

---

## UNIT 16 POSTMODERNIST INTERVENTION

---

### Structure

- 16.1 Introduction
- 16.2 The Modernist Tradition
- 16.3 What is Postmodernism?
  - 16.3.1 Postmodernity
  - 16.3.2 History of the Term
  - 16.3.3 Main Concepts
- 16.4 Ideologues of Postmodernism
  - 16.4.1 Predecessors
  - 16.4.2 Ideologues of Postmodernism
- 16.5 Postmodernism and History-Writing
- 16.6 Critique of Postmodernism
- 16.7 Summary
- 16.8 Glossary
- 16.9 Exercises
- 16.10 Suggested Readings

---

### 16.1 INTRODUCTION

---

Postmodernism is a reaction against modernity. In essence, it may also be called anti-modernity. However, it is not anti-modern in a simple, binary opposition. It has developed through a long process of critical engagement with modernity and its consequences. Although the anti-modern tradition is almost as old as the modernist one, what has come to be called the 'postmodern turn' has gained prominence since the 1970s. The three decades since then have seen the spread of postmodern ideas throughout the world. However, they are particularly dominant in the advanced Western world. The ideologues of postmodernism have criticised and attacked the philosophy, culture and politics which modernity had generated. In fact, postmodernism has positioned itself basically vis-à-vis modernity. It is, therefore, important to know what modernity consists of. Without understanding it, it may not be possible to understand postmodernism.

---

### 16.2 THE MODERNIST TRADITION

---

The process of modernity began in the European countries around the time of Renaissance. Its centre lay in the origins and growth of modern sciences which established a quest for certainty, truth, exactitude, general principles and universal laws. Its ultimate philosophical justification was achieved in the works of philosophers like Descartes, Enlightenment thinkers such as Voltaire, Montesquieu and Diderot, the German philosophers such as Kant and Hegel and many other philosophers and thinkers. Modernity was said to herald the end of the Middle Ages or Feudalism in Europe, and usher in an era where Reason reigned supreme. The philosophers of modernity from Descartes to the post-Enlightenment thinkers to Marx and Weber denounced the medieval values, faiths and beliefs. Although

some of them, like Marx, were critical of modernity, they upheld most of its values and norms. Alain Touraine, a French sociologist, has stated that the dominant conception of modernity was that of a sharp break from the past:

‘The most powerful Western conception of modernity, and the one which has had the most profound effects, asserted above all that rationalization required the destruction of so-called traditional social bonds, feelings, customs, and beliefs, and that the agent of modernization was neither a particular category or social class, but reason itself.... The West... lived and conceived modernity as a *revolution*.’

The social sciences, including history, were integrally related to the making of this modernity. Great thinkers like Hobbes, Montesquieu, Voltaire, Hume, Adam Smith, Bacon were both products and producers of this modernity. Their theories were used for legitimising and maintaining centralised, bureaucratic states, creating new institutions, and moulding society and economy in new ways.

Modernity may be said to consist of various values and beliefs which included :

- i) faith in the usefulness and correctness of modern science and technology;
- ii) belief in Enlightenment principles that the society should follow the path of Reason and that myth and religion should have no role in shaping social values;
- iii) belief in a linear, progressive and transparent course of human history;
- iv) more reliance on universal principles in comparison to particularity;
- v) faith in the autonomous, self-conscious individual who is master of his destiny;
- vi) belief that modern science and Reason would conquer nature and give rise to affluence, freedom and a life free from fear of mortality.

Apart from new philosophical principles, modernity also generated powerful material forces which gave rise to modern industries, capitalism, and an entirely new set of social relations in Europe by the nineteenth century. This new industrial society was marked by urbanisation, bureaucratisation, individualism, commodification, rationalisation and secularisation. By the mid-nineteenth century, the process of modernity had almost completely eliminated the economy, society and polity of the Middle Ages in Western Europe and North America. Instead, it had given rise to a completely new economic, social and political order.

As the modernity generated unprecedented progress, it also created enormous sufferings. The peasantry, workers and artisans were all forced to go through terrible misery in the process of being modernised. Even more sufferings were due for the colonial territories in Asia, Africa, Latin America and Australia where the colonising Europeans eliminated the local people, occupied their lands and drained the economy for their own benefits. This imperialist drive led to the death of millions in colonial territories, enormous distortion in their cultures and traditions, and terrible burden on their resources.

---

## 16.3 WHAT IS POSTMODERNISM?

---

Postmodernism and postmodernity are sometimes used interchangeably. In fact, both terms denote different, though related meanings. While postmodernity has been used to characterise the economic and social conditions of existence in contemporary developed societies, postmodernism denotes the philosophy which has now arisen after and in opposition to the philosophy of modernity. In the following sub-sections, we will discuss the concepts of postmodernity, the history of the term postmodernism and finally the basic concepts relating to postmodernism.

### 16.3.1 Postmodernity

It has been a belief among some, particularly the postmodernists that we have passed beyond modernity and the age we are now living in is a postmodern one. Keith Jenkins, one of the postmodern theorists of history, declares that

‘Today we live within the general condition of *postmodernity*. We do not have a choice about this. For postmodernity is not an “ideology” or a position we can choose to subscribe to or not; postmodernity is precisely our condition : it is our fate.’

Frederic Jameson, a benevolent critic of postmodernism, also thinks that postmodernism is a cultural process initiated by a radical change in the nature of capitalism. In a famous book, he has characterised postmodernism as the ‘cultural logic of late capitalism’.

Basing in this belief about the emergence of a new society, several thinkers have argued that this has led to a change in our knowledge-system. Thus Jean-Francois Lyotard, a French thinker who popularised the term ‘postmodernism’, states that ‘the status of knowledge is altered as societies enter what is known as the postindustrial age and cultures enter what is known as postmodern age’.

In using the term postmodernity, the emphasis is basically on the social and the economic. It implies the exhaustion of modernity and stresses the rise of new information and communication technologies leading to globalisation and the enormous growth of consumerism. The theorists of this transformation have claimed that just as in the past the agrarian societies based on land were replaced by industrial societies based on manufacturing, in the same way, the industrial societies are now being replaced by a post-industrial world in which the service sector is now the most prominent.

It was Daniel Bell who, in his book *The Coming of Postindustrial Society*, seriously wrote about the arrival of a new kind of society representing a break from the earlier industrial society. In his view, the old-style ‘factory worker’ is now replaced by the new service-sector professional. Simultaneously, the old-style machines are now replaced by new information and communication technologies. The Fordist assembly line is now a thing of the past and there is a decentralisation of production and manufacturing. Moreover, now there is a greater flexibility in management and employment.

### 16.3.2 History of the Term

The term ‘postmodern’ has a long past and it has been used in many contexts. But its use, as the term itself indicates, has mostly been in the sense of surpassing the modern. As early as 1870, an English painter, J.W.Chapman used the term ‘postmodern’ for the paintings which were supposedly more modern than the French impressionist paintings. Later, in 1917, Rudolf Pannwitz applied the term for the nihilistic tendencies in European culture. In the post-Second World War period, Arnold Toynbee (1889-1975), in his monumental book, *A Study of History* (1934-61), used the term to show a transformation in European society and culture from around 1875. He described this ‘Postmodern Age’ as a break from the earlier Modern Age which followed the Middle Ages. In his view, this phase of Western history could be characterised by revolutions, wars and socio-political upheavals. This Postmodern Age, in his opinion, was marked by collapse of rationalism, stability and Enlightenment values which had characterised the Modern Age until 1875.

In the United States, the idea of a postmodern era has been articulated since the 1950s. The historian Bernard Rosenberg, the economist Peter Drucker and the sociologist C. Wright Mills defined the idea of postmodern in their own ways. While Rosenberg linked it with the emergence of a mass society, Drucker identified it with the postindustrial society; according to Mills, the postmodern age is leading to restriction of freedom and a robot-like society.

From the 1970s onwards, however, the term has been in constant use to criticise and attack the legacy of modernity. The French theorists, followed by the American ones, have been on the forefront in this regard. They have formulated theories which have heralded the new postmodern philosophy that has spread to many parts of the world.

### 16.3.3 Main Concepts

Very much like the theories of modernity, there is no unified theory of postmodernism. If anything, the situation is even more diffuse and chaotic. The range is vast and it covers the whole spectrum from mild critique of modernity to total nihilism. But, although postmodernism derives its definitions from many sources, the one common thread running through them is the critique of modernity. The major ideologues whose works constitute the corpus from which postmodernism is formulated are Foucault, Derrida, Lyotard, Baudrillard, Deleuze, Guattari, White, and Rorty. Their works posed a major challenge to the narratives of modernity and their theories attacked the basic foundations of knowledge created by modernity with Reason at its centre. The targets of their criticism have been capitalism, historicism, humanism, scientism, and rationalism which constituted the modern world.

Postmodernism questioned the claims of the Enlightenment philosophers for universal knowledge. It also criticised the search for foundations of knowledge. Modernity gave rise to grand narratives, that is, overarching theories purporting to explain each and everything within its compass. Postmodernism rejects the very idea of such grand narratives and attacks the all-encompassing, overarching ideologies.

Secondly, postmodernism debunks the claims of the science to achieve truth. Postmodernism takes nothing as absolute and leans towards relativism, sometimes total relativism. It, moreover, rejects the claims of human and social sciences for representing the facts and the world. In the opinion of the postmodern theorists, there is no truth which is beyond or prior to linguistic intervention; it is language which constructs the reality and the world for the humans. It is, therefore, futile to search for truth beyond language which, in turn, is conditioned by the individual and local cultures.

Thirdly, postmodernism also attacks the modernist organisation of world and knowledge in binaries. According to the postmodernists, the modernist tradition tried to arrange knowledge around certain major binaries in which science was the core common element – science vs. rhetoric, science vs. literature, science vs. narrative. Here science represented the true knowledge while the other side of the binary belonged to imagination and false consciousness. It also generated other sets of binaries. Fact vs. fiction, truth vs. imagination, science vs. magic, masculine vs. feminine, etc. are the binary oppositions conventionalised by the theorists of modernity. In these binaries, the second term almost always occupies an inferior position. Postmodernism challenges this knowledge based on binaries and instead emphasises on multiplicities, varieties and differences. The western concept of postmodernity has been outlined by Steve Seidman as follows :

‘As we move towards the end of the second millenium we in the west are entering a postmodern cultural terrain. This is a culture in which knowledge becomes knowledges, identities are understood as fractured, plural, and porous, and society and politics is without a fixed center.’

David Harvey, in his book *The Condition of Postmodernity* (1989), summarises the various features of modernism and postmodernism which are opposed to each other. These are listed in the table below.

## Features of Modernism and Postmodernism

Modernism	Postmodernism
Elitism, closure, authoritarianism and social engineering	Popular consumerism, flexibility, choice, openness, opportunity
High culture and tradition, profundity	Popular culture and the commodification of leisure and culture, “irreverent pastiche”, “contrived depthlessness”
Austerity and discipline	Playfulness, “laid back” hedonism
Fixed meanings, centres, absolute laws and truths	Relativity, indeterminacy, contingency, fragments of being, decentering, life (or “petite”) histories
Holism	Individualism
Planning	Experimentation, pragmatism
Homogeneity	Heterogeneity
Signified	Signifier
Certainty, unitary structures, e.g., class and systems, synthesis, externality (i.e., reality “out there”)	Scepticism, deconstruction, discursive reality

---

## 16.4 IDEOLOGUES OF POSTMODERNISM

---

In this section we will discuss the philosophers and thinkers who gave shape to the idea of postmodernism. This will include the earlier philosophers, whose thoughts have influenced the more recent thinkers, as well as those whose works have grounded the idea of postmodernism since the 1960s.

### 16.4.1 Predecessors

The critique of modernity is almost as old as modernity itself. As modernity achieved its full philosophical expression in the Enlightenment and post-Enlightenment philosophies, their challengers also came to the fore around the same time. When Voltaire was laying the foundations of the Enlightenment which stood against tradition, and was advocating the supremacy of Reason, Rousseau spoke for ‘cultural primitivism’ and the ‘natural order’.

A little later the Romantics also stood against Enlightenment’s emphasis on rationalism, scientism, universalism and totality. Instead, they defended the archaic, the traditional, the natural, the individual and the exotic. Their rebellion against modernity led the Romantics like Herder, the Grimm brothers, and many others to search for traditional folk cultures.

