
UNIT 24 HISTORY FROM BELOW

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24.1 INTRODUCTION

History from Below began as a reaction against the traditional histories which concerned themselves almost exclusively with the political, social and religious elites. It has been variously termed as ‘grassroots history, history seen from below or the history of the common people’, ‘people’s history’, and even, ‘history of everyday life’. The conventional history about the great deeds of the ruling classes received further boost from the great tradition of political and administrative historiography developed by Ranke and his followers. In opposition to this ‘History from Above’, the History from Below was an attempt to write the history of the common people. It is a history concerned with the activities and thoughts of those people and regions that were neglected by the earlier historians. Peasants and working classes, women and minority groups, unknown ‘faces in the crowd’, and the people lost in the past became the central concern of this historiographical tradition. History from Below is an attempt to make history-writing broad-based, to look into the lives of the marginalised groups and individuals, and to explore new sources and to reinterpret the old ones.

24.2 BEGINNING AND GROWTH

The beginning of the History from Below may be traced to the late 18th century. In the classical western tradition, history-writing involved the narration of the deeds of great men. The common people were considered to be beyond the boundaries of history and it was beneath the dignity of the historian to write about them. In any case, as Peter Burke points out, ‘until the middle of the eighteenth century, the word “society” in its modern sense did not exist in any European language, and without the word it is very difficult to have any conception of that network of relationships we call “society” or “the social structure”’.

According to Eric Hobsbawm, such an approach to history became possible ‘only from the moment when the ordinary people become a constant factor in the making of such decisions and events. Not only at times of exceptional popular mobilization, such as revolutions, but at all or most times. By and large this did not happen until the era of the great revolutions at the end of the eighteenth century.’ In particular, he traces the

origin of this trend in the French Revolution which provided the impetus and opportunity for writing such history by drawing the common people in the public sphere and by creating documents related to their actions. He states:

‘One of the reasons why so much modern grassroots history emerged from the study of the French Revolution is that this great event in history combines two characteristics which rarely occur together before that date. In the first place, being a major revolution, it suddenly brought into activity and public notice enormous numbers of the sort of people who previously attracted very little attention outside their family and neighbours. And in the second place, it documented them by means of a vast and laborious bureaucracy, classifying and filing them for the benefit of the historian in the national and departmental archives of France.’

The process basically started with the ‘discovery of people’ by the Romantics in late-18th century Europe. They used the popular cultural resources like ballads, folk songs and stories, myths and legends to reconstruct the past. Their emphasis on passion as against reason, on imagination as against mechanical science formed the basis for recovering the popular history. In Germany J.G.Herder coined the term ‘popular culture’. The two early-19th century histories which used the word ‘people’ in their titles were the *History of the Swedish People* by E.G.Geijer and the *History of the Czech People* by Palacky. In Germany, Zimmermann wrote about the German peasant war. In France, it was Jules Michelet (1798-1874) who, in his voluminous writing on French Revolution, brought common people into the orbit of history-writing. His *History of France* (1833-67), *History of the French Revolution* (1846-53) and *The People* (1846) are notable for taking the masses into account. In England, the History from Below may be traced to the writings of J.R.Green, Goldwin Smith and Thorold Rogers in the 1860s and 1870s. Green, in the Preface to his book *Short History of the English People* (1877) criticised the tendency to write the ‘drum and trumpet’ history, i.e., the history of wars and conquests. He wrote:

‘The aim of the following work is defined by its title; it is a history not of English kings or English conquests, but of the English People I have preferred to pass lightly and briefly over the details of foreign wars and diplomacies, the personal adventures of kings and nobles, the pomp of courts, or the intrigues of favourites....’

Similarly, Thorold Rogers’s huge, seven-volume study, *History of Agriculture and Prices* (1864-1902), was a major work on the social and economic history.

