



## **The crux of history from below**

**Dr. BR Prasad Reddy**

Associate Professor, KH Government Degree College, Dharmavaram, Anantapuram, Andhra Pradesh, India

### **Abstract**

The commercialization of higher education has radically marginalized history and other social sciences. These disciplines have been reduced to the status of poor cousins of professional courses. Social scientists are being seen as the less glamorous and more crisis-ridden 'country cousins' of natural scientists. Time has come for policy makers and managers of institutions of higher learning to realize that just as the market needs engineer's managers and scientists; social equilibrium requires philosophers, artists, social scientists and historians. More recently, the whole issue of 'history from the bottom up' received undue attention because of the controversy surrounding the question of cultural censorship which led to the practice of book pulping.

'History from bottom-up' is also termed as people's history, grassroots history, history from below, history of the common people and sometimes even history of everyday life. It is an attempt to elevate the activities and thoughts of those people and regions that were neglected by the earlier historians. This type of approach to historical truth meant getting at the memory of things said and done in human life and thought.

Bottom-up history instils a respect for and attention to people's lives, culture and traditions. It shows how these things, under the right circumstances, provide seeds for mass resistance. It shows how new political cultures based on ideas and values can emerge and become hegemonic. History plays a powerful constitutive in determining an individual's sense of personal identity. The greatest repression, perhaps, is to deny and deprive people of their history. People's history perhaps will invariably solves this problem.

**Keywords:** social equilibrium requires philosophers, artists, social scientists and historians

### **Introduction**

The commercialization of higher education has radically marginalized history and other social sciences. These disciplines have been reduced to the status of poor cousins of professional courses. Social scientists are being seen as the less glamorous and more crisis-ridden 'country cousins' of natural scientists. While there is a mad rush for admission into professional courses, the number and quality of social sciences students is declining when actually the system needs a large number of good quality social scientists to diagnose successfully the very effects of the policies of globalization, privatization and economic liberalization of society and suggest remedial measures for the ill effects. Time has come for policy makers and managers of institutions of higher learning to realize that just as the market needs engineer's managers and scientists; social equilibrium requires philosophers, artists, social scientists and historians. At this juncture, it is the duty of the historian to make the world realize the importance of focussing on 'history from below'.

Are we ready to accommodate the history from below? Can our society absorb the alternate history? These questions stare at us as we are passing through the 1<sup>st</sup> quarter of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. More recently, the whole issue of 'history from the bottom up' received undue attention because of the controversy surrounding the question of cultural censorship which led to the practice of book pulping. Recently, Penguin India agreed to withdraw and pulp all copies of Ms. Wendy Doniger's book 'The Hindus: An Alternative History' from

the Indian market owing to threat by Shiksha Bachao Andolan Samiti (SBAS). SBAS has also pointed at another book 'On Hinduism' penned by the same author but published by Aleph Book Company. The academic world should be very much aware to this kind of moral censorship against incorporating 'the history from the bottom up' into history books. This ought to have set off a fierce debate across the nation. But, we are silent.

Yet, barring such aberrations, it is heartening that the 'History from bottom-up' is in vogue since 1960s. The period's radical spirit and the example of mass movements composed of ordinary people, motivated a new generation of historians to look at the past with fresh eyes. It began as a reaction against the traditional histories which concerned themselves as almost exclusively with the political, social and religious elites which is regarded as 'History from Above' as most historical scholarship focused on institutions, structures and 'Great Men'.

'History from bottom-up' is also termed as people's history, grassroots history, history from below, history of the common people and sometimes even history of everyday life. It is an attempt to elevate the activities and thoughts of those people and regions that were neglected by the earlier historians. It introduced a new world where ordinary peoples' lives and struggles were crucial to the historical process. Tribals, peasants, working classes, women, dalits, minorities and other unknown 'faces in the crowd' whose deeds went unrecorded, unnoticed, unsung, unwept became the central concern of this

historiographical trend.