However, the single most important thinker who almost anticipated postmodernity was **Friedrich Nietzsche** (1844-1900), a German philosopher. Nietzsche agreed with the Romantics in their critique of modernity, but he differed with them so far as the solution was concerned. The Romantic search for peace in nature, tradition and religion did not appeal to Nietzsche. He said that the modern man had become too rooted in knowledge and freedom to return to nature and tradition. It was, therefore, futile to entertain a Romantic alternative of return to nature.

The main ideas of Nietzsche with which the postmodernists identify are related to his severe attack on principles of modernity – Reason, scientism, truth, meaning and universality.

Nietzsche severely criticised the tradition of western rationalism beginning with Plato and its claim to truth. In his opinion, this entire claim to possess truth is nothing but a desire for power and domination. He believed that human history is not, and should not be, meaningful, purposeful and predictable. He asserted that uncertainty was the hallmark of human condition. He also proclaimed the 'death of God' and demise of religion and said that morality and truth were impossible to achieve.

Another thinker in this tradition was **Martin Heidegger** (1889-1976), another German philosopher. He is considered to be one of the most important thinkers of the 20th century. He was an anti-historicist and denied the conception of history as science and rejected its view of progress. He was also hostile to reason, science and technology. He believed that modern technology has reduced the humans to absolute slavery. In his most important book, *Being and Time*, Heidegger undertook an enquiry into Being by combining the Existentialist and Phenomenological approaches. According to him, the crisis of modernity lies in the replacement of God by man as the centre of the universe. According to him, the entire western philosophical tradition since the time of Socrates was metaphysical. Here Heidegger inverts the usual meaning of 'metaphysics' (which normally is 'beyond the natural realm of senses'). In his opinion, the western rationalist tradition denies the possibility of a world beyond the concrete world perceived through senses. He believed that there was nihilism in the contemporary thought which originated in Socratic rationalism. It has been the generally accepted view that science and technology was opposed to metaphysics, in that while metaphysics dealt with the world beyond our natural senses, science and technology were concerned with things in the concrete world. But in Heidegger's unique definition, modern technology was considered as the highest manifestation of metaphysics because it can predict, manipulate and transform the world.

Both Nietzsche and Heidegger radically question the modernist tradition and prepare the ground for philosophical postmodernism. They criticise the unlimited competition and desire for dominance which modernity produced and show that there is a strong possibility that the relentless drive for modernity could be tyrannical, dehumanising and nihilistic.

However, what the postmodernists do not pay sufficient attention to or ignore are the hierarchical and elitist attitudes of both these thinkers. Along with other things, Nietzsche condemned the egalitarianism of Enlightenment thought and abhorred the mass-based democratic societies of his time. He believed that democratic Europe was the 'involuntary breeding ground for tyrants'. He hoped for a European aristocracy which would heed the advice of the philosophers. Similarly, Heidegger supported Hitler and the Nazis and was himself a member of the Nazi party.

#### **16.4.2 Ideologues of Postmodernism**

There are many thinkers associated with postmodernism. However, in this section, we will take up the ideas of only some of the most important thinkers for discussion.

**Michel Foucault** (1926-1984): Foucault, a French philosopher, was a complex thinker whose thoughts encompass various themes and multiple ideas. Nevertheless, he is considered a postmodern thinker because of his trenchant criticism of the Enlightenment ideas and modernity. His writings had and have still continued to exert tremendous influence in humanities and social sciences. His work is frequently referred to in disciplines such as history, cultural studies, philosophy, sociology, literary theory and education. He is famous for his critiques of various social institutions which he considered the products of European modernity. Institutions and disciplines such as psychiatry, medicine and prisons invited his trenchant criticism. Apart from his works on these, he is also renowned for his general theories concerning power and the relation between power

and knowledge, as well as his ideas concerning ‘discourse’ in relation to the history of Western thought. In later life he also worked on the history of sexuality. Foucault expressed his ideas through a series of important books – *Madness and Civilization* (1961), *The Birth of the Clinic* (1963), *The Order of Things* (1966), *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (1969), *Discipline and Punish : The Birth of the Prison* (1975), and *The History of Sexuality* (1976-1986).

Foucault’s writings are mostly set in historical contexts, but he discourages the notion of totality and continuity in history. Instead, he promotes the idea of discontinuity. Thus, for him, history is not continuous and unifocal, nor can there be any universalisation of history. Foucault’s ideas about history and society progresses from the concept of archaeology to that of genealogy. But throughout his works, he stresses the idea of difference. Moreover, he rejects the Enlightenment idea that the rule of Reason can be equated with emancipation and progress. He says that instead of serving as an emancipatory force, the knowledge centres on power and helps in creating new forms of domination in modern times. He thus criticises the attempts to separate knowledge and power and emphasises that the pursuit of knowledge, particularly in modern times, is indissolubly associated with pursuit of power and quest for domination. In brief, his ideas can be stated as follows :

- i) the history or the society is not unifocal but is decentred;
- ii) the discourses constitute the subject; the subject is not the originator of discourses. The discourses instead originate from institutional practices;
- iii) knowledge is not neutral but is intricately connected with modes of power and domination.

**Jacques Derrida** (1930-2004): Derrida, another French philosopher, has proved crucial to the development of the postmodern theory, particularly the ‘linguistic turn’. The basic contribution of Derrida to the development of the poststructuralist and postmodernist theories is his theory of deconstruction. It views all written texts as product of complex cultural processes. Moreover, these texts can only be defined in relation to other texts and conventions of writing. According to Derrida, the human knowledge is limited to texts; there is nothing outside the texts. Reality is constituted by language. It does not, however, mean that there is no world outside of language. But it does mean that the world we know is accessible to us only through language. It is language which constitutes our world and, therefore, language precedes reality. The knowledge of reality is not beyond language and its rules of existence. Another point related to deconstruction is the idea of difference which states that the meaning of anything is ascertained only through difference from other things. Any text is conceivable only in relation of difference to other texts. In this sense, difference precedes the existence of things.

Another point is about the unity of opposites, because without unity, there are no opposites. Unity and opposition alternate with each other. Deconstruction emphasises on the instability and multiplicity of meanings. There is no fixed meaning of anything and no single reading of a text.

**Jean-Francois Lyotard** (1924-1998): Lyotard is the main thinker who made the word postmodern famous. His book, *The Postmodern Condition*, published in French in 1979 and in English in 1984, made the term popular. He defined the term in the following way : **‘Simplifying to the extreme, I define *postmodern* as incredulity towards metanarratives’**. These metanarratives are grand narratives such as ‘the dialectics of Spirit, the hermeneutics of meaning, the emancipation of the rational or working subject, or the creation of wealth’. Lyotard expresses doubt towards all these. In his opinion, theories and discourses of all kinds are ‘concealed narratives’, that is, near-fictional accounts, despite their claims for universal validity. He criticises the modernist theories which tend to totalise and universalise ideas which are basically modern European products. He also

rejects the foundationalism which bases all knowledge on secure theoretical foundations. He attacks the metatheories, articulated through what he calls the masculinist metalanguage, which support the domination of various sorts – of one class over another, of men over women, of majority over minority. Instead, he advocates the ideas of difference and plurality, of radical uncertainty, and possibility of alternatives.

**Jean Baudrillard** (b. 1929): Baudrillard, another French thinker, is also closely identified with postmodernism and represents a particularly extreme form of it. His ideas have been highly influential in the world of media and arts. He stresses that we are now a part of the postmodern world. He distinguishes between modernity and postmodernity on several counts :

- i) modern society was based on production while postmodern society is based on consumption;
- ii) modern society was marked by exchange of commodities, whereas symbolic exchange is the hallmark of the postmodern society;
- iii) in modern society representation was primary where ideas represent reality and truth, but in postmodern society, the simulation takes precedence where there is no reality and where the meanings dissolve.

The three phenomena which, in Baudrillard's opinion, create the postmodern condition are simulation, hyper-reality and implosion. In the new era of information and communication technologies, the media (or the television) images replace the real things. These simulations increasingly become so powerful that they set the ideal for the social life. The media simulations of reality, video games, Disneyland, etc, supply more intense experiences to the consumers than the mundane everyday life. This, therefore, becomes the universe of hyper-reality where the distinctions between the real and the unreal are eliminated. In fact, these media images become more real than reality itself. Thus, the whole situation becomes inverted.

Baudrillard also defines the postmodern world as one of implosion where the traditional boundaries of classes, groups and genders are collapsing. This postmodern world has no meaning, no rhyme and no reason. There is no anchor and no hope. It is a world of nihilism.

**Hayden White (b.1928)** : White, an American historian, is considered an important postmodern thinker, particularly, in the field of history. His book, *Metahistory : The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, published in 1973, has been hailed by many as signifying a break in the philosophy of history. It was supposed to herald a 'linguistic turn' in the writing of history. Now, it was said, instead of asking 'how does history resemble science?' one might ask 'how does history resemble fiction?'

White argues that the past is presented to us merely in the form of various disjointed chronicles. It is the historian who creates out of it a meaningful story. It is not possible to find in the historical events a coherent narrative. At the most, they offer elements of a story. It is now the historian who prepares a coherent narrative out of the available set of records by suppressing certain events, while highlighting some others. This process becomes manifest by the fact that the same set of events may be construed as tragic, ironic or comic depending upon the political or other predilections of the historians. It, therefore, becomes clear, according to White, that history is not a scientific exercise, but a literary one and the historical narratives are not scientific treatise but 'verbal fictions'.

White says that in writing of history all the techniques of novel-writing are employed. Selection of events, characterisation, change of tone and point of view are the techniques

common to both the writing of novels and history. In history-writing, as in the creation of novels, imagination plays a great role. It is only through imagination that the historian makes sense of the past events and weaves some of them into a credible story.

**F.R. Ankersmit** : Ankersmit is a philosopher of history in the Netherlands. His views on history is outlined in his books which include *Narrative Logic : A Semantic Analysis of the Historian's Language* (1983), *The Reality Effect in the Writing of History* (1990), and *History and Tropology : The Rise and Fall of Mataphor* (1994). He denies the possibility of any generalisation in history. According to him, the generalisations about the past do not refer to anything real, but are concepts constructed by historians for the purpose of writing history :

‘For instance terms like “Renaissance”, “Enlightenment”, “early modern European capitalism” or the “decline of the Church” are in fact names given to the “images” or “pictures” of the past proposed by historians attempting to come to grips with the past.’

Similarly, he says, that ‘concepts such as “intellectual movement” ... “social group” ... do not form part of the past itself and ... do not even refer to actual historical phenomena or aspects of such phenomena’. He, therefore, asserts that ‘generalizations do not express any truths on the nature of (socio-historical) *reality*; they only reflect regularities in how we have actually *decided* to conceptualize reality’.

He further argues that the historian’s language creates an opacity which makes the knowledge of the past even more difficult :

‘The historical narrative is a complex linguistic structure specially built for the purpose of showing part of the past. In other words, the historian’s language is not a transparent, passive medium through which we can see the past as we do perceive what is written in a letter through the glass paperweight lying on top of it.... We do not see past through the historian’s language, but from the vantage point suggested by it.’

Ankersmit, therefore, proposes that historical writing should be considered as representational painting, which is distinct from the thing it represents.

---

## 16.5 POSTMODERNISM AND HISTORY-WRITING

---

Postmodernism offers a fundamental critique of the conventional mode of history-writing. Sometimes the critique becomes so radical that it almost becomes anti-history. The main ingredient of history-writing, such as facts, sources, documents, archival records, etc., all come under severe scrutiny under the microscope of postmodernist vision. The certainty and continuity attached to historical writing are thoroughly debunked, the inner working of historiography is put under scanner and its proclaimed nearness to ‘truth’ is attacked. The history-writing itself is historicised, and its rootedness in the western culture is highlighted by the postmodern thinkers. Postmodernism rejects the ‘objectivist’ tradition of history-writing starting with Ranke which strove to recover the past ‘as it actually was’. It has attacked history both in its grander versions as well as in its relatively modest versions. It challenges the proclaimed objectivity and neutrality of the historians and claims that the process of interpretation transforms the past in radically different ways.

