Feminist Recovery and Re-reading of Historical Knowledge Production

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Conventional recording and interpretation of sources determine what constitutes a major historical event, thereby rendering certain past events and actions inconsequential. One of the dominant methods of historical record-keeping and study is the recovery, analysis, and contextualisation of archival material. Mainstream archives are often perceived and understood as historical facts. The question of women recurs in addressing voices from "below," where emancipation is a process rather than an end, and women are agents rather than mere beneficiaries. The principles of selection and evaluation common to all historiographies align with a pre-fabricated statist perspective. This view of contradiction supports a hierarchised view of gender relations without acknowledging women's agency. To formulate an alternative historiography for those neglected by the mainstream statist perspective of record keeping, merely rewriting is not essential. Nevertheless, the paper argues that understanding the process through which the dominant source was recorded, as well as re-reading and re-interpreting it, is crucial. Reading against the grain or between the lines, especially in the case of prescriptive texts, or examining how myths and narratives evolve in a diachronic context, raises new questions. Thus, it is essential to understand how historical events influence the present and shape contemporary society, as well as how current developments, in turn, reshape our understanding of history and the methodologies we employ to investigate the questions we pose as researchers. This step is significant in the shift away from the hegemonic production of historical knowledge. Therefore, the paper explores what constitutes dominant archives in their formulation, production, and circulation. How does it contextualise the contemporary with respect to the questions of relative visibility and invisibility? In what ways can the neglected be recovered by reading the archives? How is the feminist recovery/re-reading of the past and simultaneous production of historiography and knowledge positioned?

Keywords: Feminist historiography, archives, knowledge production, gender relations.

Introduction: History and Historical "Facts"

"History is always necessarily selective," argues E. H. Carr in his seminal work– *What is History?* The indispensability of the text within historical studies is rooted in its critical insight into the standards deployed by the historian in recording history. Interrogating the framework of objective history and a

positivist approach to studying history, Carr's work questions how the "fact" is manufactured and presented by the historian, who then studies it as a historical fact. Carr argues that the value of these "facts" depends on the vantage point from which they are produced.[1] The historian is placed at the centre of the creation of the historical fact, something that can be shifted, interpreted, and analysed for its relevance and value in association with existing historical knowledge. Likewise, a historian's understanding of the past can never be divorced from the prevailing culture, politics, and ideas of the contemporary. Thus, power relations, prevalent norms, culture, religion, and political beliefs mediate how a historian interprets the past. It is a continuous interaction process between the historian and his facts and a continuous dialogue between the present and the past.[2]

Conventional recording and interpretation of sources determine what constitutes a major historical event, rendering certain past events and actions inconsequential. One of the dominant methods of historical record-keeping and study is the recovery, analysis, and contextualisation of archival material. Mainstream archives are perceived and understood as historical facts. Therefore, it becomes essential to consider what constitutes dominant archives in their formulation, production, and circulation. How do they contextualise the contemporary with respect to the questions of relative visibility and invisibility? In what ways can the neglected be recovered by reading the archives? How is the feminist recovery and re-reading of the past and the simultaneous production of historiography and knowledge get positioned?

Archival Sources: Constructions, Subjectivities, and Relevance

The claims of scientificity and verifiability of historical facts are anchored through credible historical sources and accounts. By objectively observing the past to analyse material remains, the intention is to establish a positivist account of historical research that focuses on the "free individual subject" at times embedded in personal bias and speculation. Contrary to this approach, there has been a shift in the process of undertaking historical analysis of textual evidence where the historical fact or truth is not considered to exist *a-priori* to the observation. Facts need to be placed in context and interpreted, as

[1] E. H. Carr, *What is History?* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1987).

[2] Ibid.

there is no unmediated past. Hence, it is essential to understand why a historian engages with a particular source, the subsequent observations and interpretations produced, and how these simultaneously shape both the production of historical knowledge and the historian.

In terms of the dominant historical conception, documentary evidence, and sources, archives serve as the repositories of the state. Archives are central and crucial resources produced by the state to establish and legitimise their institutional power and hegemonic control. While the recording of archives is not generally intended for historical production, historians use them for purposes that interest them. Therefore, it becomes essential to understand the processes and contexts in which the production and interpretation of archival material are situated, especially in relation to the questions raised regarding them.