In the 20th century, the historian whose works inspired the left tradition of History from Below was Georges Lefebvre. He empirically grounded the study of peasantry in the context of the French Revolution. In his *The Peasants of Northern France during the French Revolution* (1924), he made a detailed statistical examination of the peasant life on the eve of the Revolution. He differentiated between various groups of peasants and outlined their differential responses to the Revolution. He further sought to comprehend the motives behind their actions. It was, however, his other book, *The Great Fear of 1789* (1932), which comprehensively described the peasant mentality during the Revolution. It is considered among the first texts of the new history from below which is basically concerned about delineating the thoughts and actions of the common people. Eric Hobsbawm, writing in 1985, feels that ‘If there is a single historian who anticipates most of the themes of contemporary work, it is Georges Lefebvre, whose *Great Fear* ... is still remarkably up to date.’ Thus it may be said that the History from Below, as we know it today, began with Lefebvre.

Building on his work, his pupil and friend, George Rude, advanced this tradition which had moved away from the ‘uncritically sentimental tradition’ of Michelet and the Romantics. Rude was basically concerned with the study of ‘the lives and actions of the common people... the very stuff of history’. In his many books, including *The Crowd in the French Revolution* (1959), *The Crowd in History* (1964), and *Ideology and Popular Protest* (1980), Rude discussed the participation of ordinary people in the epoch-making event. He was not interested in the actions and behaviour of the dominant classes. Rather, in the words of Frederick Krantz, ‘He sought ... to understand the crowd action of craftsmen, small shopkeepers, journeymen, labourers and peasants not as “disembodied abstraction and personification of good and evil”, but as meaningful historical activity susceptible, through meticulous and innovative research, to concrete re-creation’. The questions he asked about the masses set the precedent for the later work on grassroots history : ‘how it behaved, how it was composed, how it was drawn into its activities, what it set out to achieve and how far its aims were realized.’ He sought to understand the crowd as a ‘thing of flesh and blood’ having its own ‘distinct identity, interests, and aspirations’.

In Britain, during the 1920s and 1930s, there were many popular history books published by the leftist Book Club. In the 1940s, the Communist Party Historians’ Group carried forward this tradition. Many of the figures identified with History from Below, such as George Rude, E.P.Thompson, Eric Hobsbawm, Christopher Hill, and John Saville were members of this group. This group was instrumental in bringing out the famous journal *Past and Present* in 1952 and later on the *Labour History Review*. Later on this tradition was carried forward by the *History Workshop Journal*, founded in 1976, which remained devoted to publishing people’s history.

E.P.Thompson, in his essay ‘History from Below’, published in 1966, first provided the theoretical basis to this tradition of history-writing. After that, according to Jim Sharpe, ‘the concept of history from below entered the common parlance of historians’. Thompson had already written his classic book, *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963), in which he had explored the perspective of the working classes in the context of the Industrial Revolution in England. In a famous statement he stressed that his aim was to understand the views and actions of those people who had been termed as backward-looking and had, therefore, been relegated to the margins of history. He wrote :

‘I am seeking to rescue the poor stockinger, the Luddite cropper, the ‘obsolete’ hand-loom weaver, the ‘utopian’ artisan, and even the deluded follower of Joanna Southcott, from the enormous condescension of posterity. Their crafts and traditions may have been backward-looking. Their communitarian ideals may have been fantasies. Their insurrectionary conspiracies may have been foolhardy. But they lived through these times of acute social disturbance, and we did not. Their aspirations were valid in terms of their own experience; and if they were casualties of history, they remain, condemned in their own lives, as casualties.’

In one of his famous essays, ‘The Moral Economy of the English Crowd in the Eighteenth Century’ (1971), Thompson studied the crowd behaviour involved in food riots. According to him, the food riots were ‘a highly complex form of direct popular action’ where the people involved had rational and clear objectives.

Similarly, Christopher Hill and Eric Hobsbawm sought to emphasise the importance of the thoughts and actions of the lower classes in the making of history. Hill studied the radical and democratic ideologies in the course of the 17th-century English Revolution.

In his book, *The World Turned Upside Down* (1972), Hill argued that the radical movements of the ordinary people, such as the Levellers, the Diggers, the Ranters, had great revolutionary potential and was capable of subverting the 'existing society and its values'. It is a history written from the point of view of the radical religious groups involving ordinary people. Similarly, Hobsbawm wrote extensively on the thoughts and actions of the modern workers and pre-industrial peasants in books like *Labouring Men* (1964), *Worlds of Labour* (1984), *Primitive Rebels* (1959) and *Bandits* (1969). John Foster's *Class Struggle and Industrial Revolution* (1974) and Raphael Samuel's *Theatres of Memory* (1994) carries forward this tradition. In the USA, the works on the slaves by Eugene Genovese and Herbert Gutman belong to the same tradition.