Postmodernism questions the very basis of conventional historiography by locating its origins in the modern Europe’s encounter with the other. It began with the European Renaissance which prompted the Europeans to ‘discover’ other lands and people. In this quest the ‘history’ served as a tool for posing the modern western self in opposition to the other whose history was supposed to be just beginning as a result of its encounter with Europe. Thus the practice of history was employed not just to study the past but to fashion it in terms of the criteria set by modern Europe. History, therefore, evolved a

western quest for power over the colonised territories and its desire to appropriate their pasts.

There are basically two types of history in conventional sense. One is the grand narrative of history which visualises that the human society is moving in a certain direction, towards an ultimate goal – global capitalist society or a global communist one. There is another, more modest version of history which claims to rely only on facts and to eschew any ideological orientation. It claims neutrality and objectivity for itself and is the most accepted version of history writing. This is also known as the ‘lower case history’ which is ‘realist, objectivist, documentarist and liberal-pluralist’. At the centre of professional history writing is the notion of objectivity, of facts, of being able to represent reality, to recover the past. Historical facts are seen to exist independent of and prior to interpretation. Historian’s job is thus said to be able to discover the truth, to be neutral and dispassionate.

Postmodernism rejects all these notions. It not only attacks the attribution of any essence to the past, but also criticises the attempts to study the past for ‘its own sake’. Both versions of history writing are considered as ideological and situated in particular cultural formation. Both kinds of history is said to be ‘just theories about the past’, without any claim to represent the truth. Both are the products of western modernity and represent the ways in which it ‘conceptualized the past’. According to postmodernism, there is no historical truth but what the historians make it out to be, no facts except what the historians interpret, no representable past except what the historians construct.

In postmodernist view, the history can be accepted as genuine knowledge only if it sheds its claims to truth and hence to power, and accepts its fragmentary character. The only history possible is microhistory. The ambiguities and gaps in historical narration are inherent and essential to it and should be retained. All quests for continuity, coherence and consistency should be dropped. It should be accepted that all documents and facts are nothing but texts and are ideologically constructed.

There are even more extreme views within postmodernism with regard to historiography. Keith Jenkins, therefore, declares that ‘we are now at a postmodern moment when we can forget history completely.’ Here he differs somewhat from his earlier position where he felt the need for anti-modernist ‘reflexive histories’. Recently, however, he has taken the position that ‘thanks to the “non-historical imaginaries” that can be gleaned from postmodernism we can now wave goodbye to history’. He justifies his position on the ground that the history we know is entirely a modern western product which never earlier existed anywhere in the world:

‘we have obviously never seen anything like nineteenth- and twentieth-century western upper- and lower-case genres... at any other time or place. That there have never existed, on any other part of the earth, at any other time, ways of historicizing time *like that*.’

This extreme position questions the very existence of any kind of professional history-writing.

---

## 16.6 CRITIQUE OF POSTMODERNISM

---

As postmodernist critique of modernity ranges from total rejection to partial acceptance, so does the criticism of postmodernism varies from virulent attack and complete rejection to some level of its acceptance. The critiques have pointed out that in some extreme form of postmodern relativism, the implication may be that ‘anything goes’. However, such a stance may justify the status quo where ‘everything stays’. Total relativism and nihilism denies the transformative praxis and does nothing to change the repressive

socio-economic and political order. By segmenting the knowledge and by demarcating the socio-cultural boundaries to extreme micro levels, it makes it impossible to create a broad solidarity of the oppressed. Moreover, the postmodern analysis of society and culture is lop-sided because it emphasises the tendencies towards fragmentation while completely ignoring the equally important movements towards synthesis and broader organisation. At another level, by conceptualising power as distributed into countless small and big systems, practices and organisations at various levels of society, postmodernism obscures the selective concentration of power, the basic relations of domination and subordination, of repression and resistance. It also tends to ignore the roles of state and capital as much more potent tools of domination and repression.

Some critics also charge postmodernism with being historicist as it accepts the inevitability of the present and its supposedly postmodernist character. If the world is now postmodern, it is our fate to be living in it. But such postmodernity which the western world has created now is no more positive than the earlier social formation it is supposed to have superseded. Moreover, it is not very sure that whether the modernity has actually come to an end. In fact, large parts of the world in the erstwhile colonial and semi-colonial societies and East European countries are now busy modernising themselves. Even in the west, the chief characteristics of modernity are still there – industrial economy, political parties and factions, markets, unions, state regulations, discipline-based knowledge, etc. The concept of postmodernity, therefore, remains mostly at an academic and intellectual level.

Critics also argue that many postmodernists, deriving from poststructuralism, deny the possibility of knowing facts and reality. As a result, no event can be given any weightage over another. All happenings in the past are of the same value. Thus, theoretically, the Holocaust or any brutality of a similar nature can be equated with any other event, whether tragic or comic, because, in postmodernist view, it is the language which creates events and histories for us.

---

## 16.7 SUMMARY

---

The postmodern theories range from moderate to extreme criticism of modernity. While the extremist theorists desire a total break with modernity, the moderate ones endeavour to reconstruct modern theories so as to expunge totalising and repressive elements within them. While extremists abandon the progressive features of Enlightenment along with its repressive aspects, the moderates try to retain the liberating force of Enlightenment ideologies. Extreme positions are represented by Baudrillard, Lyotard and certain aspects of Foucault, whereas moderate positions are claimed by Frederic Jameson, Laclau and Mouffe.

The postmodern theorists question the very basics on which the discipline of history has been based. They do not believe in the disciplinary boundaries in academics, such as those between history and literature, or between economics and anthropology and so on. They also question the existence of facts and events apart from what the historians make them out to be. In their view, linguistic representation becomes the essence of the past and the core of history.

---

## 16.8 GLOSSARY

---

**Enlightenment** : It was a European intellectual movement of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries which professed rationalism, secularism and humanism in opposition to religion and superstition. Locke and Bentham in England, Voltaire, Montesquieu and Diderot in France and Thomas Jefferson in America were its main exponents.

**Humanism** : Humanism is defined as the doctrine which considers the human being as the centre of the universe, in place of God or nature.

**Rationalism** : It is the doctrine which only accepts the beliefs based on experience and deductive and inductive reasoning. It is also against the belief in the supernatural.

**Romanticism** : At the end of the eighteenth century, mostly in opposition to the French Enlightenment and also as a feeder to the emerging nationalisms, Romanticism developed in western Europe and Russia. Its initial exponents were Rousseau in France and Herder, Kant, Fichte and Schelling in Germany. Its impact was felt roughly from the 1790s to the 1840s. It was a reaction to the French Revolution and the Industrial Revolution in England which resulted in social and political dislocations. Crucial to the Romantic thought was an organic relation between man and nature.

**Scientism** : It is the belief that inductive methods of reasoning applied in the natural sciences are the only source of genuine factual knowledge and it is only through them that a true knowledge of man and society is possible.

---

## 16.9 EXERCISES

---

- 1) What is postmodernism? Discuss the views of some of the important thinkers identified with it.
- 2) Write a note on the modernist tradition. How is postmodernism different from it?
- 3) What is the difference between postmodernity and postmodernism?
- 4) Discuss the postmodernist views on history. On what grounds these have been criticised?

---

## 16.10 SUGGESTED READINGS

---

Keith Jenkins (ed.), *The Postmodern History Reader* (London and New York, Routledge, 1997)

Keith Jenkins, *On 'What is History?': From Carr and Elton to Rorty and White* (London and New York, Routledge, 1995)

Steven Best and Douglas Kellner, *Postmodern Theory : Critical Interrogations* (London, MacMillan, 1991)

Brian Fay, Philip Pomper and Richard T. Vann (eds.), *History and Theory : Contemporary Readings* (Mass. and Oxford, Blackwell, 1998)

Steve Seidman (ed.), *The Postmodern Turn : New Perspectives on Social Theory* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1994)

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

Geoffrey Roberts (ed.), *The History and Narrative Reader* (London and New York, Routledge, 2001)

Arthur Marwick, *The Nature of History* (Third Edition, New York, 1989)

C.Behan McCullagh, *The Truth of History* (London, New York, Routledge, 1998)

C.Behan McCullagh, *The Logic of History* (London, New York, Routledge, 2004)

---

## UNIT 17 GENDER IN HISTORY

---

### Structure

- 17.1 Introduction
- 17.2 History as the Narrative of Power
- 17.3 Absence of Women in Modern Historiography
- 17.4 Women's Movement and Gender Sensitive History
- 17.5 Features of Feminist Historiography
- 17.6 Summary
- 17.7 Exercises
- 17.8 Suggested Readings

---

### 17.1 INTRODUCTION

---

Women have a dual relationship with history in India as they are simultaneously present and absent in the historical accounts that have come down to us. The women are invisible especially from a feminist standpoint, and they are relatively visible from the point of view of the concerns of nationalist history, especially in the context of ancient India. Thus the task of the feminist historian today is doubly difficult. Unlike many other parts of the world where women have had to be inserted into history, here history has, in a sense, to be 're' written. Further, rewriting history from a woman inclusive standpoint requires historians to not only explore (and re-explore) sources and social processes, uncover evidence (which has been ignored or marginalised because of existing biases) and thereafter insert issues of gender into new historical writing, such writing has also to uncover the many histories of suppression, resulting in history having become a flattened, and one-dimensional account of a few men. Historians writing in the last twenty years or so in India have therefore necessarily had to shift the focus onto the neglected segments of our society, thereby broadening its ambit. Under this new focus, a gender sensitive history is now beginning to be possible, although we need to note that this new field was not an automatic consequence of a shift of focus but the conscious product of feminist interventions. What also needs to be noted is that among the first tasks to be addressed by feminist scholars, even before launching into the writing of a new kind of history was the attention that had to be paid to analysing what had gone before: a feminist historiography has therefore preceded a feminist rewriting of the past. And finally, when the new feminist history began to be written it had to go beyond the concerns of colonialists and nationalists to explore the structures and ideologies that have contributed to the particularities of south Asian patriarchies.

---

### 17.2 HISTORY AS THE NARRATIVE OF POWER

---

Despite the surfacing of new concerns and a new will amongst a section of historians, there are many inherent problems in writing a history that is genuinely inclusive of women. The sources of history, here as elsewhere, reflect the concerns of those who have wielded power. It is sometimes argued, with justification, that the notion of time, and therefore of history, in the dominant Indian tradition, which may also be called the Brahmanical tradition, has been cyclical and not linear, making for a crucial difference in the understanding of history. One implication of this view is that the contemporary discipline of history in India is a derivative of the western, linear, tradition and violates the spirit of the 'authentic' Indian tradition. The further implication is that, therefore, it

cannot be subjected to certain kinds of scrutiny. What is ignored in this argument is that the cyclical notion of history is as much the product of those who have wielded power as the linear view of history is. It might be useful to note that unlike archaeological evidence, which may be loosely described as the 'garbage' of history, as the incidental remnants of material culture, and therefore not associated with the conscious decision to leave something to posterity, written records are self-conscious products and are closely tied to those who have exercised power. The *Rajatarangini*, the *Harshacharita* or the *Itihasa* portions of the *Puranas* are unambiguous narratives of power even if they may reflect a cyclical view of history.

It might also be argued that these sources constitute only a small fraction of the sources we have for ancient India and the bulk of the sources are not conventional historical sources at all but a variegated collection of myths, religious texts, and other types of literary productions. Nevertheless the textual sources that have come down to us, even when they are 'religious', 'cultural', 'social', or concerned with the political economy, are products of a knowledge system which was highly monopolistic and hierarchical and thus narrowly concentrated in the hands of a few men — a group that was even narrower here than elsewhere.

