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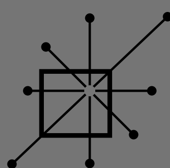

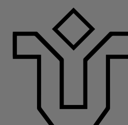

Special Issue

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South Asian Historiography from the British Period to Today

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Abstract

This essay descriptively evaluates the South Asian historiography from British colonial times to today, showing how changing ideas, shifting politics, and fierce debates over knowledge have shaped the field. In the nineteenth century, colonial scholars and administrators used Orientalist philology, utilitarian critiques, administrative surveys, and thick codification manuals to shape narratives of South Asia's past. By the early twentieth century, nationalist historians turned history into a weapon against colonial rule, shaping stirring tales of ancient Hindu glory. After independence, the field branched out and new historical methods were adopted and new theories were used under revisionist historians. In India, Marxist historians brought in structural analysis, agrarian studies, and materialist methods, while the Cambridge School recast politics around local favors and rivalries among the elite. Starting in the 1980s, Subaltern Studies and feminist historians reshaped the field, turning attention toward peasants in fields, factory workers, women, and others long pushed to the margins. By turning to unexpected sources and postcolonial theory, these scholars laid bare the elitism woven through colonial and nationalist histories and challenged the deep-set assumptions about knowledge.

Keywords

Indian Historiography, Colonial History, Sri Lanka

Introduction: Writing the Past in a Region of Many Pasts

The historiography of South Asia is plural, layered, and often argumentative. In the nineteenth century, British officials like civil servants, Orientalists, missionaries, and educated intermediaries fashioned narratives about the South Asian past to serve administration, moral critique, or philological curiosity. By the early twentieth century, Indian intellectuals mobilized history for anticolonial purposes, constructing national pasts and counter-archives. Those two main trends developed the national historical master narratives in South Asian countries in their early stages of historiography. After independence, the field fragmented and diversified. In India, Marxist historians offered structural explanations and the Cambridge School reframed politics as local bargaining. There were strong anti-national and anti-communal historiographical narratives developed. Subaltern Studies and feminist historians recentered marginalized actors and environmental, legal, and economic historians reinvented questions and sources. Also, the postcolonial theory interrogated the very conditions of knowledge. Similar trends happened in some other South Asian countries like Sri Lanka.

This essay follows that trajectory while insisting that "South Asia" is not coterminous with any single state or community. It is a space where Sanskrit cosmopolis met Persianate worlds and later British imperial systems. Its archives are multilingual and historically uneven, reflecting diverse epistemic traditions. Also, some historical moves like violence and reform, caste and tribe, gender and law, all intersect in complex ways. The following sections trace key shifts, debates, and exemplars of South Asian historiography.

British-Colonial Historiography in India: Orientalism, Utilitarianism, and Imperial Knowledge

Orientalist Philology and the Invention of Classics

The late eighteenth century marked a pivotal moment in the intellectual history of colonial India and European scholars and administrators began to work within the framework of Orientalism. They attempted to construct an authoritative image of Indian civilization. Orientalist philology, with its emphasis on recovering, translating, and codifying Sanskrit texts, produced what came to be regarded as the "classics" of Indian tradition. This was not a neutral scholarly exercise but a project deeply entangled with colonial governance, the epistemic needs of empire, and the ideological construction of India as a civilizational entity. Figures such as Sir William Jones and Henry Thomas Colebrooke who work through the Asiatic Society, transformed a

diverse landscape of textual practices into a canon that shaped both colonial understandings of India and later nationalist self-perceptions (Cohn & Scott, 1996, p. 1-3).

The rise of Orientalist philology must be placed in the broader context of European Enlightenment and imperial expansion. By the late eighteenth century, colonial rule increasingly depended on systematic knowledge of subject societies. For the British in India, effective administration required more than military dominance. It demanded legal and cultural legitimacy. Philology that conceived as the study of languages, texts. Their histories and offered means of identifying traditions that could be codified and deployed for governance. In this sense, textual scholarship became both an intellectual and a political tool.

At the center of this project stood Sir William Jones, judge of the Calcutta Supreme Court and the founder of the Asiatic Society in 1784. His translations of Kālidāsa's *Shakuntala* and the *Manusmriti* (Laws of Manu) introduced Indian literature and legal codes to European audiences whereas elevating them to the status of "classics." The choice of texts was strategic. The *Manusmriti* provided a codified vision of Hindu law useful for colonial jurisprudence, while *Shakuntala* embodied an aesthetic sensibility that Europeans likened to Homer and Virgil. Through such translations, Jones helped construct India as a civilization defined by timeless texts (Cannon, 1990, p. 33-35).

Henry Thomas Colebrooke further advanced Sanskrit studies and produced works on grammar, philosophy, and Hindu law. His scholarship supplied colonial administrators with resources for codifying and applying Indian legal concepts. He privileged Sanskrit texts as repositories of Indian knowledge. Colebrooke reinforced the view that India's true essence lay in its ancient textual traditions. This textualist orientation marginalized other cultural forms like vernacular literatures, oral traditions, folk practices, and living religious performances by subordinating them to the Brahmanical canon (McCunn, 2022, p. 20-21).

