 1885 to 1947 was not then a party but a movement'.

He is critical of several historians and trends of history-writing on India for not realising that the main contradiction in colonial India was between the Indian people and the British colonialism. The contradictions between classes, groups, and factions were all there but not as important. On the whole, Bipan Chandra revises the conventional Marxist interpretation of the Indian nationalist movement and offers a new perspective.

### 19.3.4 Irfan Habib

Irfan Habib is among the most prominent Indian historians whose specialisation is in medieval history but has competently written on all periods of Indian past, including the pre-historical past. Like other branches of Indian history, medieval India has also attracted a number of Marxist historians. Nurul Hasan, Satish Chandra, Irfan Habib, Athar Ali, and Harbans Mukhia are some among them. They have made in-depth study of medieval Indian society, polity and economy. Among these historians, Irfan Habib is considered to be particularly important. His study of the Mughal economy, *The Agrarian System of Mughal India* (1963), is regarded among the best books on the period. In this book, he argues that the basic contradiction in the late medieval period was between ‘the centralised ruling class (state) and the peasantry’. Other forms of contradiction were between the state and the *zamindars*, between the untouchables and the rest of the society and between the tribes and the encroaching caste peasantry. Among all these, according to Habib, the ‘drive for tax-revenue may be regarded as the basic motive force. Land revenue sustained the large urban sector; but the pressure for higher collection devastated the country, antagonized *zamindars* whose own shares of surplus was thereby affected, and drove the peasants to rebellion’.

This book on medieval Indian history was followed by other important contributions in the form of *An Atlas of the Mughal Empire* (1982) and his edited book, *The Cambridge Economic History of India*, Vol. I (1982). Apart from these, his several books and articles, including *Caste and Money in Indian History* (1987), *Interpreting Indian History* (1988), and *Essays in Indian History: Towards a Marxist Perception* (1995), explore and comment on various periods of Indian history.

#### Check Your Progress-1

- 1) Discuss the main ideas of Marxist historiography.

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- 2) Write a note on the views and works of any two Indian Marxist historians.

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## 19.4 IMPORTANT FEATURES OF SUBALTERN HISTORIOGRAPHY

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Subaltern historiography emerged from the series of volumes, known as the *Subaltern Studies*, initially edited by Ranajit Guha. This series began in 1982 and it had published 12 volumes by 2005. The first six volumes were edited by the founder of this project, Ranajit Guha. After that each volume was edited by individual scholars belonging to the group. Over a period of more than 20 years, this intellectual project in Indian historiography became and remained very influential.

The *Subaltern Studies* was declared by its adherents to herald a new school of history-writing constituting a radical break from all the existing trends in Indian

historiography. A group of scholars, who were critical of the contemporary history-writing in India, joined and contributed to the volumes. There were others also, who were not part of the core group, wrote articles for these volumes. It was planned in the beginning to be only a series of three volumes, but later it continued for long with more and more historians associated with it. The themes it covered also proliferated into various directions, including non-Indian Third World countries. Initially, its contributors were influenced by Gramsci and Marxist social historians in the West. Later, many of them came under the influence of post-modernism and post-colonialism. The main arguments of the subaltern historiography over the period may be summarised as follows:

- All hitherto existing Indian historiography was informed by elitism of two types – colonial elitism and bourgeois nationalist elitism.
- The subaltern historians wanted to change the direction of Indian historiography by writing history from the point-of-view of the common people, such as the peasants, and other lower and exploited classes.
- The critique of the elite classes and their ideologies was considered as the beginning point of this project.
- These historians aimed to portray the subaltern classes as thinking and acting agents rather than as passive subjects. It is argued that there was nothing spontaneous about their actions, and these classes took conscious decisions and planned for their actions, including rebellions.
- It was asserted that the elites and the subalterns occupied separate domains at political, ideological and social levels. The domain within which the subaltern classes existed, thought and acted was autonomous and the role and influences of the dominant classes on such domain were rather limited.
- Even at the organisational level, the subaltern politics was autonomous and relied on traditional social structures such as caste, tribe, kinship networks, etc.
- The consciousness of the subaltern classes was influenced by traditional religious ideology, as both the colonial ideology and bourgeois nationalist ideology failed to establish their hegemony over subaltern consciousness.
- While ‘elite mobilisation was vertical and hierarchical’, the ‘subaltern mobilisation was horizontal and equalitarian’. Moreover, while ‘the elite mobilisation was legalistic and pacific’, the ‘subaltern mobilisation was relatively violent’ (Upadhyay 2016: 541).

