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The expanding territory of Indian historiography: Some ideological reflections on micro-history

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Abstract

History primarily recognises the powerful and the victorious. Much history comprises narratives written from the perspective of the state. On the other hand micro-history is a particular methodological approach to the study and writing of history that aims at studying especially peculiar moments in the past by focusing on the lives and activities of a discrete persons or groups of people. Micro-history offers a more inclusive understanding of who and what matters within the discipline of history. Micro-history forces us to re-think traditional approaches to history that focus on seemingly more important political events and actors. Finally, by looking at the “micro” level of social activities and cultural meaning, micro-history challenges approaches to the study of history that emphasize the need to quantify, generalize, or naturalize human experience or to find and impose normative and abstract historical laws, structures, or processes on the historical changes of the past. A theoretical framework of micro-history in the study of Indian history in the recent past is the theme of this research paper titled *The Expanding Territory of Indian Historiography: Some Ideological Reflections on Micro-History*.

Keywords: expanding territory, Indian historiography, micro-history

Introduction

Micro-history is the most interesting and innovative approach in historical studies. It refers to the intensive historical investigation of a well-defined smaller unit of research most often a single event or an individual which are neglected in traditional and mainstream historical writings. The pioneer of the field was the German historian George G. Igger. He developed it as a methodology in 1970's to counter the traditional methodology of social sciences. The main objection of him was that through the traditional methodology it is not possible to know the concrete reality of small scale life^[1]. The small scale life refers to the anthropological, cultural, sociological, political, economic and all other inclusive characteristic features of a society or individual or any productive unit or life system. The originators of micro-history thought that it is a methodology to be applied only in the field of cultural and social history^[2]. But this assumption is far from truth. Any object of study dealing with the primary societies, group or individual or languages or knowledge or experience and perspectives of the marginalised mainly come under micro-history^[3]. History primarily recognises the powerful and the victorious. Much history comprises narratives written from the perspective of the state^[4]. Normally the historians and social scientists generalizations are based upon macro situation^[5]. Having analysed a large content or a long period or a country, historians formulate generalizations. Very often this generalization may not hold good to the studies related to micro-history as these studies will not give the real situation of the marginalised or the suppressed. Carlo Ginzburg, a micro historian criticized the large scale quantitative studies on the grounds for the distorted reality on the individual level. The micro historians placed their emphasis on small categories of life in which how people conducted their lives^[6]. Such people or society has no wider identity or acceptance for generations together. Such Categories will come under the domain of micro-history. Micro historians never move to general ideas, class terms, or universals or to the formation of concepts. Here historian deals with the “particular” not the general. The social, cultural or any features connected with the particular is brought out. But within the particular its various shades are analysed socially and culturally.

Usually the historian understands the object in tune with the cause and effect. The nature of cause and effect depend upon the vicious mind of the historian.

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Yet the Micro historians more likely to reveal the complicated functions of individual relationship with each and every social settings and they stress difference from large norms. They tend to focus on the object which did not come under historical scrutiny in a wider context or already handled. Themes in micro-history are always obscure, strange and less known unless and otherwise it has become the subject matter. Giovanni Levi, an Italian micro historian dealt with the methods of micro-history. Micro historians concentrate on the contradictions of normative system and there for on the fragmentation, contradictions and plurality of viewpoints which make all systems fluid and open [7]. Sometimes, the Micro historians also deal with the institutions in power and how they deal with the affairs of the people. To able to illustrate their point, micro-historians have turned to the narrative as an analytical tool or research - method where they get opportunity to present their findings by which conclusions are reached [8].

Features of Micro-History

The most common feature of micro-history is the study of the past on a very small scale. Studies include looking at individuals and incidents of minor importance. It is usually done in close collaboration with other social sciences. Here, the subject of study is very often unknown or minor in importance unless analysed in relation to human nature and his role in a particular social space. Again the methodology of micro-history has undergone changes due to the theories of post modernism, with the emergence of structuralist conception of history by Levi Strauss and his followers. They say that there is no existing object. But it is fixed by the relationship between the signifier and the signified [9]. The identity of an object is not in relation to the object but their internal differences. Hence according to Strauss individual elements of a system have significance when considered in relation to the structure as a whole [10]. As per this the micro development will become significant when it becomes a part of micro-history or it will have a different treatment by the historian. Micro-history always remains as micro. It is subjected to the reconstruction process. In such process, the subjective element may set in. Post-modernist like Derrida and Foucault are of the view that "history is in pure form does not exist". Theories, interpretation and explanations can have little to do with the facts of the past since such exercise reflects the subjective view point of the historian [11]. Francis Fukuyama speaks the end of history. To him, "history is indistinguishable from past. Because, the same truth has been proven time and again where no real change has occurred [12]. Micro-history method in real sense of the term appears to be phenomena. Varieties of views and expressions can be made on historical themes. Historians some times, will have a personal touch with the micro area on which he writes. In this connection the view of the post-modernist stands valid. To them history is a perpetual knowledge, an assertion which deprives the past of its hegemony over the present. No doubt, past is constructed by the perspective knowledge of historian [13]. At the same time micro-historians are trying to communicate a specific meaning in association with ideas derived from other social sciences. In this effort micro-historian makes history more scientific.