Orientalist philology relied on comparative linguistics, textual criticism, and jurisprudence. The discovery of affinities between Sanskrit, Greek, and Latin led to the formulation of the Indo-European language family. They further elevated Sanskrit as a language of great antiquity. At the same time, jurisprudential concerns guided the search for authoritative legal codes, with texts like the *Manusmriti* presented as universal, timeless law despite the diversity of local and caste-based practices in Indian society. The archive itself was elite, drawn from palm-leaf manuscripts and commentaries mediated through Brahmanical pandits. While colonial scholars depended on these intermediaries, interpretive authority remained firmly with Europeans, who systematized texts in ways suited to colonial purposes (Said, 2015, p. 45-50).

The consequences of this invention of classics were far-reaching. By casting India as a civilization anchored in a glorious ancient past, Orientalist philology created a temporal schema of rise, decline, and stagnation that justified colonial rule as custodianship. Simultaneously, the framework of timeless textuality was inherited by nationalist thinkers. Reformers such as Rammohan Roy and later leaders of the Indian renaissance contested colonial interpretations but often reinforced the textualist bias by valorizing Sanskrit classics while sidelining vernacular and subaltern traditions. Thus, even critiques of colonial discourse remained shaped by Orientalist categories (Travers, 2007, p. 2).

This process also silenced many voices. Women, lower castes, and non-Brahmanical communities found little space within the canon when the British practices rarely appear in the Sanskrit archive. By equating Indian civilization with elite Brahmanical literature, Orientalist philology reinforced a hierarchical vision of culture and identity. Later subaltern historians and postcolonial critics would challenge this exclusivity, emphasizing the need to recover marginalized traditions and voices.

The legacy of Orientalist philology is therefore ambivalent. It was a colonial project of knowledge and power and shaped both administration and cultural imagination. Yet it also generated resources appropriated by nationalist and postcolonial movements. The very category of "classics," though an Orientalist invention, proved remarkably resilient across colonial and postcolonial contexts. Orientalist philology's invention of Indian classics was a moment of intellectual production bound to political power. While privileging an elite textual archive, it created enduring frameworks through that Indian history and identity were imagined, contested, and reproduced.

A different British strain named Evangelical and Utilitarian school saw indigenous institutions as despotic or backward. James Mill's *History of British India* (1817) denigrated Indian civilization through a stadial theory of progress. Thomas Babington Macaulay's 1835 Minute promoted English education to create a class of interpreters. The moral mission of the British Raj authorized codification (e.g., Indian Penal Code), forest and revenue settlements, and social interventions (e.g., abolishing *sati*). They often produced contradictory outcomes. Historiography here became Whiggish and plotted Indian ascent through British guidance.

The colonial state generated voluminous records. District gazetteers by W. W. Hunter, settlement reports, census reports, linguistic surveys by G.A. Grierson, and official histories of rebellions of 1857 can be given as examples to this category. These offered granular data but also encoded categories like "tribe," "caste," "criminal," "martial". That shaped social realities and later scholarship. Revenue and police archives, maps, and photographs became tools of rule

and, paradoxically, resources for later critical histories. Imperial historians like Vincent A. Smith synthesized political narratives that centered dynasties, governors-general, and civilizing reforms. Meanwhile a bureaucratic archive that classified society into enumerable categories.

Early 20th-century Indian historians were unavoidably impacted by the national movement in their writing. Although they did not identify as nationalist historians, they typically used a nationalist perspective when interpreting Indian history. They made greater use of the Orientalists' contributions. Once more, there was a great attention for ancient India, now commonly known as 'Hindu India.' Before the arrival of Muslims, ancient India was considered a golden age and the Muslim era emerged as the second or darker phase. It was seen as a gloomy time that contaminated Hindu India. The national historians followed the same periodization as the British. And the glorification of Hindu India was the main characteristic they followed. Blaming ethnic and religious others for the collapse of Indian civilization and emphasizing unified India under Hindu kings. Their empires were significant aspects of Indian national history. The same aspects were brought forward in the Sri Lankan master narrative by national historians, while the Tamils were seen as foreigners and villains.

Nationalist Historiography: Anticolonial Uses and Competing Pasts

By the late nineteenth century, history writing in India began to take on a distinctly anticolonial character. For intellectuals and activists working under colonial rule, the past became a weapon of critique, a resource for mobilization, and a means of countering imperial denigration. Writers such as Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay reimagined the nation through a literary-historical lens, sacralized the motherland and embedding historical imagination in cultural and religious idioms. His famous hymn "Vande Mataram" evoked a past of strength and devotion, fusing history with nationalism. The Indian National Congress also drew on the historical past to popularize narratives of resistance. It circulated heroic accounts of rulers and rebels to inspire patriotic unity.

Vernacular presses played a central role in this cultural-political project. Popular biographies of figures such as Shivaji, Rani Lakshmibai, and Tipu Sultan reached wide audiences and transformed them into national icons. These works did not always conform to professional standards of historical scholarship. But they were powerful in shaping popular memory. At the scholarly end of the spectrum, Jadunath Sarkar's meticulous studies of the Mughal Empire embodied a Rankean craft of empiricism and archival rigor (Chakrabarty, 2015). Yet his narratives also resonated with nationalist motifs of decline, foreign domination, and civilizational struggle.