The emergence of law and legislation as a framework for understanding human society has established its authority by recording events in their current form, which are then subsequently separated and placed in another text of sociological importance by the editor. The movement across disciplinary frameworks formulates and positions one's purpose to reclaim historical documents.[3] Ranajit Guha, in *The Small Voice of History*, argues that the ordinary apparatus of historiography, particularly in the context of the reclamation of history, targets powerful institutions and tends to neglect the lower depths and "smaller voices".[4] This dominant historiographical practice fails to distinguish between historical study and the study of statecraft. Guha posits that the application of critical historiography will enable a closer examination of the ground and will bring forth the elements of subaltern life, situating the narratives within a given context. There is a need to cultivate the disposition to understand these voices from "below" and interact with them, as their complexity is unmatched by statist discourse and, in many ways, stand in opposition to its oversimplified modes of operation.[5] This preoccupation

[3] Ranajit Guha, "Chandra's Death," in *A Subaltern Studies Reader, 1986–1995*, ed. Ranajit Guha (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 34–62.

[4] Ranajit Guha, "The Small Voice of History," in *Subaltern Studies IX: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, ed. Shahid Amin and Dipesh Chakrabarty (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996), 1–12.

[5] Ibid.

with the statist viewpoint that informed the colonial model is indistinguishable from the standpoint of those who were colonised and later the nationalists.

The questions and issues pertaining to women often highlight the voices from "below", indicating that emancipation is an ongoing process, with women acting as agents rather than just beneficiaries. The principles of selection and evaluation, common to all historiographies, are in consonance with a pre-fabricated statist perspective. Hence, the hierarchised view of contradiction[6] upholds a hierarchised view of gender relations without acknowledging 'women's agency" in the movement. Guha asserts that just the critique of statist discourse does not account for the production of alternative historiography.[7] For that to happen, the critique must move beyond conceptualisation into the next stage—the practice of rewriting that history. It does not mean a simple revision on empirical grounds, but one where historiography is pushed to a point where the instrumentality, the last refuge of elitism, will be interrogated and reassessed not only with respect to women but also to all participants. This idea is central to subaltern studies,[8] where the voice of one group from below will activate and make the voices of other groups audible as well.[9]

Therefore, to formulate an alternative historiography of those neglected by the mainstream statist perspective of record-keeping, rewriting alone is not essential. Nevertheless, understanding the process through which the dominant source is recorded, as well as re-reading and re-interpreting it, is crucial. This step is significant in the shift from the hegemonic production of historical knowledge towards a more contextual and relational reading of history.

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[6] The hierarchised view of contradiction sees contradiction not a single and undifferentiated phenomenon but existing, operating and manifesting at different levels or degrees.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Subaltern Studies emerged around 1982 as a series of journal articles published by Oxford University Press in India. The main aim was to retake history for the underclasses, for the voices that had not been heard previously. Scholars of the subaltern hoped to break away from the histories of the elites and the Eurocentric bias prevalent in imperial history.

[9] Ibid.

Feminist "Recovery" and Interpretation of Archives

Feminist scholars and historians have raised concerns about accommodating feminist methodological frameworks with mainstream historical studies. Janaki Nair, in her work, *The Troubled Relationship of Feminism and History*, traces the dominant approaches through which critiques and methods of feminism have been incorporated in the field of history. Despite the presence of a feminist framework of inquiry within the domain of historical study, they have done little to transform its foundational core and the sanctioned ignorance of mainstream academia. Nair argues, "in inverse proportion to the quantum of high-quality writing on Indian history from the standpoint of women is the relative imperviousness of the discipline itself to feminism's insights."[10] The feminist discourse of historical analyses and the subsequent production of alternate historiography are based on the disturbing emphasis on periodisation. However, the work of feminist historians working in close association with mainstream history has been unsuccessful in scrutinising the "disciplinary foundations of history, its thematic orientation, and its periodisation".[11] Thus, a feminist historical analysis may operate on the additive framework of historical investigation without re-conceptualising the same.[12]

Feminist methodological frameworks within history often encounter questions on visibility, hypervisibility through institutionalisation, and isolation in terms of theoretical knowledge production. This contradiction can be seen in the interdisciplinary operations of women's studies and feminist historiography, which have been extensively aided by the Indian state's willingness to nurture, if not absorb, the critical insights of feminism in its programmes, policies, and endowments. In this sense, academic feminism has flourished under conditions that are uniquely Indian, alongside with and often against the power of the Indian state. However, feminist investment in historical analysis is based primarily on the desire to dismantle and alter existing gender hierarchies within the given spatial and temporal dynamics.