Although the Marxist historians have mostly influenced the writing of History from Below in the 20th century, there are others also whose writings can be said to constitute this trend. Prominent among them are some of the historians of the *Annales* School. Both the founders of the *Annales*, Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre, had interests in popular mentalities. Bloch's classic book, *The Royal Touch* (1924), shows his interest in collective psychology and in people's mentalities, ideas and beliefs. Bloch explores the popular belief in the healing powers of the French and the English kings and their capacity to cure the skin disease scrofula just by touching the patient. This belief became a fundamental element in construction of royalty and maintenance of its strength. Similarly Febvre's *Martin Luther* (1928) and *The Problems of Unbelief in the 16th Century* (1942) were studies of mentalities. These works stimulated the later generations of historians to explore the history of mentalities.

It was, however, Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie's *Montaillou : Cathars and Catholics in a French Village, 1294-1324* (1975) that became one of the classic texts of this genre. It is a study of the ideas and beliefs of a medieval Pyrenean peasant community and offers valuable insights into the lives and activities of common people. Ladurie used as his basic source material the inquisitorial records of the Catholic church to explore the thoughts and beliefs of a small community.

Another classic work in the same tradition, though not of the *Annales* lineage, is Carlo Ginzburg's *The Cheese and the Worms* (1976). Here the author looks into the intellectual and spiritual world of one individual, an Italian miller named Domenico Scandella (also known as Menocchio). He was tried by the church authorities for his heretic beliefs and was executed in 1600. The copious documentation dealing with his case provided the basic source material to Ginzburg who is aware of the conceptual and methodological problems involved in recreating the world of subordinate groups and individuals in the pre-modern period. However, he thinks that 'the fact that a source is not "objective" (for that matter, neither is an inventory) does not mean that it is useless. ... In short, even meagre, scattered and obscure documentation can be put to good use.' Ginzburg's other works, such as *The Night Battles : Witchcraft and Agrarian Cults in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (1966) and *Ecstasies : Deciphering the Witches' Sabbath* (1989), also strengthened the tradition of History from Below. His works, along with those of Giovanni Levi, also created a new trend in history-writing known as 'microhistory' which we have discussed in detail in **Unit 11**. Peter Burke's *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (1978), Robert Darton's *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (1984) and Natalie Zemon Davis's *Society and Culture in Early Modern France* (1975) and *The Return of Martin Guerre* (1983) are some other works which explore the popular mentalities and belong to this kind of historiography.

24.3 MAIN TRENDS

According to Raphael Samuel, the ‘term “people’s history” has had a long career, and covers an ensemble of different writings. Some of them have been informed by the idea of progress, some by cultural pessimism, some by technological humanism’. There is a variety in the subject matter also. ‘In some cases the focus is on tools and technology, on others on social movements, on yet others on family life.’ This kind of history has also ‘gone under a variety of different names – “industrial history” in the 1900s ..., “natural history” in those comparative ethnologies which arose in the wake of Darwin... “Kulturgeschichte” (cultural history) in those late-nineteenth-century studies of folkways to whose themes the “new” social history has recently been returning’.

It is, however, clear that this version of historiography has been dominated by the Marxist historians. From Georges Lefebvre in France to Eric Hobsbawm and E.P. Thompson in England to Eugene Genovese and Herbert Gutman in the United States, the nature and method of History from Below in the West have been defined by Marxist social historians. They have first used this term and delineated its features in relation to the conventional historiography. Thompson, Hobsbawm and Raphael Samuel have written about its concepts and contents and most of them have practiced this kind of history-writing. In this version, politics of class struggle has been an important presence. Whether it is the study of the 18th-century French peasantry by Lefebvre, or the medieval English peasantry by Christopher Hill, or the working classes of the 19th and 20th centuries by Thompson, Hobsbawm and John Foster, the existence of classes and the class struggle is always noticeable. These historians insist on the agency of the people and their own role in shaping their lives and history. Some of them, particularly Thompson and Genovese also emphasise on the lived ‘experiences’ of the people instead of abstract notions of class for understanding their behaviour.