In this context it might be useful to explore the manner in which scholars have tried to break out of the limited concerns imposed by the 'recorders' of history who have, in a sense, refracted history for us. In contemporary times it is possible to use oral history as a way of countering the biases of 'official' history. But the relationship of orality to textuality is very complex in the case of our early history. In a sense, all 'texts' were orally transmitted and then 'written' up much later. Though these texts only ultimately became prescriptive, or were regarded as sacred, they were treated as authoritative and therefore worthy of formal handing down in the traditional way which was oral precisely because it could be carefully controlled. 'Oral' texts are not in and of themselves counter-hegemonic. Further, certain oral traditions which had been brought into the ideological field of the religious literati but nevertheless circulated largely among the humbler folk, and were therefore more widely shared as they were narrated to a heterogeneous audience, such as the *Jatakas* or the *Panchatantra*, though significant in terms of yielding a different kind of evidence on women and the lower orders, are not necessarily the compositions of such sections, at least in the versions that have come down to us. The *Jatakas* for example, comprise a rich repertoire of narratives and often describe the experiences of ordinary women and men with great poignancy; they are, nevertheless, firmly located within a Buddhist world-view. As they stand, the *Jatakas* are the product of mediations between high culture and 'low' culture; framed by the *bhikkhus* (the Buddhist monks) these narratives cannot be termed 'folk'. While they are an alternative to the Brahmanical texts they cannot be regarded as the dichotomised 'other' of elite texts. Similarly, the *Therigatha*, verses or songs of the *bhikkhunis* (the Buddhist nuns), a work that is probably one of the earliest compilations of women's poetry anywhere in the world, while very definitely the compositions of women, have not escaped the editorial hand of the Buddhist monastic compilers. These factors have complicated the use of oral sources and the writing of a gender-sensitive history from below. There are further problems because of the difficulties of dating oral texts, which therefore cannot easily be collated with other evidence available for specific periods; while we gain from the point of view of the richness of the data we lose from the point of view of specificity of time and region. Nevertheless, despite the many problems inherent in the sources the newer generation of historians, writing from a 'history from below' standpoint including feminists, have begun to use these sources creatively. Using strategies such as reading against the grain and between the lines, especially in the case of prescriptive texts, or looking at the way myths and narratives change in a diachronic context they are raising new questions and bringing in fresh insights. We will further discuss these issues in later sections.

## 17.3 ABSENCE OF WOMEN IN MODERN HISTORIOGRAPHY

It might be useful at this point to examine the factors that led to a shift in the writing of history and thus acted as a catalyst for gender history. In the Indian context nationalist history dominated the scene until the late 1950s. Nationalist history was primarily focussed on political history (kings, conquests, invasions, as in the case of the earlier colonial history; liberal and imaginative administrators, political institutions and so on) and cultural history — mainly a detailing of achievements on the cultural front. Apart from an obsessive concern with locating and outlining idealised images and golden ages, there was almost a conscious steering away from examining internal contradictions, hierarchies along different axes, and oppressive structures. This point may be illustrated by seeing the numerous works of R.K.Mukherji, R.C.Majumdar and K.P.Jayaswal among others. This trend in the writing of Indian history found its most systematic formulation in the Indian History and Culture volumes edited by R.C. Majumdar and published by the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Bombay between 1956 and 1963. This was part of a move to present the imperial government with a united front but also a product of middle class myopia obsessed with a single axis of deprivation, between the colonial power and the nation's *bhadralok* in relation to them. Tilak, the militant nationalist, for example, argued that the distinctions between labourers and masters was false; all Indians were labourers or rather *shudras* and slaves, and the British were the only masters

Meanwhile, going back to the late colonial period, social history made its appearance. Here as elsewhere, in the early stages, social history was a kind of residual history with politics and economics left out. Some of the issues explored under this rubric were the history of social reform, and religious and revivalist movements, mostly within the framework of biographical narratives of the men spearheading the movements. Finally in the decades after independence and under the influence of Marxist approaches, social history became the history of social formations. D.D. Kosambi pioneered this field with two brilliant and wide-ranging books and a series of imaginative papers published from the mid fifties onwards. His formulations were the basis for detailed analyses on various epochs of Indian history and the relationship between modes of production and other political and social institutions. By the late 1970s and 1980s there were raging debates on whether or not there was feudalism in India, and while the issues thrown up in the course of this debate were important, there was absolutely nothing on what happened to women in the feudal mode of production, or where they figured in the new relations of production. The underlying presumption was that history for women was the same as history for men. No attempt was made to move into the field of the modes of social reproduction while continuing to explore modes of production where class and gender could be combined making for a connection between gender structures, ideologies, and social and economic power structures. Similarly, although there was a welcome shift towards exploring the history of the lower orders, such as the *dasa-karmakaras*, *shudras*, and *chandals*, bringing in issues of caste and class and unequal power relations, this did not include an examination of unequal gender relations. In any case a shortcoming, in my view, of the history of social formations is that human beings as individuals, whether men or women, and their experience of different social processes, seemed to be missing from it. Since it centred on modes of production the primary issues that were explored were the ways in which surplus was extracted, the particular forms of labour exploitation, and the role of technology in transforming relations of production, human experiences, mentalities, and emotions tended to be left unexplored. In some ways then, such a history was as distant as the earlier dynastic or administrative histories had been. This lacuna has to some extent been rectified by new trends in history writing under the label of 'subaltern' studies but these scholars too have neglected women as a category. While

they brought into the frame of history the lives and struggles of ordinary people such as peasants and tribals, they too focussed on peasant *men* and tribal *men* without even being conscious that there could be subalterns within subalterns. Their writing was as male centred as earlier nationalist or Marxist history had been. It is ironical that even as a certain space was opening up for a history of the 'powerless' the most powerless among the powerless remained outside the framework of new historical trends.

---

## 17.4 WOMEN'S MOVEMENT AND GENDER SENSITIVE HISTORY

---

How then did the shift occur in terms of the writing of women's history? We may attribute this to the women's movement of the 1970s which provided the context and the impetus for the emergence of women's studies in India. As Tanika Sarkar has recently pointed out, women's history as a sustained and self-conscious tradition developed from the 1970s since many feminist scholars were themselves involved in the vigorous and turbulent movements against rape, dowry and domestic violence. It was here that the contours of the multiple forms and structures of patriarchies, and the cultural practices associated with them began to be outlined through the experiences of women on the ground. These years, during the heyday of an explicitly political women's movement, and the insights derived therein, provided feminist scholars with the experiential material on the basis of which they formulated gender as a category of analysis. (The recent phenomena of mainstream scholars cashing in on the space created for women's history, without addressing the existence of patriarchies in their writing, is an explicitly anti-political and deflective agenda, marking a sharp break from *feminist* scholarship.) And since the 70s also witnessed other political movements of peasants, workers, and tribals turning our attention onto the marginalised and the oppressive conditions under which they lived and struggled, historians were *forced* to broaden the ambit of history; the content of history has thus been dramatically democratised and we are now happily moving in a direction which is making history the most dynamic discipline in the social sciences. But it is important to recognise that historians, and only some of them at that, respond to grass-roots assertions: they do not lead the new trends but merely follow the agendas set by our people, which is why a gender sensitive history had to wait for the women's movement and was not an automatic or logical trend following from Marxist history or subaltern history.

---

## 17.5 FEATURES OF FEMINIST HISTORIOGRAPHY

---

In a moment such as this, it is apt that a review of the main trends in women's history is undertaken. Beginning with tentative formulations and simple re-readings it is by now fairly evident that despite a weak institutional base women's history has taken off. During the last decade some very fine work has appeared in the field of women's history forcing mainstream historians to recognise and sometimes even cash in on the 'market' created by feminist scholarship. Among the first major moves made by feminist scholars was that of dismantling the dominant nationalist narrative of the glory of Hindu womanhood during the ancient past, specifically during the Vedic period. By breaking up the Hindu / Vedic woman into the 'Aryan' and the *dasi* woman attention was drawn to the differing histories of women according to respective social locations. This corrective was important because while it was necessary to insert gender as an axis of stratification it was equally necessary, perhaps more so, to outline the stratification that existed *within* women. The suppressions entailed in the homogenised product of the nationalists, the 'Hindu' / Vedic or 'Aryan' woman, became evident. At the same time the need to outline the distinctive social histories of women was highlighted. Thus while the major tendency during these early years was to write a complementary, or supplementary, history of women, to accompany the narratives of mainstream history, by plotting the history of women in different arenas and in different

types of struggles the distinctive experiences of women in the context of class was built into the analysis of gender.

A second feature of the thrust in writing women's history was the painstaking uncovering and compiling of an archive of women's writing. Given the male biases of the sources normally relied upon by mainstream history, and the difficulties experienced by feminist historians in finding alternative sources, the putting together of this archive has been very significant. It has helped to break down the canonisation of certain sources which are no longer invariably regarded as more reliable but, more correctly, as having achieved authoritative status through their closeness to power. A parallel and no less significant development has been the appearance of some extremely rich and sensitive readings of women's writing.

An overview of women's history and the insights derived from the new writing lead directly to the recognition that gender as a tool of analysis has been very unevenly used to explore the three conventional chronological phases of ancient, medieval and modern India. The bulk of the new writing is being done for colonial and post-colonial India and there is very little of such writing for ancient and even less for medieval India. This is in part due to the need for a knowledge of the classical languages in which the sources are available for these phases but it is also partly attributable to the dominant contemporary theoretical concerns which are focussed solely on colonial and post colonial Indian society. In practice this has also meant the abandonment of these phases to the continuing domination of the Indological framework which is locked into a high classical and consensus approach, unwilling to recognise that there could be other histories.

However, there have been pioneering works heralding a breakthrough in more ways than one. A recent study by Kumkum Roy on the emergence of monarchy in early India is significant because it uses precisely those sources that the Indologists have always relied upon, the Brahmanical texts relevant for the period, but opened them up to a totally different line of inquiry. The study also links the inter-relatedness of the different axes of stratification to outline the processes by which hierarchies were established and legitimised through the use of Brahmanical rituals. Once the structure was in place the king was regarded as the legitimate controller of the productive and reproductive resources of the kingdom. At the same time the *yajamana*, on whose behalf rituals were performed, came to be regarded as the controller of the productive and reproductive resources of the household. The most significant aspect of Roy's work is that it breaks down the false, but perhaps for the moment operationally necessary, divide between gender history and mainstream history. It demonstrates how our understanding of the past is expanded and enriched when gender is included as a category of analysis.

Other issues that have been probed at the conceptual level include the relationship between caste, class, patriarchy and the state, and the dynamics of the household in early India. Apart from these studies which are attempts at exploring women's histories at the level of the relationship of gender to other institutions there are studies of the changing versions of myths and other narratives, prostitution, motherhood, labouring women, property relations, women as gift givers, and women as rulers. These accounts have helped to gradually build up a base for further conceptualisations and to break the hold of the Altekarian paradigm, which has dominated the field of women's history in the case of 'ancient' India. A major lacunae that continues to restrict our understanding is the way in which gender shapes, and is in turn shaped by, other structures within a given social formation.

While a beginning has been made from the point of view of using a gender-based framework in the case of early Indian history there is a singular paucity of works using gender as a category of analysis in medieval Indian history. Even a women's history

which complements or supplements mainstream history is far from being systematically written. Perhaps this is because there has been a slow response to engage with gender as a category of analysis from scholars with a mastery over Persian in a situation where Persian sources continue to dominate the field of medieval Indian history. A slow beginning has been made recently but the works tend to be episodic rather than conceptual. The most sustained output is coming from south Asia specialists from American academies but these are usually narrowly empirical and steer clear of making broader analytical points. The lack of a strong gender based standpoint is unfortunate because it is not as if the sources for medieval India are peculiarly disadvantaged; in fact the situation is quite the reverse. It is just that the sources have never been systematically explored from the point of view of gender. Kumkum Sangari's finely nuanced and elaborately analysed study of Bhakti poetry and within that of Mira's location is an example of historicising literature, and individuals during the medieval period. Sangari's analysis of the family, kinship and the state is a pointer to the direction that a gender sensitive history could fruitfully take. Happily, studies are now underway on a range of themes such the genderedness of language, landownership, inheritance, the politics of the royal household, women against women in polygamous households, and the changing narratives that produced the model of the virtuous and chaste *virangana*. Perhaps these studies and others can be linked together, and others can be undertaken, leading to broader understanding of gender relations in medieval India.

An important lacuna in the gender history of both ancient and medieval India is the absence of region-based studies. With the exception of a few explorations of Tamil literature and inscriptions of early and medieval south India we have very little by which we can make connections between the social formations of different regions and the ways in which these would have shaped gender relations in their respective regions.

More wide-ranging explorations have been possible in the field of women's history during the colonial and post-colonial period. More accessible from the point of view of the languages in which the sources are available, these sources are also better preserved. Consequently, feminist scholars have been able to not only insert women into history but also examine the relationship between various social and economic processes and gender. They have also been able to explore certain themes in some depth and have made a dent in historical debates about nationalism, class formation and the operations of caste.