Sarkar's work illustrates how even professional history could be drawn into anticolonial discourse, providing legitimacy and authority to claims of a heroic but interrupted Indian past (Bayly, 1996, p. 80-92).

The ancient era's values were crucial to the national movement. Participation in politics, democratic structures, and Independence from foreign dominance were sought and taken for granted. In the history of northern India, for instance, where there have been several invasions and conquests from the northwest between 600 B.C. and 500 A.D., the issue of foreign dominance has proved to be extremely challenging to resolve. As Romila Thapar argued, the term Hindu is a foreign term that Arabs use. However, this term was used by Indian historians and national leaders to unify the Hindu mass against minorities. A united, glorified, and prosperous Hindu India was their dream to achieve in the post-independence era under the national governments.

Professionalization and Canon Formation

The early twentieth century witnessed the professionalization of history in India, with the establishment of university departments, scholarly journals, and institutions such as the Indian Historical Records Commission. These developments reflected not only academic aspirations but also a nationalist desire to build authoritative histories of India that could rival and displace colonial narratives.

Among the most influential figures was R. C. Majumdar, whose multi-volume histories offered sweeping accounts of India's political and cultural evolution. Majumdar balanced political narrative with accounts of literature, philosophy, and art, thereby affirming the cultural richness of the Indian nation. Yet his histories also reproduced civilizational binaries and portrayed "foreign" incursions as disruptions of a unified, timeless Indian essence. This canon formation helped codify nationalist historiography (Majumdar, 1951–1977, p. 100-145).

Within this framework, certain episodes were elevated as touchstones of national identity. The 1857 uprising was reinterpreted as the "First War of Independence," a collective resistance against colonial oppression. Similarly, the narrative arc of Indian history was cast as one of unity-in-diversity, culminating in the achievement of independence in 1947. Such themes not only challenged colonial portrayals of India as fragmented and stagnant but also established a shared story that bound diverse communities into a single nation.

Competing National Pasts: Communal and Regional Threads

Despite its emphasis on unity, nationalist historiography was far from monolithic. Competing interpretations emerged from religious, communal, and regional perspectives. Hindu reformist and nationalist thinkers such as V. D. Savarkar advanced a Hindutva-inflected reading of history that centered Hindu heroes and cast 1857 as a proto-Hindu national uprising. In contrast, Syed Ahmad Khan emphasized rationalist reform within Islamic traditions, while later historians such as I. H. Qureshi in Pakistan developed state-centric histories that traced Muslim nationhood back to medieval sultanates and the Mughal Empire. These competing pasts shaped divergent trajectories of Indian and Pakistani nationalisms.

Parallel debates unfolded elsewhere in South Asia. In Sri Lanka, K. M. de Silva's political history and his reliance on the *Mahavamsa* informed interpretations of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism. Progressive scholars, however, criticized such exclusivist readings and argued for more pluralistic accounts of Sri Lankan pasts. Similarly, within India, regional histories like Maratha, Punjabi, Bengali, Tamil flourished, constructing archives of sub-national pride. These regional traditions both complemented and challenged the overarching nationalist narrative, underscoring the diversity of historical imaginations within the broader anticolonial project (Thapar, 2014, p. 13-18).

Strengths and Limits

Nationalist historiography achieved significant intellectual and political gains. It recovered indigenous agency, emphasized the richness of Indian languages and archives, and countered colonial portrayals of Indians as passive or backward. By elevating figures of resistance and cultural achievement, it gave Indians a history of which to be proud and provided ideological fuel for the struggle against empire.

Yet these strengths were accompanied by notable limitations. The focus on elites and heroes often obscured the roles of peasants, women, and marginalized groups. Nationalist historians tended to treat community identities like Hindu, Muslim, regional as timeless, essential categories than historically contingent constructions. Narratives of unity-in-diversity sometimes glossed over deep divisions of caste, gender, and class. In privileging high culture and elite leadership, nationalist historiography reproduced hierarchies even as it opposed colonial rule.

These tensions created fertile ground for subsequent critiques. From the mid-twentieth century, Marxist historians emphasized class and economic structures, the Cambridge School

foregrounded local politics and patronage, Subaltern Studies sought to recover the agency of the marginalized, and feminist scholarship interrogated the gendered dimensions of history. Each of these schools built upon, but also pushed against, the legacy of nationalist historiography, exposing its exclusions while acknowledging its foundational role in anticolonial thought (Chandra, 1979).

In sum, nationalist historiography was both a response to colonial denigration and a formative force in shaping modern South Asian identities. Its anticolonial uses of the past mobilized pride and resistance, while its professionalization and canon formation sought to institutionalize a national history. Yet its competing communal and regional threads revealed the multiplicity of historical imaginations at play. By celebrating agency while overlooking internal hierarchies, nationalist historiography achieved much but left unresolved questions that later schools would take up. Its legacy remains central to understanding not only India's intellectual history but also the contested nature of national pasts across South Asia.

Marxist Historiography: Structure, Mode of Production, and Agrarian Relations

From the mid-twentieth century, Indian Marxist historians reshaped periodization and explanation of Indian history. D.D. Kosambi pioneered a materialist reconstruction of ancient India through numismatics, archaeology, and philology, treating texts as social documents. R.S. Sharma debated the transition to feudalism and the nature of land grants and surplus extraction. Irfan Habib's studies of the Mughal agrarian system analyzed revenue, class, and technology with archival precision.