These were the main formulations of subaltern historiography which are present in one form or the other in most of the articles in the *Subaltern Studies*. Now we will discuss some of the important subaltern historians and their works.

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## 19.5 SOME IMPORTANT SUBALTERN HISTORIANS

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The number of scholars who wrote for the *Subaltern Studies* and wrote their own works under the influence of subaltern historiography is quite large. Even the number of those who stood by subaltern formulations over a period of time is substantial. It will not be possible to discuss all of these. In the following Sub-sections, we will discuss only four of the subaltern historians.

### 19.5.1 Ranajit Guha

Ranajit Guha was the prime mover of the project of *Subaltern Studies*. Right from the beginning, he was critical of other trends in Indian history-writing. In his preface to the first volume of the *Subaltern Studies*, he declared that ‘The historiography of Indian nationalism has for a long time been dominated by elitism – colonialist elitism and bourgeois-nationalist elitism.’ He argued that both the colonial the nationalist historiographies had many things in common. The most important of these was that they both ignored the politics of the common masses. Even the leftist historians did not acknowledge the agency of the people. The historians belonging to all these three trends appropriated the politics of the people to their own ends. Thus, colonial, nationalist, and Marxist discourses were considered ‘an act of appropriation which excludes the rebel as the conscious subject of his own history’ (cited in Upadhyay 2016: 549). Reacting against earlier forms of history-writing, Guha stated that what brought the subaltern historians together was the opposition to this elitism:

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.

Guha, *Subaltern Studies*, vol. III, 1984: vii

In his book, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency* (1983), Guha argues that all historical discourses on ‘peasant insurgency thus made [their] debut quite clearly as a discourse of power. Rational in its representation of the past as linear and secular rather than cyclical and mythic, it had nothing but reasons of state as its *raison d’être*.’ By the same logic it was also a discourse of the state. Thus, ‘By making the security of the state into the central problematic of peasant insurgency, it assimilated the latter as merely an element in the career of colonialism. In other words, the peasant was denied recognition as a subject of history in his own right even for a project that was all his own’ (*Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency*, p. 3).

According to Guha, these discourses were so much elitist and so focussed on the secular and statist ideas that they were ‘reluctant to come to terms with the religious element in rebel consciousness’. According to history, the specific form of rebel’s consciousness was expressed in religious terms and ‘it is not possible to speak of insurgency...except as a religious consciousness’ (*Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency*, p. 38, 34). In the process of imposing their own ideologies on the peasant rebels, these elitist historical discourses ignored the rebels’ actual ideology altogether.

### 19.5.2 Partha Chatterjee

Partha Chatterjee, another leading light among the subaltern historians, was influenced by postmodernist and postcolonial thinking right from the beginning of the project. In his influential book, *Nationalist Thought and Colonial World* (1986), he applied the postcolonial framework of Edward Said in which the colonial power-knowledge has been held to be extremely dominant and overwhelming. In his later book, *The Nation and its Fragments* (1993), he carried this analysis further.