Among the more rigorous areas of research in women's history during this period has been the analysis of the way in which new colonial structures especially in the field of law shaped the lives of women. An impressive body of writing has examined the working of specific laws such as the Widow Remarriage Act, the impetus and the forces behind the creation and codification of laws, the contradictions between the applications of different sets of legal systems such as customary law and statutory law, statutory law and 'personal' law, and the general move towards homogenising the diversity of social customs and cultural practices. One of the most exhaustive and significant studies by Bina Agrawal has focussed on the way law shapes gender relations by denying women access to productive resources in the form of land. She has thus provided us with an understanding of the political economy of the vulnerability of women. While some of these studies have been empirical others have examined the historical context, class dynamics and the relationship of law to colonialist and nationalist ideologies at given moments. These studies have also been able to reveal the possibilities and limitations of a colonialist (and nationalist) hegemonic agendas.

The issue of women's education has been the subject of numerous writings. Initially scholars tended to plot the different stages by which opportunities for women's education were created and expanded in the context of the movement for social reform, taking for granted

its 'positive', liberatory and transformative potential. Men's spearheading of the campaign for women's education then appeared to be genuinely 'liberal'; perhaps it was paternalistic but it was presumed that it was a means by which women would be emancipated from an earlier deprivation. These studies have now been taken much further to examine the crucial role of education, or rather 'schooling', in the agendas of new patriarchies and the relationship of schooling for women to processes of class formation. Men's stake in women's education and power over them, women's agency and resistance in a conflict-ridden household in the process of many kinds of transition have also been outlined. Some of these analyses have been made possible through a close examination of women's writing. As women were drawn into literacy and education, mostly at the instance of their menfolk (to make them companionate wives and fitting mothers), but sometimes against their approval, they took to writing. Letters, memoirs, essays, biographies, poetry, stories, travelogues, and, on occasion, social critiques of patriarchy appeared by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and continued into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Feminist scholarship on this alternative archive has been significant in fine tuning our understanding of social reform, but also in revealing to us what was suppressed in the accounts of mainstream history. It is to be expected that the social critiques written by 19<sup>th</sup> century women would be regarded as significant markers in the history of women's resistance to the ideologies and practices of male domination; women like Pandita Ramabai and Tarabai Shinde have thus become known in the world of feminist scholarship. What is important is that through a sensitive reading of a seemingly conformist piece of writing, by Rashsundari Devi, too one can uncover an oblique but moving critique of upper caste cultural practices.

The history of labouring women too has been sought to be included in the rewriting of history. Accounts of their participation in agrarian struggles, issues that were raised and others that were suppressed and the perception of the women of those 'magic' days, as some of them put it, have been important not only to balance out the accounts of 'peasant' struggles but also in exploring the complicated relationship between issues of class and gender, and the strategies of left wing groups in highlighting class oppression and suppressing gender oppression. Feminist scholars discovered that in their recuperation of earlier histories of women's political activism, questions of sexual politics and its complicated relations with broader struggles were of central, absorbing importance: struggles that needed women, mobilised them, conferred a political and public identity upon them, and yet subtly contained them and displaced their work for their own rights.

Women's place in the organised labour force especially in the textile and jute industries have been the subject of monographs, and currently there are a number of studies underway on women in the unorganised sector, especially in the context of globalisation and the structural adjustment programme. These studies, being the first of their kind, have however retained a largely empirical approach. Perhaps with more studies documenting the daily lives of labouring women we might be able to write an account of the making of the working class from a woman centred point of view. However, history is changing so rapidly in the new era of globalisation that the working class may be transformed beyond recognition even before we can write their history!

Among the more significant researches in writing an account of women's labour within an historical frame is the issue of domestic labour. This has been a central issue in feminism resulting in a considerable body of scholarship, in the west as well as the third world. Its relationship to capitalism has been repeatedly stressed in western feminist scholarship. In India studies have analysed domestic labour in its relationship to caste, class, widowhood, hierarchies within the household, and the capacity of households to buy domestic services. At the conceptual level, the relationship of domestic labour to

the labour market and the proliferation of the sexual division of labour in waged work, even as it might appear to be outside the realm of market, has also been highlighted. The fact that 'domestic labour exists within a system of non-dissoluble, non-contractual marriage permeated by ideologies of service and nurture has meant that domestic labour and domestic ideologies not only co-exist but are also jointly reproduced even in a rapidly changing economic and social system' has also been pointed out by Sangari.

Earlier on in this paper it has been suggested that feminist scholarship has had to be innovative in its use of sources as well as in their reading of them. One of the recent works that has been extremely successful in such an approach has used a range of sources including conventional sources such as statistics and government reports, but has balanced these off by folk literature, proverbs and fieldwork to locate women's perception of their own lives. The framework of the political economy of gender used by Prem Chowdhry has yielded an important study of the everyday experiences of labouring women of a peasant caste over a hundred year period.

The use of oral history by feminist historians to explicitly critique the inadequacies and biases of official and mainstream/malestream and elitist histories has been extremely significant in the field of partition history. Here women have been the pioneers in writing an alternative history written from the point of view of the marginalised: women, children, and *dalits*. They have raised crucial questions about the ideologies of the state in the context of notions of community, and honour in the recovery and rehabilitation of 'abducted' women and the doubled dimensions of violence experienced by women first at the hands of men, and then at the hands of a patriarchal state which denied women agency as it sought to align boundaries with communities. It is significant that feminist scholarship has provided a systematic critique of nationalism at the very moment of the birth of a new nation. Far from a recognition of their pioneering work even their critique of nationalism and of the post-colonial Indian state is yet to be taken seriously by mainstream historians. This is perhaps an outcome of the territoriality of mainstream/malestream historians entrenched in the academy, with personal stakes in retaining their hold on historical writing. Further, in my view, these are part of an agenda of once more marginalising, or even erasing, women's pioneering of a new field, thereby claiming both originality and monopoly over theory. Given the backlash against feminist scholars in terms of appointments to Universities at the highest level, currently underway, the political dimensions of such marginalisations need to be seriously noted.

The issue of women's agency is part of a larger set of issues in feminist scholarship and it is at the moment often being simplified. The desire to write a different kind of history has led feminist scholars to explore the histories of resistance by women, individually and collectively, and also their use of strategies such as subversion and manipulation of men's power over women. While it is important to document acts of resistance, subversion and manipulation, it is somewhat simplistic to celebrate all instances of 'subversion' and 'manipulation'; these may certainly be examples of women's agency but particular instances of subversion such as the strategies used by the tawaifs of Lucknow cannot be regarded as subversive as they work within, and therefore reinforce, patriarchal ideologies. It is useful to bear in mind the political consequences of actions as well as of theoretical formulations especially in the context of feminist writing in India, which owes its originary impulse to a political agenda, as pointed out earlier. Recent writings have tried to provide a perspective for exploring women's agency. The dialectical relationship between structure and agency requires examining and it may be useful to look at structure and agency as processes that pre-suppose each other: there is also a need to bear in mind that social systems set limits and put pressures upon human action. Agency does not exist within a vacuum as women have come to understand.

---

## 17.6 SUMMARY

---

The preceding sections of this paper have tried to outline some of the issues in writing history from a gender sensitive standpoint and mark some of the major conceptual advances within the field of women's history. There are huge areas that still need to be explored such as the histories of *dalit* women and many issues are under theorised, an example being the relationship between caste and gender. There is an urgent need for a rigorous outlining of the structures in which women's oppression is located. In this context I consider it important for feminist scholars to be wide-ranging in their research and not restrict themselves to theoretical approaches that may dominate academies in particular locations. I would even argue that it is necessary for feminist scholars to resist the tendency to take over their agendas by currently fashionable theories such as post-modernism. Its use in the Indian context has tended to valorise pre-colonial society, as well as the 'community' and the 'family' as pre-modern indigenous institutions which have remained outside the realm of colonial power and are therefore 'authentic'. It may be noted that we have a long tradition of examining the community and family in women's scholarship. The direction of these early works has been overtaken by works that are restricted to the modern pre-modern paradigm. The new focus is also almost entirely on culture. Scholars using the post-modernist framework appear to be antagonistic to any project that is engaged in locating the structures that are the sources of the oppression of women. Perhaps the focus on 'women's culture' enables some of these scholars to highlight the happy spaces for women in the family and obliterate everything else. But for those who experience, or are sensitive to the workings of multiple forms of patriarchies it is crucial to understand social and economic processes and the hierarchical institutions that have put systems of oppression into place. For feminist scholars an unqualified or uncontextualised concentration on culture as an autonomous realm, or discussions of agency without a look at its relationship to structure, will be disastrous. It will push us back, not take us forward in theorising patriarchies and the complex ways in which they work in India.

---

## 17.7 EXERCISES

---

- 1) Discuss the various features of feminist historiography.
- 2) What is the relationship between women's movement and gender-sensitive history?
- 3) Why have women been generally absent in the traditional historiography?

---

## 17.8 SUGGESTED READINGS

---

Kumkum Sangari and Uma Chakravarti eds. *From Myths to Markets: Essays on Gender* (Shimla, Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1999).

Uma Chakravarti, *Rewriting History: The Life and Times of Pandita Ramabai* (Delhi, Kali For Women, 1998).

Uma Chakravarti, 'Beyond the Altekarian Paradigm: Towards a New Understanding of Gender Relations in Early India', *Social Scientist*, 16(8), August, 1988.

Kumari Jayawardena and Malathi de Alwiss, *Embodied Violence: Communalising Women's Sexuality in South Asia* (Delhi, Kali for Women, 1996).

Aloka Parasher, 'Women in Nationalist Historiography: The Case of Altekar,' in Leela Kasturi and Vina Majumdar (ed.), *Women in Indian Nationalism* (Delhi, Vikas Publishing House, 1994).

Vijaya Ramaswamy, 'Aspects of Women and Work in Early South India,' *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, January-March, 1989;

Vijaya Ramaswamy *Divinity and Deviance* (Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1994).

Vijaya Ramaswamy *Walking Naked: Women, Society, Spirituality in South India* (Shimla, Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1997).

Janaki Nair, *Women and Law in Colonial India* (Delhi, Kali For Women, 1996).

Rosalind O'Hanlon, *A Comparison Between Men and Women: Tarabai Shinde and the Critique of Gender Relations in Colonial India* (Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1994).

Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (ed.), *Recasting Women : Essays in Colonial History* (Delhi, Kali for Women, 1989).



---

## UNIT 18 RACE IN HISTORY

---

### Structure

- 18.1 Introduction
- 18.2 Race as Political and Social Construct
- 18.3 Race and Science
  - 18.3.1 Concept of Evolution within Racial Science
  - 18.3.2 Eugenics and Racial Science
- 18.4 Race in Relation to Colonialism
- 18.5 Race and the Discipline of Anthropology
- 18.6 Racial 'Research' and the Politics of Domination
- 18.7 Popularising Racial Concepts
- 18.8 India and the Idea of Race
- 18.9 Summary
- 18.10 Exercises
- 18.11 Suggested Readings

---

### 18.1 INTRODUCTION

---

One of the depressing predictions about the twentieth century was made by the black American scholar W.E.B. Du Bois back in 1903 when he asserted that 'the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the colour line – the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia and Africa, in America and in the islands of the sea'. It is perhaps with these words in mind that another black scholar Stuart Hall, this time British, asserted a few years ago that 'the capacity to live with difference is, in my view, the coming question of the twenty first century'.

The abolition movement against slavery of the 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries had provided a context for the emergent science of human races in the twentieth century. It is important to remember here that while for scholars of Du Bois's generation the 'colour line' was an everyday reality based on institutional patterns of *racial domination*, in recent times questions about race and racism have been refashioned in ways that emphasise *cultural difference*. The shifts in conceptual language that have become evident in the past three decades are symptomatic of wider debates about the analytical status of race and racism, as well as related shifts in political and policy agendas.

---

### 18.1 RACE AS POLITICAL AND SOCIAL CONSTRUCT

---

Serious study of race and race relations as important social issues can be traced back to the early part of the twentieth century. The expansion of research and scholarship in this area, however, happened around the 1960s, in the aftermath of the social transformations around questions of race that took place during that decade. This was a time when social reforms implemented in the aftermath of the civil rights movement, urban unrest, and the development of black power ideas and forms of cultural nationalism. These helped enormously to reshape the politics of race not just in America, but in other parts of the world, as well.