Modern economic and political history was one of the main themes they followed. Bipan Chandra's work on nationalism and economic policy offered a class-analytic reading of colonialism and bourgeois politics, while Sumit Sarkar's *Modern India* combined narrative finesse with structural insight. The *Indian Economic and Social History Review* became a crucial venue. Debates over the colonial mode of production, whether it was "semi-feudal," "colonial capitalism," or an articulation, animated scholarship and connected Indian questions to global Marxist theory.

Marxist historians expanded archives to include revenue records, price series, village studies, and production data, often linking micro evidence to macro structures. Their commitment to causality and socio-economic explanation countered nationalist moralism and imperial teleology. Critics charged them with economism or underplaying culture, nonetheless, their empirical rigor left a durable imprint on curricula and research.

The Cambridge School and the Politics of Locality

The Cambridge school introduced elite competition and factional politics to Indian history. In the 1960s–80s, the Cambridge School, including John Gallagher, Gordon Johnson, Anil Seal, and later C. A. Bayly, reinterpreted Indian politics as a mosaic of local patronage, faction, and interest brokerage rather than ideological mass mobilization. Nationalism appeared as the outcome of competitive politics within constraints of colonial institutions. However, the Nationalist and Marxist historians criticized the school for methodological individualism, privileging elites, and de-ideologizing politics. Yet their insistence on local archives, district studies, and the sociology of association enriched empirical studies and diversified the geography of political history beyond metropolitan narratives (Seal, 1968, p. 67-70).

Anti-communalism and Anti-nationalism in South Asian Historiography

India also witnessed communal nationalism and its violence during its Independence movement. The Hindu majority community in India discriminated against many minority communities like Muslims. The violence and brutality became an everyday practice in national space, and rationalizing communal nationalism. The nation was a visible ideological propaganda. Ongoing waves of communalism influenced the historiography of India and the ideological propaganda shaped national history. Some Indian critical scholars like Romila Thapar and Neeladri Battacharya have solidly studied the national historiographical waves against the backdrop of violent colonialism. Romila Thapar's book *Communalism and the Writing of Indian History* and other relevant research attracted a significant readership on this critical theme (Thapar, 1969, p. 1-10).

The communal approach to interpreting and understanding Indian history extends beyond the medieval and modern periods, as it can also distort the interpretation of ancient Indian history. A closer look at the ideology of modern communalism in India often seeks intellectual validation from the historical past. One major flaw in Indian national history was its focus solely on religion rather than considering the broader historical context. For instance, Hindu communalists attempt to portray an ideal Hindu society during the ancient period, blaming the subsequent problems in India on the arrival of Muslims. Conversely, Muslim communalists strive to trace the origins of separatism back to the medieval period, starting from the 11th or 13th century C.E. From the medieval era, the Muslims have been blamed for any social and economic failure in Indian history.

The traditional historians did not appreciate Muslim empires in India and their well-organized trading and economic networks, wealth, or renowned cultural traditions.

As in Sri Lanka, the modern historiography of ancient Indian history and culture began in the eighteenth century. From that time until the early twentieth century, three major intellectual trends emerged in India: the Orientalists, the Utilitarians, and the Nationalists. Oriental studies gained popularity at the end of the eighteenth century with the establishment of the Royal Asiatic Society. The same society we can find in Sri Lanka as pioneers of colonial historiographical projects. The European scholars who studied Sanskrit and Pali have developed a deep admiration for the culture of the Aryan-speaking peoples. They formulated the theory of an Indo-European homeland and the shared ancestry of Sanskritic and Greek cultures. The Aryans were perceived as a racial group rather than merely people who spoke related languages, and efforts were made to draw connections between the evolution of Aryan culture in India and Greek culture in Europe. This theory was intertwined with new racial theories in France, Germany, and England. Therefore, for the self-imagination of the colonizers, the Aryan theoretical construction around Indian and Sri Lankan people became significant. This Aryan theory was adopted by post-independence historians in India and Sri Lanka.

In countries like Sri Lanka, oriental studies, Pali language learning, and Aryan theory became popular after India focused on Oriental studies. Many professional historians prioritized developing a Sri Lankan national historical master narrative parallel to Indian history. As Muslims were excluded in Indian national history, the Tamils were excluded in Sri Lankan history. Both historical narratives were based on newly developed ethno-religious segregation and racism. In India, scholars like Max Mueller exemplified the attempt to identify with an idealized version of ancient Indian culture. This idealization often extended to modern India as well. The writings of such Orientalists significantly influenced Indian circles, as many religious and social reform movements of the nineteenth century, like the Arya Samaj, emphasized Vedic culture as the foundation of Indian tradition and made it their ideal (Pandit, 2006, p. 124-26).