But the Marxist historians are not the only ones in this field. The historians belonging to the *Annales* School such as Marc Bloch, Lucien Febvre and Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie have also studied the life and thoughts of the subordinate classes. However, with them, it goes under the name of ‘history of mentalities’. Closely allied to this is the new cultural history. Developed in the 1960s by Le Roy Ladurie, Robert Mandrou and Jacques Le Goff who were part of the later *Annales* School in France, this version of historiography had a more populist conception of history and was critical of the ‘religious psychology’ approach of Febvre. These historians stressed that the people were not passive recipients of the ideas imposed from above or outside, but were creators of their own culture. Some other historians, such as Carlo Ginzburg, Robert Darnton and Natalie Zemon Davis, who are not allied with the *Annales*, may also be classified as cultural historians. This kind of cultural history is the history of popular ideas. It differs from the approach of the Marxist historians in that it does not stress on classes or economic or political groups. Instead, they focus on small communities or individuals, on everyday life, on routine work practices, and on ceremonies and rituals. It is, therefore, a version of History from Below in which the politics, though not absent, clearly plays a much less important role than in the Marxist version.

These two trends, one associated with Marxism and the other with the ‘history of mentalities’ and cultural history, have been the most important versions of History from Below in the 20th century. However, there are other versions of this kind of historiography. In the right-wing version of such history there is no place for politics. It is a history of people in which there is no class struggle, no conflict of ideas and there is a strong sense of religious and moral values. The institution of family is idealised and there is a tendency ‘to interpret the social relationships as reciprocal rather than exploitative’. Raphael

Samuel states that the ‘characteristic location of right-wing people’s history is in the “organic” community of the past.... The ideology is determinedly anti-modern, with urban life and capitalism as alien intrusions on the body politic, splintering the age-old solidarities of “traditional” life’. G.M. Trevelyan’s *English Social History* (1944) and Peter Laslett’s *World We Have Lost* (1965) are examples of this trend.

In the liberal version, the History from Below celebrates the spirit of modernity and benefits of capitalism and material progress. It is optimistic in tone and is future-oriented. It is critical of the pre-modern period which it considers synonymous with superstition and warfare. Guizot, Mignet, Thierry and later Michelet were some of the historians who represent this trend.

24.4 PROBLEMS OF WRITING HISTORY FROM BELOW

Both the exponents and critics have pointed towards several problems involved in the practice of History from Below. The most important problem relates to the nature and availability of sources. Most of the records left by the past describe the lives and deeds of the ruling and dominant groups. Even those records which relate to the lives and activities of ordinary people were created by the dominating classes or by those who were associated with them. This was done mostly for administrative purposes. The records about the subordinate groups are more numerous for the periods when they were resisting or rebelling against the authorities. Before the late 18th century in Europe access to such sources is restricted. For other parts of the world, particularly the Third World countries, the availability of such records is even more difficult. Moreover, as most of these records were created by and for the members of the dominant groups, they suffer from hyperbole, neglect and misrepresentation. For example, the police records revealing the subversive activities among the masses are often exaggerated. Similarly, they completely ignore those areas in the life of people which were not in administrative interest.

The problem is compounded because the masses have generally not left much records of their own. Popular culture is generally preserved through the oral medium and not through written medium. The oral tradition, as Hobsbawm remarks, ‘is a remarkably slippery medium for preserving facts. The point is that memory is not so much a recording as a selective mechanism, and the selection is, within limits, constantly changing’. The paucity of written sources left by the ordinary people is a great hindrance in writing about their feelings and ideas.