It was also during the 1960s that the 'race relations problematic' as Michael Banton put it, became the dominant approach in this field. Seeing race as a fact which transforms social relations also grappled with ideas on 'ethnicity' and social boundaries between different groups in a given society. The idea of race has been utilised to comprehend processes of migration and settlement as well. They are sometimes posed as a minority, ethnic or an immigrant problem.

John Rex's analytical model in race relations asserts that reading social relations between persons as race relations is encouraged by the existence of certain structural conditions:

- 1) existence of unfree, indentured or slave labour
- 2) unusually harsh class exploitation
- 3) strict legal distinctions between groups and occupational segregation
- 4) differential access to power
- 5) migrant labour as an underclass fulfilling stigmatised roles in a metropolitan setting.

In this context, Rex, in studies conducted by him, explored the degree to which immigrant populations shared the class position of their white neighbours and white workers in general. His analysis outlined a class structure in which white workers won certain rights through the working class movement, through the trade unions and the Labour Party. The non-white workers, however, were found to be located outside the process of negotiation that has historically shaped the position of white workers. They experience discrimination in all the areas where the white workers had made significant gains, such as employment, education, and housing. Thus the position of migrant, non-white workers placed them outside the working class in the position of an 'underclass'.

Robert Miles has also looked at the condition of migrant communities, but he has done so within the context of 'real economic relationships'. Thus there is a contradiction between 'on the one hand the need of the capitalist world economy for the mobility of human beings, and on the other, the drawing of territorial boundaries for human mobility.'

**His greatest contribution is the proposition that races are created within the context of political and social regulation, and thus race is above all is a 'political' construct.**

The first proposition for our purposes is that idea of race is a human construct, an ideology with regulatory power within society. The use of 'race' and race relations, as analytical concepts, disguise the *social* construction of difference, presenting it as somehow inherent in the empirical reality of observable or imagined biological difference. Racialised groups are produced as a result of specific social processes, or specific social actions such as the defense of domination, subordination and privilege.

The terrain of anti-racist struggle today is no longer that of social equality but of cultural diversity. Equality has come to be redefined from 'the right to be equal' to mean 'the right to be different'. In the sixties and seventies, the struggle for equal rights meant campaigns against immigration laws or against segregation through which different races were treated differently. Today it means campaigns for separate schools, demands to use different languages, the insistence of maintaining particular cultural practices. The black rights activists have argued that in the past civil rights reforms reinforced the idea that black liberation should be defined by the degree to which black people gained equal access to material opportunities and privileges available to whites – jobs, housing, schooling etc. This strategy could never bring about liberation, because such ideas of equality were based on imitating the life styles, behavior are most importantly, the values and ethics of white colonizers.

To locate the concept of race, racism and racial relations in contemporary times, and be able to comprehend the twentieth century attempts to understand these terms, we will have to go back to the nineteenth century when Charles Darwin provided one of the first important frameworks for this task. His ideas are important as they immediately gave rise to self appointed Social Darwinists, who are largely responsible for both distorting the science component of Darwin's theory and for using it for justification of colonialism and imperialism.

---

## 18.3 RACE AND SCIENCE

---

As Nancy Stepan points out, it was the early travel literature on human groups by explorers which tended to get transformed into scientific texts on race. When it emerged on its own, racial science was 'scavenger science' which fed on whatever materials lay at hand. Such racial science had a national character as well (depending on the influence of religion, for instance.) To a large extent, history of racial sciences is a history of a series of accommodation of the sciences in general to the demands of deeply held convictions about 'naturalness' of the inequalities between human groups.

The racial science of the 1850s was less dependent on bible, more scientific, but also more racist. It drew upon physical types, on racial worth, permanence of racial types and the like. Skull became the arbiter of all things racial in most of 19<sup>th</sup> century, and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, because of alleged mental differences which different skull shapes or sizes supposedly indicated.

### 18.3.1 Concept of Evolution within Racial Science

Darwin was the originator of the evolutionary theory, and his main argument was for continuity between animals and humans, separated by not kind but degree. However, the distance between the technical, industrial, highly civilised Europeans and animals seemed too vast. So Darwin turned to 'lower' races or 'savages' to fill the gap between humans and animals. Later scientists used this argument to form an evolutionary scale of races. Racist science picked this point up and used it to show that racist hierarchy as well as other social hierarchies were real aspects of nature's order. In retrospect, Darwin did not conceive of races in new terms for his arguments on evolution of man, but old terms. In essence, thus, Darwin himself carried out the task of accommodating the new evolutionary science to the old racial science. Evolutionism was also compatible with the idea of fixity and antiquity of races.

However, it should be remembered that as far as a social position on slavery was concerned, Darwin was an abolitionist, not a racist. This ambivalence manifested itself with other thinkers as well. For instance, Prichard shared the racial prejudices of his time, but his ethnocentrism was also tempered by moral disgust for slavery, his belief in the essential humanity of the African, his Christian faith in the psychic unity of all the peoples of the world.

Evolutionary thought was compatible with the hierarchy of human races, and rather than dislodging old racial ideas actually strengthened them, and provided them with a new scientific vocabulary of struggle and survival ('struggle for existence', 'survival of the fittest', two of the most well known Darwinian tenets).

Darwin applied natural selection to cultural, intellectual and moral development. Natural selection had brought certain races like the European race to the highest point of moral and cultural life. He agreed with Wallace that after the appearance of intelligence, struggle between races became primarily a moral and intellectual one. Morally and intellectually less able of the races were extinguished and the reverse rose to spread themselves

across the globe. It was natural struggle that had produced the “wonderful intellect of the Germanic races”. Darwin took up the view that natural selection worked on individual and racial variations to select the fittest races and to raise them up in the scale of civilisation. To Darwin, then, it seemed reasonable to believe that just as natural selection produced Homo Sapiens from animal forbears, so natural selection was the primary agent for producing civilised races out of barbarity.

Incidentally, here it might be mentioned that the development of the field of medicine was seen as a great onslaught on natural selection, as it allowed the biologically unfit to survive and to pass on their unfitness to the next generations. At any rate, development of medicine made natural selection on physical bases redundant, and led to a situation where it was possible to propose natural selection on the basis of morality and intellect of human groups, instead.

The developing disciplines of comparative anatomy and animal biology gave validity to prevailing ideas about the hierarchy of human races. The challenge for an evolutionary anthropologist was to endorse a materialist, evolutionary view of man, based on continuity between man and animals, without relying on hierarchy of human races or retreating to theology. It was Wallace who first insisted on the gulf between animals and humans and was then able to see that human progress is not inevitable, but depended on favourable social and political conditions. He put forward the radical, original theory that the immense variety of racial civilizations were because of different experiences and history, not biological differences between different groups of people.

Darwin’s ideas took root all over the world in some form or the other. The widely prevalent mid 19<sup>th</sup> century belief on the part of leading figures like Vogt in England and Topinard in France was also that racial traits emerged by selection in struggle for life. They further proposed that with time, traits became fixed by heredity, and became permanent. Thus the false idea of the fixity and unchangeability of races became a widespread belief. Even though no individual could be found who was not a mixture, faith in the ‘type’ remained. More and more precise instruments were invented to measure the differences between the ‘types’. It was forgotten that essentially, the human species being a migratory and conquering species is bound to be a mixed one, and hence has to be a constantly changing one.

In spite of Wallace’s important intervention, races came increasingly to be seen as natural, but static chains of excellence, formed on the basis of nervous organisation, skull shape or brain size. Colour was a traditional and convenient criterion of race, not the least because it did not require the permission of the individual for it to be assessed by the anthropologist, which head measurement, for instance, did! The smallness of differences separating the presumed types (as far as the head size or shape of the nose were concerned) led to the use of more and more precise instruments, and to the subdivision of types. The results were never in doubt, and a vigorous analysis of the racial types which made up a family always followed after varied results in terms of the shape of the head were found, for instance, and it was assumed that different racial types had got mixed, instead of doubting the veracity of the measurements themselves.

The science which involved measuring human measurements was called Anthropometry, though it never did rise above ideological considerations to prove a hierarchy of races, and hence became a pseudoscience for all practical purposes.

### **18.3.2 Eugenics and Racial Science**

In order to be a purposeful discipline, science was expected to play a role in planning and managing human existence and human affairs, including cohabitation. The word eugenics

itself was introduced into science for the first time in 1883 by Charles Darwin's cousin, Francis Galton. He defined eugenics as the 'study of agencies under social control that may improve or impair the racial qualities of future generations either physically or mentally'.

In its essence, eugenics was a science and a social programme of racial improvement through selective breeding of the human species. Though slow to win approval in Britain, by the first years of the twentieth century, eugenics had established itself institutionally in England. By the 1920s, it had grown into a worldwide movement, with active eugenic or 'race hygiene' societies in Russia, Germany, Japan and the United States.

The initial German Nazi plan was to improve the racial stock – weed out the mentally deficient, hereditary criminal, hereditary unfit. A new age of racial thinking, however, had come into being that was to last until the 1930s, when the horrors of compulsory sterilization and the mass murder of the Jews and Gypsies in Nazi Germany (at least partly in the name of eugenical science) caused worldwide revulsion.

Eugenics in Nazi Germany was uniquely barbaric. It is worth mentioning here that not just in Germany but all over the world, adherents to this repugnant social programme were drawn mainly from the progressive middle class: doctors, psychologists, biologists and social reformers, and *not* politicians or businessmen. In its heyday, eugenics succeeded in drawing into its fold directly or indirectly a surprising number of the leading scientists of the day, and provided one more channel for the transmission of the racist tradition. For the student of race science and racism, eugenics is important because it linked race with hereditarianism, and the new science of genetics.

Socially and politically, several factors favoured eugenics by the beginning of the twentieth century. The social optimism of the mid nineteenth century had given way by the end of the century to a pessimism which Galton's eugenics perfectly expressed. The 1880s had been a particularly hard period, with economic depression, unemployment, strikes, and growing political radicalism. It was clear from political events and sociological studies that poverty, alcoholism and ill health had not disappeared in Britain, despite what seemed to many to be decades of social legislation. The early military setbacks of the British in the Boer War in South Africa in 1899-1900 raised the spectre of a physically degenerating British people, and increased concern that the imperial mission of Britain would be harmed unless the population could be unified and made fitter. Most importantly, the declining birth rate, and especially the differential in the birth rate between the middle class and the working class, raised the possibility in some people's minds that Britain was about to be swamped by the biologically 'less fit'.

Eugenics rested on the belief that the differences in mental, moral and physical traits between individuals and races were hereditary. Such a belief had of course been implicit in race biology since the early nineteenth century. What gave eugenics its force in the modern period was its association with Darwinian evolution. Eugenics thus obtained its scientific credential from the new science of heredity. It obtained its support and its notoriety as a social and political movement from the many new and often explosive subjects it introduced into the biological and social debate, such as the biological roots of 'degeneracy' in human society, or the sterilization of the 'unfit'. At a time of heightened nationalism, imperialistic competition, and social Darwinism, such ideas for a while proved dangerously attractive to those looking for social change.

Under the banner of eugenics, the science of human heredity received a clear programme – the goal was to explore the hereditary nature of traits in human populations that seemed desirable or undesirable, and to establish their variability in individuals or classes

of individuals, or 'races'. Mental ability, moral character, insanity, criminality and general physical degeneracy, were all studied diligently. On the social and political side, the task of the eugenisists was to publicise the findings of science, to discuss schemes to encourage the fit, and to discourage the unfit, to breed, and to air generally the social and political significance of such a programme.

Eugenics was seen to be not merely a power that humans now had over future generations; it was seen to be a quasi-religious obligation because in the conditions of modern civilization, the biologically sick and unfit were not eliminated by natural selection but allowed to live and to breed. Man had, in consequence, to weed out where nature did not any more. The Eugenists' first legislative success occurred in 1913, when the Houses of Parliament passed the Mental Deficiency Bill, which the Eugenics Education Society had urged as a means of segregating mentally backward individuals from the rest of society so as to prevent their breeding.

Recent studies of eugenics in Britain have identified it primarily as 'class' rather than a 'race' phenomenon. The chief preoccupation of the eugenists was with the biological fitness of the working class. Most eugenists assumed that social class was a function of hereditary worth, and the social policies they contemplated were often directed against the 'unfit' lower classes, especially the social residuum or social problem group – the permanent alcoholics, paupers and persistent criminal offenders.