Meanwhile, the country's national movements and anti-Muslim political waves deeply admired the segregated aspects pointed out by Indian historians. They adopted these historical claims to enhance the discrimination and violence against minority communities. In the initial decades following Independence, liberal and communist political parties in India gained significant strength and popularity. However, in the twenty-first century, nationalist political parties and governments have risen to power, securing majoritarian support. Even though India has a secular and religiously tolerant constitution, there is widespread religious violence is often deeply ingrained in India's politics, religious practices, and history. Since Narendra Modi became the Prime Minister

of India in 2014, there has been a sharp rise in Hindu nationalist sentiment and religious violence across the country. His political party, the B.J.P., often emphasizes the value of Hindu identity. Modi was Gujarat's Chief Minister in 2002 when anti-Muslim rallies erupted, resulting in the worst religious bloodshed in India since its Independence. The ideological construction of Hindu identity is essential to the nationalists like the Modi government. Therefore, national historians in India played a considerable role in spreading Hindu nationalism among the general public through history books. Indian school textbooks also played a critical role in spreading Hindu nationalist values and the ideas of the golden era of Hindu India.

Though revisionist historians like Romila Thapar continually fight against for rational and non-discriminative aspects of history, the waves of nationalism ignore critical historical discourse and continue segregating history writings. Thapar criticizes the "communal interpretation" of Indian history, where events from the last thousand years are viewed exclusively through the lens of a supposed continuous conflict between monolithic Hindu and Muslim communities. She argues that this approach to history is "extremely selective" in its choice of facts, "deliberately partisan" in its interpretations, and fails to employ contemporary methods of analysis that consider multiple, prioritized causes. Revisionist historians in India, such as Thapar, have significantly influenced the revisionist school in Sri Lankan historiography. Sri Lankan historians like R.A.L.H. Gunawardana (Gunawardana, 1979) and Sudarshana Seneviratne studied and appreciated these revisionist historical efforts in India, adopting similar approaches to Sri Lankan history.

Consequently, it can be argued that nationalist and revisionist historiographical movements in South Asia are interconnected with theoretical developments in mainland India. Postcolonial studies and critical theoretical approaches from the subaltern studies group were highly influential in other countries like Sri Lanka. These novel critical schools allowed minority communities to be integrated historical analyses all around South Asia. The debunking of national myths and evaluating the weakness of traditional history became prominent in newly developed South Asian studies related to its critical school.

Subaltern and Feminist Interventions in Indian Historiography

Ranajit Guha and the Subaltern Collective

The 1980s marked a profound shift in Indian historiography with the emergence of the Subaltern Studies Collective, founded by Ranajit Guha and a group of younger historians. At its core, the project was a radical rethinking of how history in India had been written and whose voices it had privileged. Guha's influential manifesto, *On Some Aspects of the Historiography*

of Colonial India (1982), argued that both colonial and nationalist historiographies were elitist in orientation. The colonial archive viewed Indians as passive subjects in need of governance, while nationalist histories emphasized elite leaders, parties, and institutions. In both, the political agency of peasants, workers, and marginalized groups was subsumed into narratives of elite initiative (Ludden, 2002, p. 1-39).

The Subaltern Studies sought to "write history from below", foregrounding the autonomy of subaltern politics. Guha stressed that peasant insurgencies, strikes, rumors, and popular religious practices revealed a distinct sphere of political consciousness that could not be reduced to elite categories. Rebellions and everyday forms of resistance, often dismissed as "spontaneous" or "pre-political," were instead seen as meaningful acts of defiance. By challenging the assumption that the nation was the only legitimate unit of history, the collective opened new ways of thinking about the relationship between power, culture, and resistance. What made Subaltern Studies innovative was not only its critique of existing historiography but also its methodological experimentation. The collective drew on unconventional sources to uncover subaltern voices: police intelligence reports, colonial surveillance files, vernacular pamphlets, rumors, folklore, and oral traditions. These sources, often considered marginal or unreliable by conventional historians, became central to reconstructing the textures of subaltern life.

Shahid Amin's *Event, Metaphor, Memory* exemplifies this approach. His study of the Chauri Chaura incident of 1922, in which villagers attacked a police station and killed 22 policemen, revealed how peasants reinterpreted Gandhi's call for non-violence in their own idioms of justice and resistance. Instead of seeing the episode as a "misunderstanding" of nationalist strategy, Amin highlighted how subaltern actors produced their own political meanings (Amin, 1995). Other members of the collective pushed the boundaries of interpretation further. Gyanendra Pandey analyzed communal violence, showing it to be historically contingent and shaped by specific political contexts rather than an inevitable clash of primordial identities (Pandey, 1990). Partha Chatterjee reconceptualized nationalism by distinguishing between the "inner" spiritual domain, which Indians sought to preserve from colonial domination, and the "outer" material domain of state and economy, where Western forms were adopted. These works combined close archival reading with theoretical innovation, reshaping the study of colonialism, nationalism, and community (Chatterjee, 1993).

The Postcolonial Turn

By the 1990s, Subaltern Studies intersected with postcolonial theory, expanding its reach beyond South Asian historiography into global debates about knowledge and power. Dipesh Chakrabarty's *Provincializing Europe* was a landmark intervention, arguing that European categories of modernity, rationality, and historicism could not be universalized. Instead, histories needed to be written from the vantage point of non-European experiences, thereby destabilizing the epistemic dominance of the West (Chakrabarty, 2000, p. 56-60).

Equally influential was Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?* Spivak questioned whether subaltern voices could ever be represented without mediation, suggesting that attempts to recover them inevitably risk reproducing structures of power and silencing. Her intervention sparked intense debates about representation, agency, and the limits of historiography itself (Spivak, 1988, p. 271-313).