At another level, there are problems related to conceptualisation also. Although all practitioners of History from Below claim to write about people, the term ‘people’ itself is used with different, sometimes conflicting, meanings. Raphael Samuel states that ‘In one version of people’s history – radical-democratic or Marxist – the people are constituted by relations of exploitation, in another (that of the folklorists) by cultural antinomies, in a third by political rule’. The problem is further complicated by excluding certain groups from the category of people, while considering some as more people than others. In one version it is the proletariat which constitute the real people, in another it is peasantry. Herder, the German Romantic scholar, did not include the urban masses in the category of ‘people’. For him and his followers, the ‘people’ were the peasants who lived close to nature and were innocent. The term sometimes also adopts racist connotations in which people speaking other languages or following different faiths are not counted among the real people. At the left radical level, the exclusion takes another form. Peter Burke, while praising the histories written by British Marxist historians, points out :

‘Edward Thompson’s *Making of the English Working Class* comes quite close to excluding working-class Tories from the people. As for *The World Turned Upside Down* [by Christopher Hill], it deals alternately with radical ideas and with the ideas of ordinary people, so that an incautious reader may very well be led to equate the two. However, in seventeenth-century England, not all ordinary people were radicals and not all radicals were ordinary people.’

The History from Below has also been criticised for not taking theoretical issues into account and for romanticising and idealising the people. Its rank and file approach ignores the fact of institutional influence on industrial relations. Moreover, its neglect of quantitative analysis and overemphasis on narrative has also been criticised.

24.5 INDIAN CONTEXT

The main problem in writing the History from Below in India, apart from the conceptual problems discussed above, is the absence of relevant sources. The records pertaining to the lower classes were almost exclusively produced by those not belonging to that stratum of society. The relevant sources are a big problem even in advanced countries where the working-class literacy was much higher. Even there the sources related to the peasants and other pre-industrial groups come to us through those in authority. In India, most of the members of the subordinate classes, including the industrial working classes, are not literate. Therefore, direct sources coming from them are extremely rare, if not completely absent. Given this scenario, the historians trying to write history from below have to rely on indirect sources. As Sabyasachi Bhattacharya points out, ‘Given the low level of literacy we have to depend on inferences from behaviour pattern, reports on opinions and sentiments (often involving a distorting refraction in the medium), on oral testimonies (best when exactly recorded as in trial proceedings) etc.’ Oral traditions also have their problems. They cannot be stretched back too far and one has to work within living memory. These problems are outlined by one of the great practitioners of History from Below, Ranajit Guha, the founder of the *Subaltern Studies* about which we will read more in the next Unit. Guha, in his book, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (1983), talks about the elitist origins of most of the evidences which the historians use for understanding the mentalities behind the peasant rebellions :

‘Most, though not all, of this evidence is elitist in origin. This has come down to us in the form of official records of one kind or another – police reports, army despatches, administrative accounts, minutes and resolutions of governmental departments, and so on. Non-official sources of our information on the subject, such as newspapers or the private correspondence between persons of authority, too, speak in the same elitist voice, even if it is that of the indigenous elite or of non-Indians outside officialdom.’

To overcome these elitist biases, it is often supposed, folk traditions may be used. But, according to Guha, ‘there is not enough to serve for this purpose either in quantity or quality in spite of populist beliefs to the contrary’. Firstly, there are not much of such evidences available. Moreover, ‘An equally disappointing aspect of the folklore relating to peasant militancy is that it can be elitist too.’ Guha’s suggestion for capturing the insurgent’s consciousness is to read between the lines, ‘to read the presence of a rebel consciousness as a necessary and pervasive element within that body of evidence’.

However, Sumit Sarkar finds a much deeper problem which may be the cause of this non-availability of evidences. It is the continued subalternity of the lower classes :

‘Above all, “history from below” has to face the problem of the ultimate relative *failure* of mass initiative in colonial India, if the justly abandoned stereotype of the eternally passive Indian peasant is not to be replaced by an opposite romantic stereotype of perennial rural rebelliousness. For an essential fact surely is that the “subaltern” classes have remained subaltern, often surprisingly dormant despite abject misery and ample provocation, and subordinate in the end to their social “betters” even when they do become politically active.’

It is with these constraints that the historians have worked on Indian people’s histories.