---

## 18.4 RACE IN RELATION TO COLONIALISM

---

Once human behaviour was seen as an outcome of structure of the mind fixed by heredity, it was not difficult to stretch it and see human groups differently endowed and so destined for different roles in the history of human society. The hierarchy of races was believed to correspond to and indeed to be the cause of what most people took to be the natural scale of human achievement. The general public agreed because it coincided with the Europeans' image of themselves in the world.

Around the mid-nineteenth century, in fact, there existed a number of schools of thought, occupying themselves with the fundamental question of proving the inherent superiority of one people over another. A possible reason for their coming into existence was search for some popular explanation to account for the fact of imperialism, and to rationalise it in the public mind.

The aptitude of a race to colonise and the tendency of another to be colonised was already reflected in a number of earlier philosophical thinkers' categories, devised mostly on racial lines. Gustav Klemm and A. Wuttke had designated the so-called civilised races as active, and all others as passive in 1843. Carus divided mankind into "peoples of the day, night and dawn" in 1849, depending on their place in the scale of civilisation, and implicitly marking out the ones who needed help to be pulled out of the continuing 'night'. Nott and Gliddon ascribed animal instincts only to the 'lower' races, and it was deduced from this by their supporters that conquest by the civilised races would slowly cure such instincts of the conquered. In all these categories, however, the supposed racial attributes, which made one race the perpetual conqueror and another doomed to conquest forever, had not been linked to any identifiable cause as yet.

Writings of the 1850s became more specific and pointed in their search. Why were a people 'active' (progressing, colonising) or 'passive' (stagnating, conquered)? Why would some *inevitably* belong to the day, others to the night? The first identifiable reasoning was in terms of alleged superior mental capacity of a people as compared to another: one would then naturally rule over another. These mental characteristics, moreover, seemed to clearly stem from some *fixed* attribute, which must be pinned down.

Climate was a part of the unchanging environment surrounding any given set of people, and provided, in a number of creative ways, a ready explanation for the lower races' possession of lower mental faculties. A.H.Keane, one of the vice presidents of the Anthropological Institute at Cambridge proposed that in excessively hot and moist intertropical regions, in the struggle for survival by the inhabitants, the animal side of a human being is improved at the expense of the mental side. (It was, predictably, the opposite in the temperate zones where the white population lived).

Another interesting point of view was that mental development suffered in regions where food was easily and abundantly available e.g. in the tropical regions. On the other hand, it was claimed that wherever men have been involved in a strenuous conflict with a cold climate, they have acquired heroic qualities of character: energy, courage, and integrity. It is important to note here that "struggle for existence" vis-à-vis the climate was held to have different consequences for the whites and the non-whites. In the former it developed virtues of character, in the latter animal like physical development at the cost of the mental.

A transition from 'mental qualities' to the category of 'racial qualities' was certainly an advance as far as popular rhetoric was concerned: new assertions could now be made without any reference to a constant factor like physical environment/climate as the earlier authors were impelled to do. One race, for instance, could be simply *asserted* to be more moral than another, a totally new input into the argument, requiring no evidence whatsoever. E.B.Tylor was the originator of this reasoning: "There is a plain difference between the low and high races of man, so that the dull minded barbarian has not the power of thought enough to come up to the civilised man's moral standard."

Soon the fact of colonisation will not need any explanation at all: "It is only necessary to look at the physique of the Hindoos in order to account for their subjection to alien races..." Weak physical bodily traits led to weak morality, and both the weaknesses (separately as well as together) adequately explained colonialism.

It is worth mentioning that E. B. Tylor, the supposed father of evolutionary anthropology, picked up for his academic researches the general trend of the above arguments. He could confidently assert that "it was reasonable to imagine as latest formed the white race of the temperate region, least able to bear extreme heat or live without the appliances of culture, but gifted with the powers of knowing and ruling". Clearly a particular race was constituted of mental qualities, via climate, which either condemned it to slavery, or the power of ruling. This strain of reasoning was sufficiently influential for Emerson to ask, "It is race, is it not, that puts the hundred millions of India under the dominion of a remote island in the north of Europe?"

At some point, however, the genetically determined physical traits (manifested in the physical appearance of the body) become more important than the physical environment/climate as the determinant of mental capacities of the colonised races. All along, there was a parallel school of research working on the physical person of the colonised, attempting to reach the same conclusion, viz. the colonised needed to be colonised.

---

## 18.5 RACE AND THE DISCIPLINE OF ANTHROPOLOGY

---

Much debate took place in the late nineteenth century, around the theory of social Darwinism. There were, in principle, two ways found of locating a particular race on the scale of social evolution :

- i) by examining the physical development of the race in question, and
- ii) by analysing the social component of the society which that particular race had built for itself.

The second was mostly ignored, and the first became the scientific problem of the day. As far as the scientific community was concerned, the physical development of a race was not to be judged in terms of physical beauty — that was for the layperson. The scientist was interested in proving evolution of the ‘internal’ parts - the skull, the brain, the nasal bone, and so on. This strain of research had its own trajectory. In the initial phases of social evolutionism, it was attempted to relate the mental capacity of the race in question (the direct determinant of social achievement) to some *measurable* physical attribute. The concept of ‘cranial capacity’ (related to the brain size) was an early and enduring one.

A clear formulation of the concept of cranial capacity is given by one of its proponents, Keane. This author asserted that ‘mental gradations’ – a scale of mental capacity — could be shown between various races, based on the principle of cranial capacity.

In fact, Darwin himself observed that there did exist a relation between the size of the brain and development of the intellectual faculties. It was with the intent of proving this point that he presented the following data: “The mean internal capacity of the skull in Europeans is 92.3 cubic inches, in Americans 87.5, and in Australians only 81.9 cubic inches”. The fact that Franz Boas challenged this, and pointed out as late as 1922 that both Europeans and Mongols have the largest brains, and not Europeans alone, shows the currency of these ideas well into the twentieth century.

Later in the nineteenth century, another popular notion which gained influence was that “the black is a child and will long remain so”. Investigations were done to show that this was because of the “sudden arrest of the intellectual faculties at the age of puberty (due) to premature closing of the (cranial) sutures”. It was claimed that studies showed that upto the age of puberty, a negro child learnt remarkably well, but after that became ‘incurably stupid’. Moreover, there was no religious, intellectual, moral or industrial advancement in the negro who was also a political idiot. It is significant how explicitly the supposed lack of political acumen or industrial development is being attributed to a fixed incurable cause, i.e. the so-called cranial sutures!

The above details have been given to show a particular trend in supposed scientific research as far as determining the potential of a race was concerned. These ‘researches’ continued in many more directions than just on the skull of individuals. It will suffice here to record that **slowly, but relentlessly, the parameters of civilisation changed from the size of the skull to size of the jaws, to size and shape of the nose, to the length of the arms etc. reflecting the then current concerns of the sciences of anthropometry and anthropology of the period in relation to racial differences.**

With work going on in the opposite direction, however, it soon became clear that there was *no* relationship between low mental development and the size and shape of any part of the body. Franz Boas cited research done by Karl Pearson, Manouvrier and so on to contradict views of older authors like Gobineau, Klemm, Carus, Nott and Gliddon who assumed characteristic mental differences between races of humans. More importantly, he identified the reason for revival of these older views (now in the garb of science) to the growth of modern nationalism.

The professed relationship between the physical type and mental capacity had run into dangerous ground by the end of the century. By 1896, while still insisting that whites did

represent the highest type of mental development, it was admitted that “mental differences are independent of the general body structure”. How else could one explain that intellects like Alexander Pope’s “dwelt in a feeble frame, while the stupid Negroes of Senegambia are endowed with Herculean bodies?” As a result of researches done by the likes of Franz Boas, it got established by the early decades of the twentieth century **that mental activity followed the same laws in each individual of whatever ‘race’, and its manifestations depended almost entirely upon the character of individual social experience.**

There was another direct offshoot of rhetoric which derived from evolutionary ideology: there was frequently an attempt to compare, albeit favourably, the ‘lower races’ with animals, and not always with apes: the distance between the representatives of the two races was so much that one race was closer to animals than to humans. An author wrote of the Australians that

“the difference between the brain of a Shakespeare and that of an Australian savage would doubtless be fifty times greater than the difference between the Australian’s brain and that of an orang-utan. In mathematical capacity the Australian who cannot tell the number of fingers on his two hands is much nearer to a lion or a wolf than to Sir Rowan Hamilton, who invented the method of quarter ions. In moral development, this same Australian whose language contains no words for justice and benevolence is less remote from dogs and baboons than from Howard ... The Australian is more teachable than the ape, but his limit is nevertheless very quickly reached. All the distinctive attributes of man, in short, have been developed to an enormous extent through long ages of social evolution”.

The imagery of animals to describe such people was a frequent occurrence in ethnology/anthropology books. So, while in the Andaman Islander, the peculiar goat like exhalations of the Negro were absent, the Yahgan’s intelligence is inferior to that of a dog’s as “unlike a dog, they forget in which hole they hid their remaining food after a feast”. Just like the wild animals of Australia were peculiar and always of a low type, so were its dark coloured natives with their coarse and repulsive features. Francis Galton’s researches with South African communities became classics in anthropological literature and were universally quoted as exhibiting the great ‘mental intervals’ between the higher and the lower races. According to Galton, taking the dog and the Damara, the comparison reflected no great honour on the man.

By contrasting the most undeveloped individuals of one race with the most highly developed of another, and in fact, by relegating the former a category closer to animals, the (European) reader was made to identify with an idealised, unusual specimen of his/her own race as the collective norm. Visually, too, the standards of European beauty were considered the norm, and to emphasise the difference, the most degraded specimens were chosen for taking photographs — “the ugliest and the weirdest looking” of an otherwise handsome race” for use in ethnology books.

This kind of research was supplemented if not started with accounts showing similarities between these communities and various species of animals, other than monkeys and apes: “among the rudest fragments of mankind are the isolated Andaman Islanders... the old Arab and European voyagers described them as dog-faced man-eaters. As mentioned earlier, Hunter described the “Non-aryans” of India as “the remains of extinct animals which palaeontologists find in hill caves...”

Something was being said, in the era of evolutionary anthropology, when the rung on the scale assigned to some communities was even lower than that of apes, which would evolve at some point of time into humans.

---

## 18.6 RACIAL 'RESEARCH' AND THE POLITICS OF DOMINATION

---

What was the impulse behind the researches that were done on certain groups of 'uncivilised' people? The ethnographic material of the period shows a marked tendency to represent the aborigines belonging to the lowest rung of the world evolutionary scale. There is a distinct tendency to overemphasise their barbaric practises. John Lubbock, an eminent anthropologist of his time, and one of the early Presidents of the Anthropological Institute published his popular "Prehistoric Times" in 1865. Here he studies 'modern savages' like the Andaman Islanders, Australians and Maoris with the message that they needed to be colonised. These statements were significant in a context where a section of European political and public opinion had begun to challenge the rightness of colonial presence all over the world. Racially motivated research provided ample data from this time onwards well into the twentieth century to show the barbarism of the subject races in general.

In retrospect, the people of the colonies were presented by the evolutionary theorists as curiosities and specimens of a bygone era. This emphasis on the Asians or Africans, Australians and Native Americans as relics of the *past* served an important purpose: to dull the reader's sensibilities as far as their *current* situation was concerned. Seeing them from the point of view of anthropological science detracted from the fact of them as politically active people. India, for instance, was posed as a great museum of races — this particular view denied the people concerned a legitimate place in the present. More important, it robbed them of any recognition as a society in a state of flux like any other by fixing them in a dead mould — the unchanging relics of the past. Remnants of earlier long dead generations, they were going to be studied, analysed, classified and exhibited.

It is not a coincidence that spectacles of these specimens were so popular in England and even in the colonies, in the form of great colonial exhibitions in the second half of the 19th century, with anthropological displays an important and popular part. What was propagated during such exhibitions was that "taking him all in all, the Australian aborigine represents better than any other living form the generalised features of primitive humanity".