At the same time, the project attracted criticism. Sumit Sarkar, one of its early members, argued that later volumes of Subaltern Studies shifted too far toward textualism and poststructuralist theory, losing sight of material realities such as class, economy, and political structures. Despite such debates, the impact of the collective was immense. Subaltern Studies transformed historical scholarship worldwide by foregrounding marginal voices, critiquing Eurocentric models, and inspiring similar projects in Latin American, African, and Southeast Asian contexts (Bhattacharya, 2011).

Feminist Interventions in Indian Historiography

The Challenge to Androcentrism

Parallel to the Subaltern Studies project, feminist historians from the late 1970s onwards launched a transformative critique of Indian historiography. Their intervention was motivated by a recognition that mainstream narratives, whether colonial, nationalist, or Marxist, remained deeply androcentric. Women were either rendered invisible or appeared only in symbolic roles: as mothers of the nation, as victims in need of protection, or as emblems of sacrifice and virtue. Even Marxist accounts, while attentive to structures of class and economy, often treated gender as incidental rather than constitutive of historical processes.

Uma Chakravarti's pioneering work introduced the influential concept of Brahmanical patriarchy, identifying the ways in which caste hierarchy and gender oppression were historically

intertwined. By analyzing ancient texts, legal codes, and religious practices, Chakravarti argued that women's subordination was neither natural nor secondary but central to the functioning of caste-based society. Patriarchal control of women's sexuality and reproduction, she showed, was indispensable to the reproduction of caste order. This insight reframed the study of Indian society, situating gender not on the margins but at the core of historical structures (Chakravarti, 1998).

A landmark moment in feminist historiography was the publication of Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid's edited volume *Recasting Women* (1989). This collection of essays emphasized the plurality of women's experiences, cutting across caste, class, community, and region. It challenged homogenizing categories such as "the Indian woman," foregrounding instead the multiplicity of subject positions shaped by social and historical contexts. *Recasting Women* marked a watershed in establishing women's history as an intellectually rigorous and urgent field of inquiry. Its interdisciplinary character drawing on history, anthropology, and literary studies and demonstrated that feminist historiography could productively unsettle rigid disciplinary boundaries.

Feminist historians also revolutionized the archive of history by expanding the range of sources considered legitimate. Instead of relying solely on elite texts, government documents, or nationalist writings, they turned to court records, missionary reports, oral testimonies, medical files, and personal letters. These alternative sources illuminated aspects of everyday life and women's experiences that had been systematically excluded from earlier historiography.

One of the most influential contributions was Lata Mani's study of the sati debates in colonial India. Mani demonstrated that discussions around the practice of widow immolation rarely centered the voices of women themselves. Instead, both colonial reformers and indigenous defenders used sati to advance their own agendas as British authorities to justify their civilizing mission, and Indian nationalists to assert cultural authenticity. Women's bodies became battlegrounds of ideological contestation, but their subjectivity remained silenced. Mani's work highlighted how power operates through discourses about women, rather than merely through their direct participation in events (Mani, 1998, p. 68-70).

Tanika Sarkar's research brought further nuance by showing how gender shaped both communal and nationalist politics. In her analysis of Hindu nationalist mobilization, she demonstrated the way women were simultaneously idealized as symbols of purity and relegated to subordinate roles in political practice. This paradox revealed the deep ambivalence of nationalist discourses where women were necessary to the imagination of the nation but were rarely allowed autonomous political agency (Sarkar, 2001, 125-30). In the field of labor history, Samita Sen's studies of the jute industry in Bengal exposed the way industrial capitalism was profoundly

gendered. Women workers were often relegated to low-paid and insecure forms of labor, while their reproductive roles were mobilized to justify exclusion from more stable positions. Sen's work showed that gender was not simply an "add-on" to class analysis but was crucial to understanding the dynamics of labor and capital in colonial India (Sen, 1999).

Similarly, Radhika Singha's research on colonial law and policing examined how the state regulated women's bodies, sexuality, and labor. She uncovered the ways in which laws ostensibly designed to protect women such as those addressing prostitution or criminal behavior, were often mechanisms of surveillance and control. This attention to the intersection of gender, law, and governance highlighted how the colonial state operated through intimate regulation (Singha, 1998, p. 20-29). Expanding further, Charu Gupta's scholarship explored sexuality, popular culture, and communalism. By analyzing vernacular print culture, Gupta demonstrated how ideas of female sexuality and morality were mobilized in the making of communal identities. Her work revealed how the regulation of women's bodies intersected with broader processes of religious and political identity formation.

The Partition of 1947 became another crucial site for feminist historiography, particularly through the methodology of oral history. While conventional political histories of Partition emphasized elite negotiations, state policies, and geopolitical consequences, feminist scholars shifted attention to the experiences of ordinary people, especially women, who endured displacement, abduction, and sexual violence.

Urvashi Butalia's *The Other Side of Silence* collected testimonies from survivors, uncovering stories of trauma, silence, and resilience. By centering personal narratives, Butalia illuminated dimensions of Partition that were absent from official histories: the emotional ruptures, the breakdown of families, and the ways in which violence was inscribed onto women's bodies (Butalia, 1998). Similarly, Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin's *Borders and Boundaries* documented the experiences of abducted women, forced conversions, and the struggles of recovery and reintegration (Ritu & Bhasin, 1998). These works foregrounded the gendered dimensions of violence, revealing how women were used as markers of communal honor and sites of nationalist anxiety.