24.5.1 History of Peasant Movements

A general history of peasant movements by Barrington Moore Jr., *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy* (1967), puts the Indian peasant movements in a comparative perspective. In Moore’s account, the Indian peasantry lacked revolutionary potential and were comparatively docile and passive in the face of poverty and oppression. Thus peasant rebellions in India were ‘relatively rare and completely ineffective and where modernization impoverished the peasants as least as much as in China and over as long a period of time’. This view of the Indian peasant was challenged by many historians. Kathleen Gough, in her article on ‘Indian Peasant Uprising’ (1974), counted 77 peasant revolts during the colonial period. Her conclusion is that ‘the smallest of which probably engaged several thousand peasants in active support or combat’. And the largest of these ‘is the “Indian Mutiny” of 1857-58, in which vast bodies of peasants fought or otherwise worked to destroy British rule over an area of more than 500,000 square miles’. Ranajit Guha, in his book, states that ‘there are no fewer than 110 known instances of these even for the somewhat shorter period of 117 years – from the Rangpur *dhing* to the Birsait *ulgulan*’. A.R.Desai is also against this view of the docility of the Indian peasantry and asserts that ‘the Indian rural scene during the entire British period and thereafter has been bristling with protests, revolts and even large scale militant struggles involving hundreds of villages and lasting for years’. It is, therefore, clear that, at least during the British period, the quiescence of the Indian peasantry is a myth and a large number of works explode this myth.

There are many studies undertaken on Indian peasant movements. Apart from Kathleen Gough’s work, A.R.Desai’s (ed.) *Peasant Struggles in India* (1979) and *Agrarian Struggles in India after Independence* (1986), Sunil Sen’s *Peasant Movements in India – Mid-Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (1982), Ranajit Guha’s *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (1983), Eric Stokes’s *The Peasants and the Raj : Studies in Agrarian Society and Peasant Rebellion in Colonial India* (1978), and D.N.Dhanagare’s *Peasant Movements in India, 1920-1950* (1983) are some of the all-India studies.

On Bengal, Suprakash Roy’s pioneering work in Bengali published in 1966, and translated into English as *Peasant Revolts and Democratic Struggles in India* (1999), looks at these revolts basically in terms of class struggles of peasants against the imperialist and landlords’ exploitation and oppression. He also linked these rebellions to the fight for a democratic polity in India. Muinuddin Ahmed Khan’s *History of the Faraidi Movement in Bengal* (1965) sought to interpret this peasant movement basically as a religious movement against the non-Muslim gentry. However, Narhari Kabiraj, in his *A Peasant Uprising in Bengal* (1972) and *Wahabi and Farazi Rebels of Bengal* (1982) refuted this thesis and emphasised on economic factors as the cause of the rebellion. His conclusion was that during this movement the ‘agrarian aspect took precedence

over the communal one'. Blair King's study of the indigo rebellion in Bengal (*The Blue Mutiny : The Indigo Disturbances in Bengal 1859-1962* (1966)) also reaches the conclusion that it was a secular movement which combined all sections of Indian society. However, Ranajit Guha views the Indigo rebellion differently and argues that there were contradictions between various sections of the peasantry.

Some of the other important regional studies on peasant movements are : Girish Mishra's study on Champaran movement, *Agrarian Problems of Permanent Settlement : A Case Study of Champaran* (1979), and Stephen Henningham's *Peasant Movements in Colonial India, North Bihar, 1917-1942* (1982); Majid H. Siddiqi's *Agrarian Unrest in North India : The United Provinces, 1918-32* (1978), and Kapil Kumar's *Peasants in Revolt : Tenants, Landlords, Congress and the Raj in Oudh* (1984) on U.P.; works by Stephen Dale, Robert Hardgrave, Sukhbir Chaudhary and Conrad Wood on the Moplah rebellion in Malabar, Kerala. Apart from these there are also several works on peasant movements in other parts of India.

