

Historiography in Different Themes

(1) Department of Social Sciences, South Eastern University of Sri Lanka, Oluvil – 32360, Sri Lanka.

Abstract: This article is about the development of the historiography in the twenty first century. The British colonial rulers influenced the South Asian Historiography. It reflects the society. Among the different themes in History writing I had chosen a few themes only. These themes are special interest to South Asians and they are very concerned for the development of Historiography in History writings. There are many sources available for history writing. Here I would like to highlight the empirical research is at the heart of new history writings.

Keywords: Historiography, Colonial, Rulers, Oral tradition, Reflection, Empirical

Introduction

It is a great important to write research article in the development of the historiography in the twenty first century. It is very timely, resonant and important especially for those of us working in the field of South Asian History. As a region, that had experienced a long history of colonial rules and the South Asians history was concerned and written by the British Colonial rulers and administrators. The challenge of decolonizing history has only served to stimulate critical reflections on history and historiography. It surely ensured the constant renewal of the field.

Therefore it is not surprising that the field of South Asian history has been at the forefront of critical debates in writing of history and historiography in recent times.

Here, I would like to explain my own sense of the different new directions in history writing. They have, I believe, impacted the writing of history in general and South Asian history particular. History reflects the social and other activities.

Themes in History Writing:

To illustrate the interests of new history let me say a few words on its classical themes and look at some of the writings on these in more detail. There are of course many areas of research that I could mention but I have selected those I feel might be of special interest to South Asians or that have already been explored by South Asian historians.⁰¹

1. Notions of Time
2. Demography and the Family
3. Women's History
4. Oral History
5. Mentalities

1. Notions of Time

Notions of time have been at the centre of new historians' preoccupations. New history has not undermined the belief that the question of the historian is asked from the present to the past and that it deals with origins, evolutions and itineraries in time that are fixed by dates. History, for conventional as well as new historians is a work about time. But in the case of new historians it is 'time' that is complex and constructed, with multiple faces. In Annals history the individual agent and occurrence cease to be the central elements in social explanation. Since events are constituted largely by the force of many different conjunctural and structural circumstances, there is no homogeneous or continuous time. Fernand Braudel insists upon the importance of the long – term (*longue duree*) with its stress on continuity. In his view, the movement of history is mediated through the relative immobility of 'structures', the relatively more mobile 'conjunctures' and the fast moving 'event'. His classic *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philippe II* is a blueprint for historians looking for actual physical structures which lie invisible below the surface of social activities and are subject to different rhythms of time.⁰²

Periodisation too is not taken for granted. New history posits that each historical object has its own periodisation. For instance it would not be pertinent to adopt a political periodisation for the study of an economic or religious evolution.

History is sometimes described as the science of the consciousness of time. Leibnitz defined time as the order of non – contemporaneous things. There is a today, there was a yesterday and there will be a tomorrow. But although new historians accept that the perception of ‘before’ and ‘after’ embodied in the notion of order and succession gives history its entire distinction and originality as a branch of knowledge, they stress that there is an absolute and a relative time. Time can be appropriated by people in a position of social or political dominance. As K.N. Chaudhuri perceptively remark:

‘Expressions such as idle, industrious, leisured and even obedient had little meaning without a concept of authority that appropriated in the name of duty the hours from the dawn to sunset in the lives of farmers and artisans’⁰³

It is the time of public collectivities, societies, states and civilizations. It serves as an anchor to members of a group. So the time of history is neither physical time nor psychological time. Recently, anthropologists have looked at the time of cultures and focused their attention on time as a marker of social transformation. They have shown us that there are different ways of understanding ideas and experiences of temporality. To illustrate this we can look at an essay by Jacques Le Goff, called *Merchant’s Time and Church’s Time in the Middle Ages*.⁰⁴ This essay traces the transformation of the notion of time from one of a cosmic, divine, even mystical entity to one where it becomes a commodity – measurable, and accountable in crass monetary terms. There was in fact a conflict between these two conceptions of time. The major points at issue were the following:

Medieval clerics regarded time in the light of biblical texts but during the course of the twelfth century this traditional notion of time was shaken. This was caused by the disappearance of the Roman Empire, the barbarization of the West and to a lesser

degree to the imperial restorations by Charlemagne and Otto. Christianity had to appeal to secondary causes both structural and contingent in fashioning explanations.