The use of oral histories not only diversified the archive but also introduced new analytical categories, memory, trauma, and silence, into Indian historiography. Feminist scholars argued that history must account for affective and intimate dimensions of the past, which often elude traditional documentary sources. This methodological innovation broadened the scope of historical inquiry, ensuring that personal experiences and emotional worlds were recognized as historically significant.

Feminist historiography was not confined to India alone. Across South Asia, scholars demonstrated how gender was central to understanding nationalism, conflict, and state formation. In Sri Lanka, historians such as Nira Wickramasinghe and Malathi de Alwis explored the intersections of gender, war, and memory during the protracted civil conflict. Their works showed how women's mourning practices, everyday survival strategies, and political activism became entangled with Sinhala and Tamil nationalist projects. These studies revealed the gendered dimensions of war and violence, challenging official narratives that often-erased women's contributions and suffering (Wickramasinghe, 2006, p. 40-48).

By extending the feminist lens beyond India, such regional perspectives underscored that questions of gender, power, and memory were not isolated phenomena but shared across South Asian societies. They demonstrated that feminist historiography was part of a broader intellectual transformation, one that demanded a rethinking of historical categories themselves. Feminist interventions in Indian historiography have fundamentally reshaped the discipline. By challenging androcentrism, expanding archives, and centering marginalized voices, feminist historians have forced a rethinking of what counts as history and whose experiences matter. They have shown that gender is not a secondary category but constitutive of social, political, and economic life.

From Uma Chakravarti's theory of Brahmanical patriarchy to oral histories of Partition, from labor regimes in colonial factories to the regulation of sexuality and communal identities, feminist scholarship has illuminated dimensions of the past that earlier historiographies ignored. Moreover, by connecting Indian debates to broader South Asian and global feminist scholarship, these interventions have ensured that Indian historiography is part of a worldwide rethinking of historical practice (Chakravarti, 1998).

The legacy of feminist historiography lies not only in recovering women's voices but in transforming the very frameworks of historical analysis. By insisting on the centrality of gender, feminist historians have enriched the discipline with new questions, methods, and categories and ensured that history is no longer the story of elites and men alone, but a more inclusive and nuanced account of human experience.

The Value of New Sources and Expanding the Archive

One of the most significant transformations in modern historiography has been the widening of what counts as a legitimate historical source. Earlier generations of historians relied primarily on political chronicles, elite texts, or official records. From the late twentieth century onward, however, scholars began to experiment with new kinds of archives, questioning what

voices were preserved, which were excluded. They also searched how different materials could enrich our understanding of the past. This shift was closely tied to the influence of subaltern studies, feminist historiography, and cultural history. All of these schools emphasized that the everyday lives of ordinary people could only be recovered by looking beyond traditional sources.

One of the richest new archives has been the vernacular press. Local newspapers, pamphlets, almanacs, and serialized fiction allowed historians to reconstruct the moral worlds and political imaginations of ordinary readers. These sources revealed the way debates on religion, social reform, caste, and nationalism were framed in accessible ways for mass audiences. Cheap print culture also became a site where communal tensions, gender roles, and visions of modernity were negotiated. For instance, serialized novels in Bengali or Hindi journals often reflected anxieties about women's education, urbanization, or interreligious encounters, offering insights unavailable in elite political writings (Pollock I, 2006, Ghosh, 2013, p. 40-46).

Another important body of sources has been legal and administrative records. While petitions, court proceedings, and police reports were once dismissed as bureaucratic minutiae, historians now use them to illuminate how ordinary people engaged with the colonial state. A widow's petition for land rights, a peasant's testimony in a criminal trial, or a police file on a local disturbance all open windows into negotiations of power and resistance. These documents reveal not only the workings of colonial governance but also the strategies through which marginalized groups asserted their claims and identities.

The rise of oral history has transformed historical writing, especially in the context of Partition studies. Testimonies of survivors provided perspectives absent from official state archives, highlighting experiences of displacement, abduction, sexual violence, and survival. Oral narratives often revealed silences and emotions that written records obscured. They also complicated nationalist stories of unity or sacrifice by foregrounding trauma, resilience, and fragmented memory. By treating memory itself as an object of analysis, historians gained new ways to understand how individuals and communities live with historical rupture (Butalia, 2000).

Beyond texts, scholars increasingly turned to visual and material culture. Photographs, coins, textiles, tools, and architecture provide alternative ways to reconstruct social and economic histories. A photograph of a protest, for instance, can reveal modes of collective action, textiles and crafts illuminate patterns of labor and gender, and coins trace shifts in trade and sovereignty. Borrowing from anthropology and art history, historians began to see objects as carriers of meaning, embedded in everyday practices and cultural exchanges.

Most recently, the digital revolution has expanded historical research. The digitization of archives has increased accessibility, while computational tools allow historians to handle

vast corpora of sources. Geographic Information Systems (GIS) enable the mapping of migration routes, caste geographies, or urban expansion. Text mining facilitates the analysis of newspapers or parliamentary debates at scale, while statistical methods uncover long-term economic and demographic patterns. These digital and quantitative approaches complement traditional close reading, offering new ways to link micro-histories with macro-structures (Dodd & Menon, 2024, p. 23-34).