Sources of Micro History

Nature of the sources for micro-history is rather different from macro-history. The former is more contented with non-conventional sources whereas the later is of conventional

sources. It is not a rule but an option. Sources associated with folk, oral, myth and little tradition are taken as the main channel for narration for micro-history. Classical, written, historical and great tradition related relics are the main stay to macro-history. Folklore, oral history, proverbs, novels and fictions are the reflection from the substance, but not the shadow of life. They convey the real feelings and achievement of the people at the bottom. Sometimes these sources convey a kind of protest to the political and social setup [14]. First among the non-conventional sources used for micro-history is folklore. It deals with the hereditary life of the people encompassing their encounters and all aspects of life [15]. They are the cultural survivals in oral forms. They were not reduced in written form till recently. They have been transmitted orally over generation to generation. It is very difficult to find out the authorship of the folk literature. Proverbs are still largely used by the masses and form a part of their daily language. The village people use proverbs in practical life for practical purposes. Rev. Herman Jensen had collected more than two thousand proverbs from Tamilnadu and published a book in 1897. Herman says one can look deeply in to the recesses of the native heart [16]. Proverbs also reflect the ethics of the society. Novels and fiction formed another variety of sources to explain the undercurrent of the society. Tradition is almost the safe source of undated history [17]. Oral accounts have been considered as aim authentic and distorted version of reality, say some conventional historians [18]. The written word is seen as providing the possibility of scientific discourse where as the 'oral' is relegated to 'folk and lore'. But, for micro-history, it is one of the important sources which provide the flesh and blood of the native life. Oral tradition has been very important to culture with or without writings. These are the invaluable sources in understanding people's categories and textures of consciousness [19]. For micro-history, myth has been assumed primitive and traditional. Levi Strauss has identified myth with the primitive societies. Myths aimed for another deeper mode of understanding and representing experience [20]. Myth suggests a culture's coding of truth-values through narrative. It refers to a set of sequentially arranged images each of which is in turn, a dense network of meanings and reference. It gives moral values and vision of the past. According to Nietzsche, "every culture that has lost myth has lost its natural healthy creativity" [21]. The data gathered through participant observation in festivals, ceremonies, public performances and ritual celebrations give the voice of the people than the structure of society [22]. These sources are very much useful for micro historical analysis in times of the changing faces of marginalised, subalterns, women and other categories of forgotten lot.

Micro-history will help us to become aware of the social grounding of human thought. It has emphasised the point of human reality in a socially constructed reality [23]. Micro-history is a form of knowledge of consciousness, is a social constructed from the social location. As in the words of D.P. Chattopadhyaya "there is no unique method of writing history. It is partly depends upon the subject matter, partly upon the time when it is being written, partly upon the cultural milieu as a member of which it is being written and various other related factors". [24] M. S. Bhattacharya in his *Studies in Micro-history: Political Movements in Some Parts of India and Bangladesh (1857-1947)* considers the micro aspects of the great political movements in the Indian subcontinent and illustrates the difference of mindset, attitude and aspirations

between the national protagonists and their sub-regional followers. Bhattacharya proposes that the local or sub-regional movements often merged with the great mass movements without losing their own features. Moreover, national leadership sought to accommodate the sub-regional movements wherever possible with a view to strengthening their own position and did not interfere with the local character of such movements. But the prevalent idea of historiography overlooks these features which is a sort of abuse of history. To illustrate this view, he focuses on the innermost areas of political expressions.

Historical Fragmentation and Micro History

Is micro-history that part of the whole history? The answer to this question is partly yes and partly no. The explanation given in the definition of micro-history tells us that it is an approach or methodology to study. The past in small scale that has not been given prominence or tapped for historical analysis. It is the one side of the coin. The other side is like an inverted cone. The size of an inverted cone where the base is pointed and the top is wider. Event once so important or prominent is made to sink into oblivion by the veil of history. It occurred because of fragmentation. What was once the centre of historical process was relegated to the periphery by historical anachronism^[25]. The monumental example of this is the Tamil language and culture. Linguistic pre-history of India shows that Dravidian was the earliest language spoken throughout India. Tamil is the script of Tamil language descended from Harrappan pattern of writing^[26]. But after the establishment of the Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal in 1784, European Scholars began to study the Sanskrit language seriously and came to a conclusion that Sanskrit was the classical language and Vedic Culture was the nucleus of Indian culture. According to them anything beyond the boundaries of Sanskrit Language and Vedic culture in India was barbarous^[27]. This ideology has completely fragmented the linguistic and cultural history of Tamilagam. The Dravidian was the spoken language all over India before 1500 BC. There after it became an inverted cone. There are innumerable examples in Indian history to show how the significant event became insignificant. When fragmentation became a self-assumed proportion it became an autonomous micro-history.

Micro-History and Subaltern Studies

A new trend developed in historical studies in India mound 1980 called subaltern studies. Inspired by the philosophical observations made by Antonio Gramsci (1891 to 1937) an Italian communist, Ranajit Guha and his Indian born Cambridge historians indulged in a new school of thought called subaltern studies^[28]. In their scheme of writing Heroes of History are the subalterns or inferior people and their spontaneous outbursts^[29]. Except on two counts, such as utilizing the sources of non-conventional types and the territorial pockets, the micro history differs very long extent from subaltern history. Majority of the subaltern studies focus on socio-cultural aspect of colonial society. The economic and political issues also figure in. Caste, religion, tradition, peasantry, working class, tribal, women, dalits and certain marginalized are the issues of subaltern studies^[30]. Micro-history as mentioned already is a methodological approach which examines the life of the people in small scale or pockets without any ideological base. There is no preconceived notion that the people of the small area or

pocket will exhibit a predetermined behaviour. Micro history's concern is not alone to discuss the protests and insurgency but encompassed everything that happened in an area. It does not deal with any specified theme as the object of study. Micro-history studies the origin and development of society. It gives a history of transformation through which it has passed. Besides it deals the origin of human beings and their physical and cultural developments, social customs and beliefs. If subaltern studies show the mental order of the lower orders micro-history is a path breaking approach to examine the life experience of the people of a small area in all aspects.

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