Like the peasant, the merchant was first subjected to the cycle of seasons, the unpredictability of storms and natural cataclysms. But once commercial networks were organized, time became an object of measurement. For the Christian merchant, the time in which he worked professionally was not the time in which he lived religiously. Gradually the Church adapted to the changing conditions of nascent capitalism. Condemnation of the offences which went by the name of usury became less rigid. The length of time required for fast, abstinence and Sunday rest were no longer strictly prescribed but recommended. The merchant’s time was freed from biblical time.

In the modern era, control over and classification of time were crucial. For instance the French revolution produced a new calendar and started counting the years from the beginning of the revolution. In Sri Lanka, less dramatically, the government of Dudley Senanayake attempted to introduce the lunar month with a five day and six day staggered week. Notions of time have recently been studied by historians of colonialism. Some of their studies have shown how colonialism imposed the western understanding of time as something that ruled the life of the indigenous people often perceived as ‘lay natives.’⁰⁵

2. Demography and the Family

Historical demography came of age in the 1950s in Europe when economic historians began to look into sources that had until then been exploited mainly by demographers. In France parish registers were subjects to new readings. A number of debates emerged. Among them was the thesis that demographic movements in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were linked to fluctuations in prices. Monthly and annual demographic curves were charted with the help of data regarding marriages, baptisms and deaths. To confirm or refute this interpretation historians undertook rigorous reconstructions of the history of families in micro – regions.

The Family

In 1972 *Annales* published a special double issue on 'Family and Society'; in the same year in Britain and in the US there appeared two important works on the history of the family. The precursor of family history is the historian Philippe Aries who wrote *Centuries of Childhood* in 1960. In this book he suggested that pre-industrial society did not make any critical distinction between adults and children. Our society's perception is quite different; the distinction between children and adults is constantly made in our obsession with the education of children.⁰⁶

After Aries a number of controversies have emerged; the main point of contention is between historians who see a fundamental change in the modern period to 'affective individualism' involving the primacy of love over more prosaic considerations in marriage, and those who stress continuity. Historians still disagree over the structure, characteristics and significance of the family in past times. The evidence available is often fragmentary and uncertain.

3. Women's History

Women's history has emerged as a significant field in the last two decades. In Sri Lanka many courses incorporate issues dealing with women although at the undergraduate level women's history is yet to emerge as a distinct area of study. What is quite clear until the late twentieth century is the absence of women as authors and subjects of historical accounts. The reason is simple: the traditional time-frame of history has always been derived from political history. Women have been excluded from making war, wealth, laws, governments, arts and science. Men functioning in their capacity as historians, considered exactly those activities constitutive of civilization. Hence the domination of diplomatic history, economic history, constitutional history and political history in school and university curricula. In Sri Lankan history for instance, has there been any written history by women before the mid twentieth century?

The aim of women's history is to make women a focus of inquiry, a subject of the story, an agent of the

narrative. In other words it is to construct women as a historical subject. Indeed the history of women is not the same as the history of men. There are different turning points for each sex.

In short women's history has a dual goal; to restore women to history and to restore our history to women. That means that women's history has two tasks:

- to challenge conventional history writing
- to emphasize that a representative history can only be written if the experience and status of one half of humankind is an integral part of the story. Women's history must not be written as a separate chapter but, as Helene Cixous says, women must 'insinuate themselves into the text'.⁰⁷

In Sri Lanka the task of restoration has only just begun. The historical archive has little to offer and this makes reconstruction difficult. For example feminist historians have had to tease information out of census data to interpret demographic changes. They have also had to examine other scant sources – women's letters, diaries, autobiographies, and testimonies – in order to first locate them in history. Only then can they reinterpret and challenge the historical record. Writing a women's history only for women as is most often the case in Sri Lanka has its drawbacks. How many men whether students or academics read the work of Sri Lankan feminists whose focus is exclusively on women? A valuable women's history must throw light not only on women's experience but on social and political practices and in so doing permit historians to raise critical questions regarding the rewriting of history.⁰⁸