In his book, *Nationalist Thought*, Chatterjee argues that the post-Enlightenment European knowledge-forms were so powerful that they tended to reduce a lot of nationalist thinkers into followers of European scholars. However, in certain ways, he considered Gandhi's thinking as being independent and lying 'outside the thematic of post-Enlightenment thought'. Gandhi's thought, in his opinion, possessed 'an inherently "peasant-communal" character'. Excepting Gandhi, all other nationalist ideologues were deeply implicated in replicating colonial discourses. For example, Bankim Chandra and Nehru followed the European thinking on the issue of nationalism.

In his *The Nation and its Fragments*, Chatterjee argues that the anti-colonial nationalism in India was not a copy of its European counterpart. It adopted its own course and created 'its own domain of sovereignty within colonial society well before it begins its political battle with the imperial power'. According to him, two separate domains were created – the internal and external. In the internal domain, spirituality was emphasised while materiality was considered legitimate for the external domain. The internal and spiritual domain was kept away from the influence of colonial power and European knowledge and culture. But in the external domain regular interaction with the Europeans, colonial officials and pursuit of money, power, and new science and technology were considered as important activities. Chatterjee argues that it was from the internal domain that Indian nationalism derived its sustenance, and it was here that a "modern" national culture was created which was modern but not Western. It is here that 'the nation ... [as] an imagined community ... is brought into being' (see Upadhyay 2016: 552-54).

### 19.5.3 Gyanendra Pandey

Gyanendra Pandey is one of the important subalternist historians whose writings encompassed various phases in the development of the *Subaltern Studies*. In his early article, in 'Peasant Revolt and Indian Nationalism, 1919-1922', he argued that in Awadh countryside, the peasant movements had an existence autonomous from the nationalist movement. Thus, they arose before and existed independently of the Gandhian Non-cooperation movement. According to him, the peasants' understanding of the local power structure and its alliance with colonialism was more refined than that of the urban nationalist leaders. The peasant movements were also more militant. However, the peasant militancy became restricted when the Congress took control of the movement and imposed its own programme on the movement.

In his later writings, Pandey elaborately explored what he termed as the 'construction of communalism' during colonial times. In his several articles and books, he analysed the development and spread of communalism in North India. In his analysis of the cow protection movement in UP and Bihar, he located the roots of communalism in the worsening conditions of various classes of people such as the lower *zamindars*, artisans, peasants and many other agricultural castes and classes. He argued that in their attempt towards upward social mobility, many castes resorted to communal propaganda which apparently boosted their ritual status in the society. Even among the Muslims, as Pandey explores in his essay 'Qasba Mubarakpur' in *Subaltern Studies* III, the same processes were at work with the growing impoverishment of the landlords and social and religious assertions by poor weavers.

In his book, *Construction of Communalism in Colonial North India* (1989), Pandey emphasises that the colonial discourses were responsible for making communalism into a coherent ideology. Even ordinary events of sectarian strife were portrayed as ‘communal riots’ between Hindus and Muslims. According to him, the attempt of the colonial discourse was to ‘establish the perverse nature of the population, and the fundamental antagonism between “Hindus” and “Muslims”’. In this way, the entire pre-colonial history was depicted as ‘essentially chaotic and unruly’ and divided between rival religious communities. He also argues that the portrayal of Indian past as chaotic justified the British colonial rule which established law and order and peace among the constantly warring Indians.

In his article ‘The Prose of Otherness’ (1994), Pandey criticises all varieties of modernist, ‘secular’, and ‘scientific’ historians for following the colonial discourse on the question of violence. He argues that by castigating mob violence as madness, irrational, fanatic and abnormal, these historians have misrepresented the real nature of the partition violence. According to him, these events should be seen in a balanced way and the historians should try ‘to recover “marginal” voices and memories, forgotten dreams and signs of resistance’.