24.5.2 History of Working-class Movements

Until about twenty-five years ago, the history of Indian labour was almost synonymous with the history of trade unions. Writing in 1982, Sabyasachi Bhattacharya commented that 'Till now in our labour history the Trade Union movement has been the subject of the largest number of published work'. Besides this, the focus was on the worker as an economic being, which did not take into account his/her social and cultural existence. Since the 1980s, however, this situation began to change. Several studies have appeared which view the working class history from a broader perspective. For one thing, the trade unions are no longer considered as synonymous with the working class. It is true that the trade unions represent a highly organised form of working class activities. However, trade unions are only one of the forms in which the workers organise themselves. Working class movement, on the other hand, is a much broader phenomenon and covers various mobilisations of all kinds of workers. Secondly, the recent studies have pointed out that economic motivation is not the sole determinant of working class action. The making of the working class and its movement derives from various sources in which the cultural, the social and the political are as important as the economic. Thirdly, it is indicated that the industrial workers, whom the trade union studies take as their basic staple, form a rather small part of the entire working class which includes within its ambit the rural workers, urban workers in informal sectors, and service sector workers. Moreover, gender questions are also coming to the fore for an understanding of the attitude and behaviour of the workers, the employers, the public activists and government officials.

The studies which take into account these aspects of the changing scenario include E.D.Murphy's 'Class and Community in India : The Madras Labour Union, 1918-21' (*IESHR*, IV, 3, 1977) and *Unions in Conflict : A Comparative Study of Four South Indian Textile Centres, 1918-1939* (1981), R.K.Newman's *Workers and Unions in Bombay, 1918-29 : A Study of Organization in the Cotton Mills* (1981), S.Bhattacharya's 'Capital and Labour in Bombay City, 1928-29' (*EPW*, XVI, 1981), Dipesh Chakrabarty's *Rethinking Working-Class History : Bengal, 1890-1940* (1989), Rajnarayan Chandavarkar's *The Origins of Industrial Capitalism in India : Business Strategies and Working Classes in Bombay, 1900-40* (1994), Janaki Nair's *Miners and Millhands : Work, Culture and Politics in Princely Mysore* (1998), Samita Sen, *Women and Labour in Late Colonial India : The Bengal Jute Industry* (1999), and Nandini Gooptu's *The Politics of the Urban Poor in the early Twentieth-Century India* (2001).

24.5.3 History of Tribal Movements

Several scholars treat tribal movements as part of the peasant movements. It is because over the years the tribal society and economy have started resembling those of the peasants and the agrarian problems of the tribals are same as those of the peasants. Kathleen Gough, A.R. Desai and Ranajit Guha have dealt with the tribal movements as such. Moreover, many scholars like Ghanshyam Shah, Ashok Upadhyay and Jaganath Pathy have shown the changes in the tribal society and economy which have pushed them in the direction of the non-tribal peasants. However, K.S. Singh, one of the authorities in the field, is of the opinion that such an approach is not justified because it 'tends to gloss over the diversities of tribal social formations of which tribal movements are a part, both being structurally related'. Singh puts more emphasis on social organisation of the tribals than on their economic grievances. He argues that :

‘while the peasant movements tend to remain purely agrarian as peasants lived off land, the tribal movements were both agrarian and forest based, because the tribals’ dependence on forests was as crucial as their dependence on land. There was also the ethnic factor. The tribal revolts were directed against zamindars, moneylenders and petty government officials not because they exploited them but also because they were aliens.’

In contrast to this view, some scholars have questioned the very category of the tribe itself. For example, Susana Devalle, in *Discourses of Ethnicity : Culture and Protest in Jharkhand* (1992), argues that the category ‘tribe’ was constructed by the European scholars in India and the colonial officials in their effort to understand the Indian reality. Andre Beteille also thinks that there are a lot of similarities between the tribals and the peasants and, therefore, it would be a mistake to consider them as two distinct structural types.

However, the fact remains that a large part of the tribal societies, particularly until the 20th century, possessed several specific features which put them apart from the mainstream peasant societies. For one, social and economic differentiation within the tribal society was much less than among the peasantry. Secondly, the great dependence of the tribes on the forests also separates them from the peasants whose main source of survival was land. Thirdly, tribal social organisation and the spatial concentration of the tribes in certain areas kept them relatively isolated. These factors made them particularly sensitive to the changes brought about by the colonial rule and imparted more militancy to their rebellion.