4. Oral History

Most professional historians are generally skeptical about the value of oral sources in reconstructing the past. Oral history if one were to offer a definition – is history written with evidence gathered from a living person, rather than from a written document. The question is especially important for societies without written records such as many African communities. Traditional history has

tended to deny a history to non – literate societies and non – literate communities. Since the beginning of the Rankean approach to history Africa has been seen as the historic continent par excellence. It was firmly believed that Africa, the Dark Continent had no history before it was ‘discovered’ by the west. This view was shared by thinkers from the right and the left and not only about Africa. Karl Marx himself wrote that Indian villages simply ‘stewed in the sun, unproductively reproducing themselves.’⁰⁹

What must be conceded is that there are limitations to the reconstruction through oral sources alone but that oral sources can contribute to correcting such perspectives. What are the oral sources available for the historian?

1. Oral Tradition: that is oral testimony transmitted verbally from one generation to the next, or more.

Among these one can distinguish four categories.

There is poetry including songs and lists.

There are proverbs that provide much information on popular culture. These two categories are rote learnt but while the content of songs is generally fixed or frozen the content of proverbs can vary. There are often many versions of one proverb.

Finally there are traditions not learned by rote: epics and narratives. By epic it is meant for example the Homeric epic or the Mahabarata that is the heroic poetry composed orally, according to rules. Of course the poems were written down subsequently.

1. Personal Reminiscence: This is oral evidence specific to the life experiences of the informant, for instance private family stories. Jokes too are of value for the social historian. Under totalitarian or dictatorial regimes jokes reveal the flaws, faultlines and absurdities of seemingly unopposed power.

Oral history by reminiscence is often powerful for social history. But even if it is helpful and illustrative is it formative of explanation? Is it not

trapped in the small scale? Oral history is best used with multiple, converging independent sources. It can provide the detail, the humanity, the emotion and also a welcome skepticism about the entire historiographic undertaking.

A good example is the research undertaken by the anthropologist Gananath Obeyesekere on the tales surrounding Sigiriya. After listening to folktales recounted by villagers who lived in the area he was able to reconstruct a quite different account of the demise of King Kassapa from that described in the Mahavamsa.¹⁰ There is a lot more that could be done. Historians in Sri Lanka have not exploited the fund of information that exists in the memories of its people.

For some areas of historical study oral testimony is invaluable since there is little other source material available. But as much as possible it must be checked against other kinds of source.

5. Mentalities

Histoire des mentalities are a French term. It can be translated into English as cultural history, although this itself has acquired a different meaning in the late 1980s and 1990s. George Duby for instance says that a study of feudalism must go beyond institutions, modes of production, social systems and military organization and reach out to an understanding of a feudal conception of service, to a feudal mentality. In the same way the capitalist society that began to emerge in Europe in the sixteenth century was not only the result of a new mode of production, of a monetary economy or the creation of a bourgeoisie, it was also the result of new attitudes to wards work and money, a mentality that since Max Weber one links to the Protestant ethic. So a history of mentality aims at satisfying the curiosity of historians who are eager to go further.

Robert Darnton who specializes in pre – revolutionary France explains that a history of mentalities treats one’s own civilization the same way that anthropologists study alien cultures. It is in short, he says, history in the ethnographic grain. It is a kind of cultural history that is not concerned with high culture or with the way thought evolved from

philosopher to philosopher – historians of ideas focus on this area – but the way ordinary people made sense of the world.¹¹

The methodology of the historian studying mentalities is very similar to that of the social anthropologist and sociologist. The difference between the inquiry of the anthropologist and that of the historian of mentalities, however, is that a historian researching, for instance, religious mentalities in eighteenth century India or Sri Lanka cannot base his / her understanding on interviews. He / She has to use archives as a substitute for fieldwork. Darnton suggests that if we want to understand the way of thinking in the past centuries we must set out with the idea of capturing otherness. For, in the past, people did not think the way we do today. The historian's task is to unravel an alien system of meaning. He / She is most likely to find something if he / she explores a document where it is most opaque and unclear. The sources available are many; from rituals, city plans, to folktales etc. Anything can be read for meaning, ie. the meaning inscribed by contemporaries in whatever survives of their vision of the world.