This type of approach to historical truth meant getting at the memory of things said and done in human life and thought. In pursuit of such a quest, 'everyone must be his own historian'. As the intellectual mentor of this approach, E.P. Thompson, proclaimed in the 1950s, in doing 'history from below', all kinds of evidence beyond the historical narrative --including 'the peoples' consciousness, culture, and value systems'---must equally be as crucial narratives of the peoples' struggles as explanations of social class and power. Thus, in the wake such concept, detailing the everyday lives and contributions of ordinary people became the clarion call to write history from the bottom up.

This approach enriched and energised history writing and made it broad-based. It forced researchers to chase new sources and interpret old theories. This resulted in disproving Barrington Moore's perspective of passive Indian peasantry.

Kathleen Gough article on 'Indian Peasant Uprising' (1974), A.R. Desai's (ed.) *Peasant Struggles in India* (1979), Sunil Sen's 'Peasant Movements in India – Mid-19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries' (1982), D. N. Dhanagare's 'Peasant Movements in India, 1920-1950' (1983), Y.V. Krishna Rao's 'Peasant Movements in Andhra Pradesh' are some of the famous works which challenged the concept of 'docile' nature of the peasant in face of poverty and oppression.

Similarly, tribal movements became the focus of social scientists and fresh light was thrown on the tribal revolts and their protests by Ranajit Guha, A.R.Desai, J. Mangamma, Ghanshyam Shah, Ashoka Upadhyay, Jagannath Pathy and several others. Working-class movements also entered into pages of history with the efforts of historians like Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, Sumit Sarkar, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Rajnarayan Chandavarkar, Janaki Nair. These and other works on dalits, women and minorities set the tone and agenda for a generation of historians. They made an irreversible contribution to the way history is told. The book 'Manaku Theliyani Mana Charitra' brought by Asmitha, an NGO on relentless battle waged by ordinary women during Telengana peasant armed struggle is a classic example in this regard. Never again would historians be able to dismiss, ignore or marginalize the history of ordinary people and their struggles.

But, still there is a long way to go. For example, in the pantheon of Indian freedom fighters, revolutionaries and liberators, large number of names remains unfamiliar. Year after year, volumes are written and continue to proliferate the public space about patriarchal figures like Gandhi and Nehru excluding figures like Alimelu Mangathaayaru, Yaamini Purna Thilakam etc. They remain absent from our books, our memory, our politics, our public spaces and our discourses. We are treating their history as someone else's history - or even not history at all.

### Few concerns

One of the critical issues in exploring the hitherto hidden past of these marginalised sections is the absence of relevant sources. Even those limited sources related to peasants and other sections of common strata are brought to light through those in authority because the data related to the lower classes are almost exclusively produced and maintained by privileged sections mostly for administrative purposes. Such records

suffer from misrepresentation or misinterpretation. Further, the life of people which were not in administrative interest was totally ignored.

Illiteracy of majority of the subordinate classes is another problem as they have generally not left much records of their own. Popular culture is largely preserved through the oral medium and this oral tradition is generally slippery for preserving facts and it changes constantly over a period of time. Thus the paucity written sources left by the ordinary people is a great hindrance in writing about their feelings and ideas.

Continued subalternity of the lower classes for ages, may be another cause for the non-availability of evidences. This has been amply proved while writing the series of Subaltern Studies or histories of working classes.

We need to know how to interrogate the past so we can unearth or recover the voices of the 'inarticulate'---those who do not leave behind correspondences, public papers, whose thoughts must be teased from court records---and to retrieve the insights of those who talk more than they write, that is, engage in oral history.

Instead of eulogising blindly, the historians should also concentrate on the failures of subaltern movements. Working classes facilities are being severely curtailed. The neoliberal corporate offensive had decimated the working class. Several marginal sections still suffer from immense inequality and exploitation. The degradation of women is still widely accepted in our culture. In short, we did not need another tale of heroic resistance of oppressed people. Rather, we needed to better understand the causes of their defeat, while at the same time, not discarding the gains of the new social and cultural history.