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[10] Janaki Nair, "The Troubled Relationship of Feminism and History," *Economic and Political Weekly* 43, no.4 (2008): 57–65, https://doi.org/10.2307/40278103.

[11] Nair, "The Troubled Relationship of Feminism and History," p. 58.

[12] Ibid.

The engagement with "women's questions" in history has surfaced in the work of several women historians but this alone cannot be seen as contributing to the feminist framework, historiography, and knowledge production. The uneven relationship of feminist history with mainstream history has raised concerns about the methodological parameters of analysing historical sources and what constitutes the subject of feminist history. Susie Tharu and Tejaswani Niranjana, in *Problems for a Contemporary Theory of Gender*, assert that mere visibility of discriminated groups can cause deflection of the initiative, with feminists drawn into the dominant culture. They grapple with questions on whose issues are characterised as "women's issues" and who is the target of feminist rage, assisting in understanding the politics of dominance and what constitutes the 'feminist subject.'[13] As Joan Scott eloquently puts it, is gender the appropriate category of analysis in all instances where women are present?[14] Considering gender as the sole category of analysis, that is also discursively constructed, results in an additive enterprise that values the separate worlds of women without questioning the field of power itself. Most historical writing is situated within the additive or contributory model, aiming to grant visibility to another group of women condemned to historical silence by archival absence.

Feminist historiography precedes the feminist rewriting of a "gender-sensitive history" that focuses on society's neglected elements, domains, and communities.[15] This shift in feminist history goes beyond the concerns of colonialists and nationalists, breaking binaries of knowledge production. Although formulating a "gender-sensitive history"[16] may result in some conceptual transformations, if done in isolation without considering the structures of discrimination, it tends to be futile.

Therefore, there is a need to read the intention of historians' writing from a standpoint centred around recording and interpreting "history from below."

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[13] Susie Tharu and Tejaswini Niranjana, "Problems for a Contemporary Theory of Gender," *Social Scientist* 22, no. 3/4 (1994): 93–117, https://doi.org/10.2307/3517624.

[14] Joan W Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Analysis," *The American Review,* 91, no.5 (1986): 1053-1075. https://doi.org/10.2307/1864376.

[15] Uma Chakravarti, "Reinscribing the Past: Inserting Women into Indian History," in *Culture and the Making of Identity in Contemporary India*, ed. Kamala Ganesh and Usha Thakkar (New Delhi, Thousand Oaks, and London: SAGE Publications, 2005), 202–222.

[16] Chakravarti. "Reinscribing the Past," p.202.

This approach is considered an alternative to mainstream historiography. Can feminist historiographical frameworks be placed within this approach? Subaltern Studies, to some extent, have marked new trends in history writing but have neglected the questions of gender and women. For example, although they emphasised bringing to light the lives and struggles of peasants and tribes, their focus was restricted to men without considering the existence of subalterns within subalterns. Thus, the writing produced within Subaltern Studies was as androcentric as the colonialist, nationalist, and Marxist history.[17]

In their works, scholars such as Anjali Arondekar and Shailaja Paik have outlined means and methods to counter the biases of "official history"[18] produced by archives. Arondekar, in her seminal works on sexuality and archives in colonial India, attempts to shift from the language of loss, recovery, and representation that extensively dictates queer historiography.[19] Her work calls for a move beyond the binding melancholic history of sexuality, "where sexuality's (falsely) pathologised pasts and archives are recuperated and reinstated as sources of sanctuary rather than despair. Sexuality thus endures as an object of historical recovery".[20] Arondekar argues that there exists a relational aspect between the promise of archival presence as future knowledge and historical desire for lost bodies, subjects, and texts, and for the evidentiary models they enable. The work looks at the textual material produced by the *Gomantak Maratha Samaj*.[21] There is an archival abundance contrary to the language of loss that structures the prevalent modes of narration around sexuality. This work formulates a historiography that

[17] Ibid

[18] "Official history" in this context refers to the state-sanctioned dominant and mainstream narrative that are extensively produced and circulated by the government, colonial administration, and hegemonic social groups, in other words history constructed through institutions of power.