The colonial administrators were the first to write about the tribals. This attention was due to the recurring tribal revolts as a result of colonial intervention. The earliest writings were an attempt to understand the tribal societies for better administration. W.W. Hunter’s *Annals of Rural Bengal* (1868), E.T. Dalton’s *Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal* (1872), and H.H. Risley’s *Tribes and Castes of Bengal* (1891) were some of these early works which described the tribal society. One of the earliest works by an Indian is Kali Kinkar Datta’s *Santal Insurrection* (1940). According to Datta, the main reason for the rebellion was the oppression and exploitation by the outsiders. Three of his students also focused on Chotanagpur region for their initial studies on the tribes. J.C. Jha’s *The Kol Insurrection of Chotanagpur* (1964), S.P. Sinha’s *Life and Times of Birsa Bhagwan* (1964) and K.S. Singh’s *The Dust Storm and the Hanging Mist : A Study of Birsa Munda and his movement in Chota Nagpur, 1874-1901* (1966) were pioneering efforts on these themes. The three volumes edited by K.S. Singh on *Tribal Movements of India* (1982, 1983 and 1998) are a big contribution to deal with the subject at the all-India level. John MacDougall’s *Land or*

Religion ? The Sardar and Kherwar Movements in Bihar, 1858-95 (1985), D.M. Praharaj's *Tribal Movement and Political History in India : A Case Study from Orissa, 1803-1949* (1988), David Hardiman's *The Coming of the Devi : Adivasi Assertion in Western India* (1987), David Arnold's article on Gudam-Rampa uprisings in Andhra Pradesh (in *Subaltern Studies*, vol. I, 1982), S.R. Bhattacharjee's *Tribal Insurgency in Tripura : A Study in Exploration of Causes* (1989) are some of the regional studies.

24.6 SUMMARY

History from Below, as we have discussed in this Unit, is to introduce the perspective of the common people in the process of history-writing. It is against that concept of historiography which believes in Disraeli's dictum that history is the biography of great men. Instead, the History from Below endeavours to take into account the lives and activities of masses who are otherwise ignored by the conventional historians. Moreover, it attempts to take their point of view into account as far as possible. In this venture, the historians face a lot of problems because the sources are biased in favour of the rulers, administrators and the dominant classes in general. In countries like India, this problem becomes even more acute due to low level of literacy among the masses. Despite these constraints, however, the social historians have tried their best to bring the people from the margins to the centre.

24.7 EXERCISES

- 1) What is History from Below? Discuss its beginning and growth.
- 2) Write a note on the History from Below in the context of history-writing on India.
- 3) Discuss the important trends in the writings of People's history.
- 4) What are the main problems associated with writing History from Below?

24.8 SUGGESTED READINGS

Raphael Samuel, 'People's History', in Raphael Samuel (ed.), *People's History and Socialist Theory* (London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981).

Jim Sharpe, 'History from Below', in Peter Burke (ed.), *New Perspectives on Historical Writing* (Polity Press, Cambridge, 1991, 2001).

Eric Hobsbawm, 'On History from Below', in Eric Hobsbawm, *On History* (London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1997).

Matt Perry, 'History from Below', in Kelly Boyd (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Historians and Historical Writing*, 2 vols. (Chicago, Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers, 1999).

Peter Burke, 'People's History or Total History', in Raphael Samuel (ed.), *People's History and Socialist Theory* (London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981).

Frederick Krantz, *History from Below : Studies in Popular Protest and Popular Ideology* (Oxford, New York, Basil Blackwell, 1985, 1988).

Georg G. Iggers, *Historiography in the Twentieth Century : From Scientific Objectivity to the Postmodern Challenge* (Hanover and London, Wesleyan University Press, 1997).

Jeremy Black and Donald M. MacRaild, *Studying History* (London, MacMillan, 1997, 2000).

Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, 'Presidential Address', Indian History Congress, 1982.

Ghanshyam Shah, *Social Movements in India : A Review of Literature* (New Delhi, Sage, 2004).

Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (Delhi, OUP, 1983).

Sumit Sarkar, '*Popular*' *Movements & 'Middle Class' Leadership in Late Colonial Indi: Perspectives & Problems of a "History from Below"* (Calcutta, K.P. Bagchi & Company, 1983, 1985).

Sanjukta Das Gupta, 'Peasant and Tribal Movements in Colonial Bengal : A Historiographic Overview', in Sekhar Bandyopadhyay (ed.), *Bengal : Rethinking History* (Delhi, Manohar, 2001).