The 'history from below' is more relevant not only to politics but also to society, religion, culture as Indian society is facing deep crises, unable to develop political and social institutions to guarantee stability and equality primarily because of centuries of oppressive and social political systems that were heritage due to the caste system as reflected through Rohith Vemula's suicide and Una incidents.

It fact, it was B.R. Ambedkar that identified the cause of the retardation of the Indian creativity and advocated for shattering the social linkages which had tied up the minds of the people over centuries. Through constitution he tried to eradicate discrimination on the basis of birth, caste, creed, race, language, region and gender. But still there is a long way to reach that goal.

Hence for example, Ambedkar needs to be studied much more by the younger generations who are in search of solutions to the kinds of problems that they very often face and which they feel that there are no solutions to. There is a depth that needs to be explored in order to be able to explore all the possibilities of getting over these severe problems. In the work of Ambedkar there are great insights that are yet to be explored and in that exploration one can reach to the enlightening path for Indian society. This should be an attempt to shatter the feudal tendency that relates Ambedkar just to the issue of reservations while his contribution to human society is manifold. However, in unearthing Ambedkar afresh, the academicians and activists should not be satisfied in eulogising Ambedkarism but concentrate on the causes for

failure in realizing the dreams of Ambedkar.

Thus, the practitioners of 'history from below' should be cautious in romanticizing and idealizing the people ignoring the fact of institutional influence and other such factors. Overemphasis on narrative should also be avoided and must give due importance to quantitative analysis.

### Conclusion

There are arguments that those historians who practice 'history from below' approach pay far too much homage to how ordinary people helped contribute to the shaping and building of the nation and far too little attention on the role of famous men. It should be noticed that there are no two histories like the history of the nation and the history of its people. History from the bottom up is history of the nation's peoples composed of all kinds of different histories: 'the history of rich and poor; of exploited and exploiters; of men and women'. Thus, 'history from below' wonderfully fills the gap between history from the 'top down' and 'history from the bottom up'. Historians, thus, should exhibit malice towards none.

Such historical writing tries to help us understand the full contours of the past, paying equal attention to our triumphs and tragedies. More importantly, historians should not be afraid to hail the heroic figures of the past, but those should also include the less-than-famous men and women who struggled against oppression. Historians should also pay close attention to the uglier accounts of the past: thus, historians should never avoid dealing with the dark stories of our past

Bottom-up history instils a respect for and attention to people's lives, culture and traditions. It shows how these things, under the right circumstances, provide seeds for mass resistance. It shows how new political cultures based on ideas and values can emerge and become hegemonic. It shows how resistance and radical consciousness can arise from the very fabric of ordinary peoples' lives and cultures.

A crucial function of 'people's history' is remembering atrocities that the powerful seek to erase from historical memory. Seeking inspiration in past social movements is another important element of history from below.

History plays a powerful constitutive in determining an individual's sense of personal identity. The greatest repression, perhaps, is to deny and deprive people of their history. People's history perhaps will invariably solve this problem.

History that is 'written by the victors' tend to serve the interest of the powerful. It erases the details of past oppression and hides stories about people's ability to resist through collective action. Because of this, promoting history from below is a critical part of challenging today's injustices.

The objective of subaltern studies should aim in generating consciousness in the society; integrating social scientists and the society within the folds of social revolution aimed at establishing a truly egalitarian society; making the new generation aware about ideas on social justice/equity/national integration/women empowerment/minorities etc.; and exploring the potentiality of 'history from below' to strengthen the society and Indian national spirit.

I conclude with the quotation of Howard Zinn the author of 'Peoples History of the United States, 1492 - Present' who

believed that ordinary peoples' lives and struggles were central to the historical process:

"To think that history-writing must aim simply to recapitulate the failures that dominate the past is to make historians collaborators in an endless cycle of defeat. If history is to be creative, to anticipate a possible future without denying the past, it should, I believe, emphasize new possibilities by disclosing those hidden episodes of the past, when, even if in brief flashes, people showed their ability to resist, to join together, occasionally to win."

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