There are of course methodological shortcomings. Among them are the problem of proof and the problem of representative ness.

Folktales for instance can be taken as a source for the historian, who however can never form more than an approximate idea of how tales were told in the past. This is the case of folktales of the world including Sri Lanka. We do not know exactly when and where they were told or what their texts were. But they are often all that is left of oral traditions and the richest source at the historian's disposal if he wants to make contact with the mental world of peasants in the past. Another problem is the selection of a source. In what way is for instance the oral evidence of a particular worker recorded by a court in early nineteenth century Sri Lanka representative of the people's worldview? At the outset historians working on mentalities must not pretend to present a typical peasant, bourgeois or nationalist. But they can make connections between text and context in order to reach out to the symbolic world of the past.

Another pitfall resides in the relation between mentalities and social structures. Is there for each society at each particular period a dominant mentality or many mentalities? Lucien Febre was very critical of the notion of a Renaissance man, a pure abstraction in his view.

'The Great Cat Massacre', an essay by the American historian Robert Darnton is a good example of what a historian of mentalities can read about the mentalities in eighteenth century France in a seemingly bizarre episode where cats were massacred by workers in a printing shop in Paris. Darnton uses the written account of Contat, one of the workers, as the main source of his study. Contat begins his account by saying how amusing the killing of cats was. Today's reader however, especially a reader from a Buddhist background, would not find it funny at all, would not get the joke. This inability to understand the joke indicates the distance that separates us from the workers of pre-industrial Europe. What Darnton tries to do in this essay is to understand the joke. By doing that, it may be possible to comprehend a basic ingredient of artisanal culture under the Old Regime. The text of Contact reveals many things about early modern labour relations. The first explanation is that the cat massacre served as an oblique attack on the master and his wife. Hatred for the bourgeois was common among pre-industrial workers. Indeed when one looks at the printing industry at the time there was dissatisfaction on the part of the workers. But why cats? Cats, it appeared, played an important part in some rituals especially during carnival and lent. During carnival the common people suspended the normal rules of behaviour and turned the social order upside down. In some ceremonies a cat was passed around by youth who tore its fur to make it howl. Another occasion was the celebration of the summer solstice on 24 June: crowds made bonfires, danced around them and threw objects into the flames. Among these were cats tied up in bags, cats suspended from ropes, or cats burned at the stake. Cats also represent something mysterious and occult in many societies. The torture of animals, especially of cats, was a popular amusement in early modern Europe. Folktales, superstitions, proverbs and popular medicine provide some information for the historian. Cats suggested witchcraft. In popular tales cats could

transform themselves into witches. They had occult powers. French folklore attaches special importance to the cat as a sexual metaphor. Women were identified with cats. In short cats bore enormous symbolic weight in the folklore of France. So when one rereads Contat's account these themes appear quite clearly. Sorcery appears in the qualification 'bedeviled cats'. The description of the fete resembles the atmosphere of the carnival. Contat then describes the trial that was enacted by the workers where the master and mistress were declared guilty. This episode recaptures not only labour relations under the Old Regime but also helps understand what constituted a joke in eighteenth century France.¹²

Another area where historians of mentalities have done valuable work is in studies of the book and reading.¹³ Reading is an activity that in all literate cultures is shared with ancestors, yet can never be a shared experience. Reading too has a history. In a Europe where the population was 100,000,000 at least 20,000,000 books had been printed by 1,500.¹⁴ But how can the historian recover the history of the book? Quantitative methods has brought new perspectives. There have been studies by social historians of book circulation based on the measurement of networks and volumes of exchange where the book is treated as a commodity. Another project by historians of collective mentalities has been to understand the writing and reading practices of an entire society. The book is then a cultural sign.