[19] Anjali Arondekar, *For the Record: On Sexuality and the Colonial Archive in India* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822391029.

[20] Anjali Arondekar, "In the Absence of Reliable Ghosts: Sexuality, Historiography, South Asia," *differences* 25, no. 3 (2014): 98–122, https://doi.org/10.1215/10407391-2847964.

[21] The *Gomantak Maratha Samaj* is an OBC (Other Backward Caste) community and was established as a formal organisation in 1927 and 1929 in the western states of Goa and Maharashtra. It officially became a charitable institution in 1936 (Arondekar, 2015).

refuses to negate the paradoxes instantiated in the process of self-archiving carried out by the *Samaj*.[22]

In addition to self-archiving, memory and oral history have emerged as substantial methods used by feminist historians to explicitly critique the inadequacies and biases of official and mainstream histories. Shailaja Paik presents a complex narrative of Dalit women's experiences of education through a diverse array of archival sources: newspapers, pamphlets, writings produced by Dalits, their private archives, along with the oral histories of Dalit women.[23] Given the absence of Dalit women from official and mainstream voices, the 'official' records, both colonial and postcolonial, often objectified Dalit women and lacked in-depth information on them. Paik asserts through her work that oral narratives and sources are essential for the history of non-hegemonic groups, as the ruling classes have had control over writing and left behind much more abundant written records. Hence, oral history is crucial for engaging with Dalit women's understanding of their history and to write a richer and more multi-layered account of their lives.[24]

Archival and textual sources, whether religious, cultural, social, or related to the political economy, are products of a knowledge system that is highly dominant and hierarchical. Therefore, it is imperative to explore the various methods and distinct methodological frameworks employed by scholars aiming to challenge the dominance of archives as repositories of the state. Lastly, some of the questions that emerge and are necessary to engage with during archival recovery and interpretation are: What is considered an archive? Do other recorded materials and narratives, such as oral traditions and embodied practices, receive the same legitimacy as archives? In what ways is the formulation of alternative historiography, particularly feminist history, positioned in relation to the mainstream discourse of history?

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[22] The *Samaj's* archive (housed in Panaji and Bombay) constitutes an efflorescence of information in Marathi, Konkani, and Portuguese, ranging from minutes of meetings, journals, newsletters, private correspondence, flyers, and programs, all filled with details of the daily exigencies and crises that concerned the community (Arondekar, 2015).

[23] Shailaja Paik, "Introduction: Education for the Oppressed," in *Dalit Women's Education in Modern India: Double Discrimination* (London: Routledge, 2014), https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315770741.

[24] Ibid.

Conclusion

Although they are repositories of the state, archival and written records have emerged as essential historical sources. Archives, as a colonial enterprise, are "not inert repositories; they are self-conscious products of political and institutional projects".[25] This underscores the constructed and intentional nature of archives as shaped by the priorities and anxieties of those in positions of power and hegemony.[26] The shift towards viewing history from "below" through the emergence of subaltern studies and the advent of feminist historiography has been significant in developing counter-narratives and alternative historical readings and interpretations. However, the essence of such intervention often remains limited to integrating groups and narratives into mainstream accounts of history that have been rendered invisible.

This approach provides visibility, sometimes resulting in the hypervisibility of certain marginalised groups without questioning the underlying power relations and hegemonic structures in place. It does not entirely reject the archival sources produced by those in power but complicates the implications of archival mediations. Reading against the grain or between the lines, particularly in the case of prescriptive texts, or examining how myths and narratives evolve in a diachronic context, raises new questions. Thus, it is essential to understand how historical events influence the present and shape contemporary society as well as how current developments, in turn, reshape our understanding of history and the methodologies we employ to investigate the questions we pose as researchers.

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[26] Ibid.

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