The expansion of the archive has profoundly reshaped historiography. By incorporating vernacular print, legal records, oral testimonies, material culture, and digital tools, historians have gained more inclusive and nuanced perspectives. This methodological broadening has not only recovered marginalized voices but also challenged older narratives of nationalism, colonialism, and modernity. Ultimately, the value of these new sources lies in their ability to make history more democratic, multi-layered, and attuned to the complexities of human experience.

The New Volume of *História da Historiografia* 2025 and Its Significance

With this dense discussion on South Asian historiography, it can be concluded that South Asia produced a unique history to the world that developed very influential theoretical schools. These schools affected modern historiography in the contemporary academic dialogue with their critical approaches. Therefore, it is vital to study South Asian historiography. Our journal *História da Historiografia-International Journal of Theory and History of Historiography* in its new volume on South Asian historiography has published several interesting articles.

The paper written by Mirian Santos Ribeiro de Oliveira and Pedro Afonso Cristovão dos Santos examines the historiographical works of South Asian historians Ranajit Guha (1923–2023) and Dipesh Chakrabarty (1948–). The research explored the limits of history through their works while examining Guha's *An Indian Historiography of India* (1988) and *History at the Limit of World-History* (2002), and Chakrabarty's *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age* (2021). As members of the Subaltern Studies project, both critiqued the foundations of modern Western historiography and its exclusions, while drawing inspiration from Rabindranath Tagore to expand historical perspectives. Guha focused on Hegel's Eurocentric World-history, whereas Chakrabarty interrogated anthropocentric historiography from Vico to contemporary climate discourse and emphasized the inclusion of non-human and planetary dimensions.

Also, Renu Elizabeth Abraham's research paper on "Colonial historiography of Malabar: Towards an alternative to history" examines the colonial historiography of Malabar and focuses on the reception of the Perumal tradition and its influence on later historical narratives from the region. It analyzes four key texts produced between 1887 and 1911: William Logan's *Malabar Manual* (two volumes), C.A. Innes's *Madras District Gazetteers: Malabar* (two volumes), C.A.

Menon's *Cochin State Manual*, and V. Nagam Aiya's *Travancore State Manual* (three volumes). These works, produced by British administrators and Indian officials under colonial rule, shaped the way Malabar's past was documented and interpreted, blending administrative concerns with historiographical practice. A central concern in these works is the problem of "ahistoricity," a concept that emerged in nineteenth-century Orientalist scholarship. According to the author, colonial historians, influenced by a Eurocentric view of historical knowledge, often presumed that Indians lacked history both as a record of past events and as events themselves.

The article "Para além da narrativa: renegados do Estado da Índia sob ótica histórica e filosófica" aims to present both an unconventional object of analysis and an unusual historical-philosophical approach in studies concerning phenomena in the State of India. A significant part of the Portuguese Empire hosted the only inquisitorial court in the Portuguese overseas territories due to its investigative procedures generating valuable documentation. Thus, by employing concepts from the philosophy of Agamben (the sacred and the profane) and Foucault (transgression) to understand the phenomenon of the renunciation of allegiance by subjects of the Catholic Crown in India between the 16th and 17th centuries. This study seeks to propose a historiographical perspective that goes beyond simply narrating past experiences, aiming instead to delve into them more deeply.

The article of Kaudagammana Rathanasara investigates the popular reinterpretation of the term "Jambudvīpa," which positions key Buddhist sites within Sri Lanka rather than India, as described in the Tripitaka. By examining the writings of various Sinhalese authors who attempt to redefine Buddhist geography, the study highlights a deliberate effort to challenge established historical and archaeological evidence. These claims, however, are largely unsupported by rigorous scholarship and risk undermining the reliability of traditional historiography. The use of historical narratives to advance contemporary political and cultural agendas raises critical questions about historical accuracy and the role of historiography in shaping national identity. The study underscores the importance of careful, evidence-based research to counter misleading narratives and promote a nuanced understanding of Sri Lankan Buddhist heritage.

According to Josie Portz's article in this volume, in twentieth-century pre-independence Sri Lanka, a new generation of historians emerged who adopted "modern" approaches to historical writing. Similar to other parts of South Asia, their work often served broader projects of identity formation. Among them, S.G. Perera made significant contributions to the history of the Catholic Church in Sri Lanka, mainly through his translations of Portuguese historical sources. As part of a larger study on the interplay between historical practice and Catholic identity, this article examines Perera's 1932 textbook, *A History of Ceylon for Schools*. Using qualitative coding

methods, the study analyzes the historical techniques and narrative strategies employed in the textbook, showing the way Perera engaged with modern historiographical methods to promote a Catholic-oriented Sri Lankan nationalist perspective.

Based on these research papers, I believe the new volume of *História da Historiografia* provides a comprehensive outline of South Asian historiography with modern research rigor. It enables readers to engage with new knowledge and critically evaluate some of the less-explored themes in South Asian historiography. Moreover, it encourages scholars to rethink established narratives and consider alternative perspectives that have previously received limited attention.V

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