In Europe a thematic analysis of titles of books published shows the replacement of theology as the main subject of books in the eighteenth century, by books dealing with the arts and sciences. For the historian of mentalities this can be interpreted as a move towards a secularization of society. In most cases the world of reading was a limited one although one can look for popular reading material in order to understand the culture of the socially dominated. Other studies have tried to gather information on the reading public. This has been done by charting a map of bookshops and libraries in the country under review. In eighteenth century France for instance there was a concentration in towns with a parliament, a university, or college.

The next step is to look at the content or catalogue of public libraries at a given time. This has led in some cases to new discoveries. For instance it was always widely believed that the writings of Rousseau were very influential in pre – revolutionary France. But the analysis of five hundred eighteenth century library catalogues showed only one copy of Rousseau's *Social Contract*. Instead libraries were full of authors that are today completely forgotten. Other studies have used data from private libraries and the book as a criterion to draw socio – cultural hierarchies of a city or province.

Another interesting area of research has looked at the way people read. When they had only a few books – in Europe it was the Bible, an almanach, a devotional work or two – in was read over an over again usually aloud and in groups. Later the nature of reading changed with the emergence of mass readership. But there was no common trend. In nineteenth century Europe workers still enjoyed someone reading to them while they worked. This seems a common trait in many cultures as the popularity of the radio and later the television set shows. In many societies reading was a more private experience for the minority of educated persons who could afford to buy books. Many joined reading clubs.

In Sri Lanka there is room for research on a history of the book and reading habits. What role did the Sangha play in pre – colonial times? What were the books available before the printing press revolutionized reading? What information can we glean from records of the content of private libraries, libraries of kings, or of religious institutions?

Yet another pioneering area of the history of mentalities is the theme of collective attitudes towards and representations of death. Sources ranging from archeology of tombs to manuscripts and parish registers are used. Michel Vovelle has studied western attitudes towards death from the Middle Ages to the present day. He shows for instance that from the mid – eighteenth century a decisive change in the relationship between man and the dead was manifested through an exile of the dead, the shifting of cemeteries from the churchyard to the outskirts of the city. The

study of the rituals, gestures of death and forms of body disposal is a fascinating if not morbid area of research for the social historian.

Conclusion

This article tried to introduce very briefly some of the themes researched by new historians. In so doing it was compelled to leave many valuable writings unmentioned. The main idea was, however, to show that in new history what has changed is not the fundamental understanding of history nor the method of research – empirical research is at the heart of new history – but the subject matter, the emphasis, and the incorporations of new modes of analysis that improve and fine – tune traditional methods.

Bibliography

M. Juneja & H. Mukhia, Seminar on 'New History', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 4 June 1988, pp. 1155 – 1159.

Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, 2 Vols., (London, 1972).

K.N. Chaudhuri, *Asia before Europe, Economy and Civilization of the Indian Ocean from the Rise of Islam to 1750*, (Cambridge, 1990), p. 97.

J. Le Goff, 'Merchant's Times and Church's Time in the Middle Ages', in eds Aymard and Muktia, pp. 193 – 213.

Frederick Cooper, 'Colonizing Time: Work Rhythms and Labour Conflict in Colonial Mombasa' in Nicholas B. Dirks (ed) *Colonialism and Culture*, (University of Michigan, 1992).

Philippe Aries, *Centuries of Childhood, A Social History of Family Life*, (New York, 1962).

Cited in Ritu Menon & Kamala Bhasin, *Borders and Boundaries, Women in India's Partition*, (New Delhi, 1998), p. 10.

Burke, Peter, ed., *New Perspectives on Historical Writing*, (Pennsylvania, 1991).

See Gwyn Prins, 'Oral History', in ed. P. Burke, pp. 114 – 139.

G. Obeysekere, 'Stories from Sigiriya Villagers: Supplement to the Mahavamsa', paper presented on 20 October 2000, at the Sri Lanka Historical Association Lecture Series, Colombo.

Robert Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre and other Episodes in French Cultural History*, (New York, 1985).

The Great Cat Massacre, op. ct.

The most famous work on this topic is Lucien Febre and Henri Jean Martin, *The Coming of the Book, The impact of Printing 1450 – 1800*, (London, 1976).

Anderson, Benedict, *Imagined Communities, Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, revised version, (London, New York, 1991), p. 37.