In his another book, *Remembering Partition* (2001), he reiterates the above points and emphasises on the need to study the ‘traces’, ‘fragments’, and ‘voices from the edge’. He argues that ‘the study of the fragment, or the voice from the edge, aims to uncover alternative viewpoints, other perspectives and other ways of writing, to try and capture other perspectives. The “fragment” in this usage is not just a “bit” – the dictionary’s “piece broken off” – of a preconstituted whole. Rather, it is a disturbing element, a “disturbance”, a contradiction ... in the self-representation of that particular totality and those who uncritically uphold it’ (Pandey, *Remembering Partition*, 2001: 296).

#### 19.5.4 Dipesh Chakrabarty

Dipesh Chakrabarty has been among the core members of the *Subaltern Studies* who has also been vociferously defending it against critics on all forums. Right from the beginning, he displayed unease with the economic interpretation of history as promoted by a particular version of Marxism. In his articles and book on Bengal jute workers, he emphasises the cultural aspects more than economic ones. He thinks that it was the particular culture among industrialists and recruiting agents as well as among the workers that shaped a strong ‘pre-capitalist culture with a strong emphasis on religion, community, kinship, language and other primordial loyalties’ (cited in Upadhyay 2016: 558).

In his most famous book, *Provincializing Europe* (2000), he is critical of the Western intellectual dominance of the world which shaped and still shapes the way histories all over the world are written. These have resulted in the marginalisation of indigenous knowledge-systems in non-European countries. The indigenous forms of history have been replaced by the European model and, in a way, Europe has become the central subject of all histories written all over the globe. He thinks that this totalising thrust of history in modern times has to be resisted.

He, however, makes clear that his is ‘not a call for cultural relativism or for atavistic, nativist histories. Nor is this a program for a simple rejection of modernity, which would be, in many situations, politically suicidal.’ In fact, he says, ‘I ask for a

history that deliberately makes visible, within the very structure of its narrative forms, its own repressive strategies and practices, the part it plays in collusion with the narratives of citizenships in assimilating to the projects of the modern state all other possibilities of human solidarity' (*Provincializing Europe*, p. 45).

Instead, the history he proposes are 'plural histories' which would promote dialogue between various points of view and set in motion a diversity which would contest the homogenising nature of mainstream histories.

**Check Your Progress-2**

- 1) What are the salient features of subaltern historiography?

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- 2) Discuss the writings of any two of the subaltern historians.

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**19.6 SUMMARY**

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Both the Marxist and the subaltern historiographies we have discussed here claim to speak for the oppressed and marginalised classes in the society. Both of them criticise the various forms of colonial and nationalist historiographies because of their propensity to ignore the lower classes. Both these forms of history-writing have succeeded in bringing the subordinate groups in Indian society not only within the purview of history but also sometimes in its centre. However, there are certain differences between the two and both are critical of each other. While the subaltern historians accuse the Marxist historians for not taking the authentic voice of the subordinate groups into account, the Marxist historians charge the subalternists for presenting a lop-sided picture.

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**19.7 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS  
EXERCISES**

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**Check Your Progress-1**

- 1) See Section 19.2
- 2) Take help from Section 19.3

**Check Your Progress-2**

- 1) See Section 19.4
- 2) See Section 19.5

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## 19.8 SUGGESTED READINGS

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Guha, Ranajit, (1983) *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press).

Guha, Ranajit, (ed.) *Subaltern Studies*, vols. I and III.

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## 19.9 INSTRUCTIONAL VIDEO RECOMMENDATIONS

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**The Peasant, then and now: Thirty years of Ranajit Guha's Elementary Aspects**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YXKyxc6pzb4&t=1011s>

**Debate: Marxism & the Legacy of Subaltern Studies - Historical Materialism NY 2013**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xbM8HJrxSJ4&t=16s>

**Revisiting Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Conversation with Partha Chatterjee**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jaZn9IqPJZg>

**In Retrospect: Subaltern Studies and Futures Past - Dipesh Chakrabarty**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YEW-jVr4fJU>

**Margins and Marginalities**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SessF1WOWwc>

**Dalit Memoirs: Re-Scripting the Subaltern Body**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vVA1NsiTUV0>