While working on the issue of 'ancestorhood' represented by the current aborigines, another possible link was explored: that between scale of civilisation and moral/ethical progress. It was asserted here that European morality was more perfect and "the ancestors" were immoral in their disposition. Thus not only earlier societies were deemed to be less ethical, but also those supposedly the relics of earlier ones, existing in the form of African or Australian societies. This sort of reasoning served to justify the immense scale of massacres of aborigines and native American populations in order to colonise their land. In fact, it was explicitly said of the black republic of Hyati that in the absence of the coloniser's civilising influence, the free people of Hyati had reversed back to pagan rites, snake worship, cannibalism.

Once Darwin's *Descent of Man* appeared in 1858, it was not long before social Darwinism became a fashionable and influential school of thought in British society and politics. There were commonsensical reasons for this from a practical view-point: the doctrine of survival of the fittest justified political conquest of weaker 'races' and their elimination if necessary; there was also affinity between this doctrine and the economic policy of *laissez faire* at home. In addition, by implication, this doctrine provided scientific reasons for denying protective legislation for factory workers, the poor, the elderly and the weak in society in general: if they could not struggle sufficiently to survive, they deserved to perish. Herbert Spencer and Henry Maine advocated this doctrine as a key to social problems of welfare

and state's role at home; the imperialists grasped it as a useful theoretical guideline **in defence of expansionism and colonialism.**

However, "survival of the fittest", the basic tenet of the theory of evolutionism, seemed to come under challenge with events like the Boer war at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This doctrine had not prepared the imperial powers to be resisted so tenaciously by the supposedly less fit races, and survive a war! There were also other challenges emerging to the definitions of civilisation, morality and ethics. The essence of morality was claimed by some contemporary European thinkers to exist not in the forms of European social organisations, but the ones which aborigine societies had evolved for themselves, ensuring protection for its young or the aged, or giving rights to its individual members. The third quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was also the time to begin to speak in terms of protection to the weak as the hallmark of an ethical society. Thus the theory of 'survival of the fittest' while dominating European politics and public opinion was also beginning to increasingly come under attack. Progress was being defined in terms which were now not so smug, and increasingly controversial. A few like Huxley directly challenged social Darwinism and pointed out that the mark of a really civilised society is one in which competition to survive is cut down to the minimum and one which is premised on protection of the weak, *not* survival of the fittest.

It is also an interesting fact that in principle, there was contradiction between the evolutionist's view of colonial societies and the fast delivering reforms of the imperial rule. So while the evolutionary ethnographers focussed on the essential unchangeability of societies like India – except very gradually, almost imperceptibly, over a period of a few thousand years – the administrators continued to emphasise the changes that had been brought about by the British in a relatively short time.

There was one more area of conflict: between the theory of racial evolutionism and the immediate interests of the British traders, in fact, a crucial political reason for ultimate decline of the evolutionary theory. The nineteenth century saw an interest in the aborigines from a new section apart from the missionaries and the colonial administrator – the merchants. Competition from Germany over colonial markets in particular provided the impetus for 'study' of such races from a political and commercial, apart from a scientific point of view. The science of the earlier decades, in the shape of Darwin's guidelines, however, had to be abandoned. If the people at the bottom of the evolutionary scale needed a long span of time to civilise, how could they be expected to use these goods?

---

## 18.7 POULARISING RACIAL CONCEPTS

---

It became then the duty of authors of ethnology books to inform the general public of the commercial interests of the Europeans in 'lower races'. The editor of the *Native Races of the British Empire Series* wrote that since Anthropology textbooks were too technical and bulky, the series in question were an attempt to supply in a readable form information about the uncivilised races of the empire, and the peoples of the lower stages of culture. This genre of literature became the staple of popular reading material on the question of 'races', and served to a very large extent the political-economic purposes for which it was written.

Ethnology books of the period borrowed from fiction, and managed to project quite effectively the image of an animal, and sometimes even a criminal native. This theme had several variations. Kipling's fantasy tale of a wolf-reared child inspired an ethnographer to find evidence of a supposedly real case of the same kind, which is quoted in the above book. He even published the article in the *Journal of the*

Anthropological Institute in a paper with a generalised title “jungle life in India” giving the impression that such half humans were an integral part of Indian wild life. This contribution was quoted by the author of *Living Races*, complete with references and page number of the concerned journal, giving the impression of scientific analysis. Moreover, the author of the article was mentioned to be an official of the Indian Geographical Survey, again adding to the authenticity of the report. All this served to confound fantasy with research.

In any case, the axis between travel books, popular ethnology works, anthropologists and fiction writers had an interlocking, mutually reinforcing impact on the readers’ mind. One source made the other respectable and recycled the data in a selective and often exaggerated form. The scientific layout gave the impression of authenticity, validating the fiction of Kipling and others. While these fiction writers and cartoonists drew from anthropology, popular ethnology borrowed from fiction. The line between fact and fiction, as far as the ‘races’ of the world were concerned, gradually grew blurred by the circular nature of information.

---

## 18.8 INDIA AND THE IDEA OF RACE

---

During the last quarter of the 19th century, especially after the 1857 events, there was a great desire on the British administrator’s part to ‘understand India’. This was the era of classifications and categories like warrior or martial races; criminal tribes; cultivating or professional castes and so on. Thus while India found its due place in the scale of evolution in societal terms on a world basis, within India the evolutionary theory was applied to sort out the loyal from the disloyal, the respectable from the criminal, the malleable from the obstinate - the *dasyu* from the potential *dasa*.

W.W. Hunter seems to have contributed conceptually to the hierarchisation of the Indian people by proposing an evolutionary scale within India itself, which it was claimed was a “great museum of races in which we can study man from his lowest to his highest stages of culture...” The Aryans in India with whom the British felt political affinity by now were not only fair skinned, but of noble lineage, speaking a stately language, worshipping friendly and powerful gods. The others were the original inhabitants whom the lordly newcomers – the Aryans – had driven back into the mountains or reduced to servitude on the plains. “The victors called the non-Aryans, an obscure people, *Dasyu* (enemies) or *Dasa* (slaves)”. These creatures were the subject matter of Edgar Thurston’s studies twenty years later, with a similar evolutionary hierarchy in mind.

In the ethnographical writing of the period, there is a curious mix of the Hindu religious texts passing as history, and Darwin’s scientific terminology. The reinforcing of the arguments from the Vedas with evidence from Darwin was an ingenious way of reading of Indian history by the British anthropologists. Some particularly daring samples are quoted here:

“Speaking generally of the aborigines of India, we have sacred traditional accounts which represent them to have been savages allied to the apes. ...In the existing aborigines we find here and there marked peculiarities which point to a possible descent from some lower type of animal existence - the frequently recurring earpoint of Darwin, peculiar to certain apes, the opposable toe, characteristic of the same animal; the long stiff hair of bipeds or quadrupeds in unusual parts of the body; the keen sight, hearing and smell of some of the lower animals, coupled with mental qualities and habits...which can hardly be called human”.

Further, “A comparison of the accounts that are given of (*dasyus*) in the Vedas with the Indian aborigines of today shows conclusively that some of them must have been possessed of a very low bodily and mental organisation — indeed, that they were a more debased type of beings than what is now called mankind.

“The Aryans called them Dasyus, or enemies....in fact, their description is almost identical with that of some of the Andaman Islanders of the present day. They called them eaters of raw flesh, without gods, without faith, lawless, cowardly, perfidious and dishonest...The Brahmins described the Dasyus or aborigines as Bushmen or monkeys...in Ramayana, the monkey general Hanuman...plays a prominent part.” Hunter’s classification of the ‘non Aryans’ into potential criminals was something Thurston borrowed later. The aboriginal races of the plains, according to him, had “supplied the hereditary criminal classes, alike under the Hindus, Mohammedans and the British. The non-aryan hill races also appeared from vedic times downwards as marauders”.

There is a subtle shuttling between the past and the present by this writer, and the two merge imperceptibly fairly quickly: the aborigines of today are aborigines of yesterday; there seems to have been no evolution in this case. In fact, these who exist today have some of the characteristics of apes that Darwin described — not only the Brahmin would describe them as monkeys, Darwin would call them apes. Here it is interesting to find the convergence of the existing Andaman Islanders into monkey/ape/aborigine of yesterday at one level, and views of Aryans of yesterday (Brahmins)/Aryans of today (British) and Darwin on the other. It appeared that there had been identical reading of this section of the population all along from the time of the vedas upto Darwin. In other words, the theory of evolutionism was put to quite creative use by the British ethnographer/administrator in that he completely brahminised a Darwinian concept!

In this framework for analysis of the aborigines of the late 19th century, the scientific component was an important link of the past to the present. The vedas helped to justify conquest of the aborigines in an earlier era, and Darwin was used to support their subsequent subjugation through the concept of the ‘survival of the fittest’. This mode of analysis was given a coherent form for the first time by Hunter. He, through the indirect agency of Darwin, identified the convergence of the concepts of the Brahmin of the vedas and those of the British coloniser: both found the aborigines akin to either the Dasyu (enemy) or Dasa (slave).

Invocation of Darwin in description of an evolving section of mankind, thus invites the reader to consider the natural trajectory of the aborigines in general: like the Aryans did, they ought to be ‘conquered’ first. The British felt an affinity with the Aryan as both had a superior God, and a superior civilisation which could be rightfully imposed on the Godless inferior race of aborigines. Hunter could be writing of British imperialism in eulogistic terms when he wrote with admiration that “The stout Aryan spread...(They) had a great trust in themselves and their gods. Like other conquering races, they believed that both themselves and their deities were altogether superior to the people of the land and their poor, rude objects of worship. Indeed, this noble confidence is a great aid to the success of a nation.

The ‘history’ of the apish aborigines was, then, gleaned from the vedas and merged into the future that Darwin promised: they shall evolve into mankind at some point, albeit with help from the evolved.

There was a sound historical reason for the British regarding aborigines as Dasyus. Through the 19th century, expansionist desires now extended from the plains to the hills, as also need for land for plantations pressed on the administration. The hill tribes increasingly came to be seen as a political and administrative problem as they resisted the encroachment on their land by the planters, or recruitment as plantation workers, or interference by missionaries with their social institutions. There was trouble with the Nagas in 1878, the Santals in 1855 for several years. Earlier, in 1835, on the moral grounds of suppressing the custom of human sacrifice practised by the Kondhs, the

British army burned down their villages and had to remain deployed for long periods to check further resistance. A regular pacification programme to deal with the tribes had been launched by the British, and this made them see a parallel between their own situation and that faced by the Aryans centuries ago. Through these devices, the British hoped that incorrigible Dasyus could successfully be turned into the Dasa mould, either as workers or soldiers in British armies.

---

## 18.9 SUMMARY

---

Racism, then, is an ideological force which in conjunction with economic and political relations of domination locates certain populations in specific social/class positions and therefore structures the social relations in a particular ideological manner. As we did a historical survey of general ideas on race, it emerged that the word 'race' is used in a different way in different societies, and at different historical junctures. It is in this context important to remember that whatever the changing terms of language used to talk about race and ethnicity in the present day environment, we have in practice seen growing evidence of forms of racial and ethnic conflict in many parts of the globe.

The idea of race and racism today is alive and well in its myriad monstrous forms.

---

## 18.10 EXERCISES

---

- 1) What is the relationship between colonial domination and the idea of race?
- 2) Discuss the ways in which the sciences helped to promote the notion of racial difference.
- 3) How did the idea of race originate in India?
- 4) What is the role played by the discipline of anthropology in promoting racial theories?

---

## 18.11 SUGGESTED READINGS

---

Les Back and John Solomon (eds.), *Theories of Race and Racism: A Reader* (London and New York, Routledge, 2000).

Franz Boas, *The Mind of Primitive Man*, (New York, The Macmillan C Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man* (London, John Murray, 1890, second edition published in 1874).

A.H. Keane, *The World's Peoples: A Popular Account of Their Bodily and Mental Characters, Beliefs, Traditions, Political and Social Institutions* (London, Hutchinson and Co., 1908).

Kenan Malik, *The Meaning of Race: Race, History and Culture in Western Society* (London, Macmillan, 1996).

Meena Radhakrishna, 'Colonialism, Evolutionism and Anthropology – A Critique of the History of Ideas 1850-1930', Research in progress papers, *History and Society*, Third series Number XIX, NMML, New Delhi, June, 1997.

Nancy Stepan, *The Idea of Race in Science* (London, Macmillan, 1982).