

✦ MSB GLOBAL LAW INSTITUTE ✦

“Indian Historiography”

“History”

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“Unit (1)(c)”

Lecture By :  
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# What is historiography

- **Historiography**, the writing of history, especially the writing of history based on the critical examination of sources, the selection of particular details from the authentic materials in those sources, and the synthesis of those details into a narrative that stands the test of critical examination. The term historiography also refers to the theory and history of historical writing

# Indian Historiography

- The historiography of India refers to the studies, sources, critical methods and interpretations used by scholars to develop a history of India.
- In recent decades there have been four main schools of historiography in how historians study India: Cambridge, Nationalist, Marxist, and subaltern

# What is the importance of Historiography

- **Historiography** is **important** for a wide range of reasons. First, it helps us understand why historical events have been interpreted so differently over time. ... Just as critically, **historiography** lets us study **history** with a critical eye. It helps us understand what biases may have shaped the historical record.

# Orientalist School of Historiography

- This school tried to link the history of India to the history of Europe. This was done, by the study of languages(as the European and the Indian languages both belong to the strata of Indo-European languages with the same origin). They also tried to link the biblical texts of India like the Dharmashastras to those present in Europe, again indicating similar origin of both these civilisations.

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This school also studied the social structures like the caste system in India. This was important not only from the point of intellectual curiosity but it was of administrative importance as well, as this knowledge was helpful in furthering colonial rule in India.

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- This school to a large extent, considered India as an exotic civilisation bereft of all material considerations and a civilisation which focussed on aspects like spiritualism and other similar meta-physical concepts, this can be interpreted as 'in part a reflection of an escape from 19<sup>th</sup> century European industrialisation and the changes which this industrialisation brought, which were somehow difficult to comprehend

# Orientalist School of Historiography



- One important thing to be noted about this school is that it was the first to apply the Aryan label to the Indian society , which again pointed to a unified origin of the Indian and European societies.
- Further, they intermingled caste and race, and thus the upper castes were considered Aryan(as they were advanced) and the lower castes were considered of non-aryan and mixed origins.



## Contd...

- In my view this school and its prominent historians like Max Muller were to a large extent
- Responsible in thr creation of the “stereotype” of the indian society in the european academic and social discourses. It should also be noted that, the nature of colonial rule in this school was non-interventionist in nature

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# Utilitarian School of Historiography



- The utilitarian school of political philosophy was started by Jeremy Bentham in England. It was a by-product of the enlightenment of Europe
- The utilitarian was another school headed by the James Mill who believed that the backwardness of the Indian society could only be improved through the introduction of enlightened despotism.

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- This school also believed in the “exocity” of Indian society, but it used those facts to state that the Indian society lacked rationality and Individualism and hence the European civilization was needed to make the “stagnant” Indian society “progressive”.
- This was a departure from the oriental school's non-interventionist policies. This school of historiography is responsible for the three staged periodisation of the Indian history into, the Hindu civilization, the Muslim civilization and the British period.

## Contd...

- This school created the concepts of “oriental despotism”, which again was used to legitimate the colonial conquest of the sub-continent. It should be noted that this change in historical thinking also coincided with a change in the colonial policies. By this time the colonial conquest of India was nearly complete, and the need of the hour was to reconstruct the economic structure of the colony, so as to be a source of raw material and an importer of the finished British goods. Thus, the change from a non-interventionist to an interventionist ruler, required certain kinds of interpretation of the history of India, which was provided by the utilitarian historians.

# Utilitarian School of Historiography

- It should also be noted that the concept of Indian society being the “other” of the European societies, had an important place in this school of historiography. This is clear from the ideas of “Asiatic mode of production” which is an anti-thesis of the “European mode production” this was used to give legitimacy to the British intervention in the sub-continent as it was necessary to break the stagnancy of the Indian society, so it was the lesser of the two evils, the first being remaining in the same stagnant state for eternity. This contrast between Europe and India became a primary concern, and in many cases resulted in the non-representation of those empirical facts which were not in congruence with the thesis.

# The Nationalist Interpretation



- This school of historians emerged towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This was used for the anti-colonial movement for independence. In this school, history was used for two purposes, firstly, to establish the identity of Indians and secondly by establishing the superiority of the past over the present.

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- For the first purpose, the Aryan theory of race and other similar concepts came handy, whereas for the first purpose, the Aryan theory of race and other similar concepts came handy, whereas for the second purpose, the concept of the “golden era of Hindu civilization” was created. This was done because the remoteness in history of the “golden age” was directly proportional to its utility in imaginative reconstructions and inversely proportional to factual scrutiny.



## Contd.....

- The basic thing to be noted is that, the colonial nationalists to a large extent used the same methods of historiography as the imperialists but they interpreted these “facts” differently so as to suit their socio-political needs. Though they did reject some of the imperial concepts like “oriental despotism” etcetera but to large extent they agreed on the historical facts with the imperialists.

# The Nationalist Interpretation



- This school was also responsible for the rise of religious nationalism based on the classification of the Hindu and Muslim civilizations. It has been argued that this was the period where the Concept of separate countries for Hindu's and Muslims was conceptualized.

## Contd....

- These interpretations are in the view of Ms. Thapar, distortions of Indian history. She states, “they are ideologically limited and intellectually even somewhat illiterate, because history becomes a kind of catechism in which the questions are known, the answers are known and there is adherence to just those questions and answers. No attempt is made to explore intellectually beyond this catechism.”

# The Post Colonial Interpretation

The two major schools in this period are,

1. Marxist School of Historiography
2. Subaltern School of Historiography

# Marxist School of Historiography

- The Marxist historiography on modern India was inaugurated by one of the founders of Marxism in India M.N.Roy with his work 'INDIA IN TRANSITION' published in 1922.
- It was followed by INDIA TODAY of R.Palme Dutt in 1940 and 'THE SOCIAL BACKGROUND OF INDIAN NATIONALISM' of A.R.Desai in 1959.
- All the three were classical Marxists and treated Indian national movement as the representation of particular stage in the development of mode of production.

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- The Marxist historians tried to the transformation of India in the time of colonialism and looked it as a part of the growth of world capitalism and exploitative concerns of British imperialism.
- Dutt's seminal work India today, clearly analyses the colonial phase in India as three categories.



# Contd....

- Later it became the perennial theme of the nationalist writings. The Marxist historians turned their attention on the inner contradictions of the Indian society ,the marginalised sections like peasants and workers, and highlighted their role in the movement, women's role etc. They even questioned communal periodisation of India.

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- The first phase as mercantilism or merchant capitalism under the company.
- from 1757- 1813, followed by the stage of industrial capitalism as a result of industrial revolution , from 1813-1858 (marketisation), and the final one as finance capitalism as the capital and colonial investments.





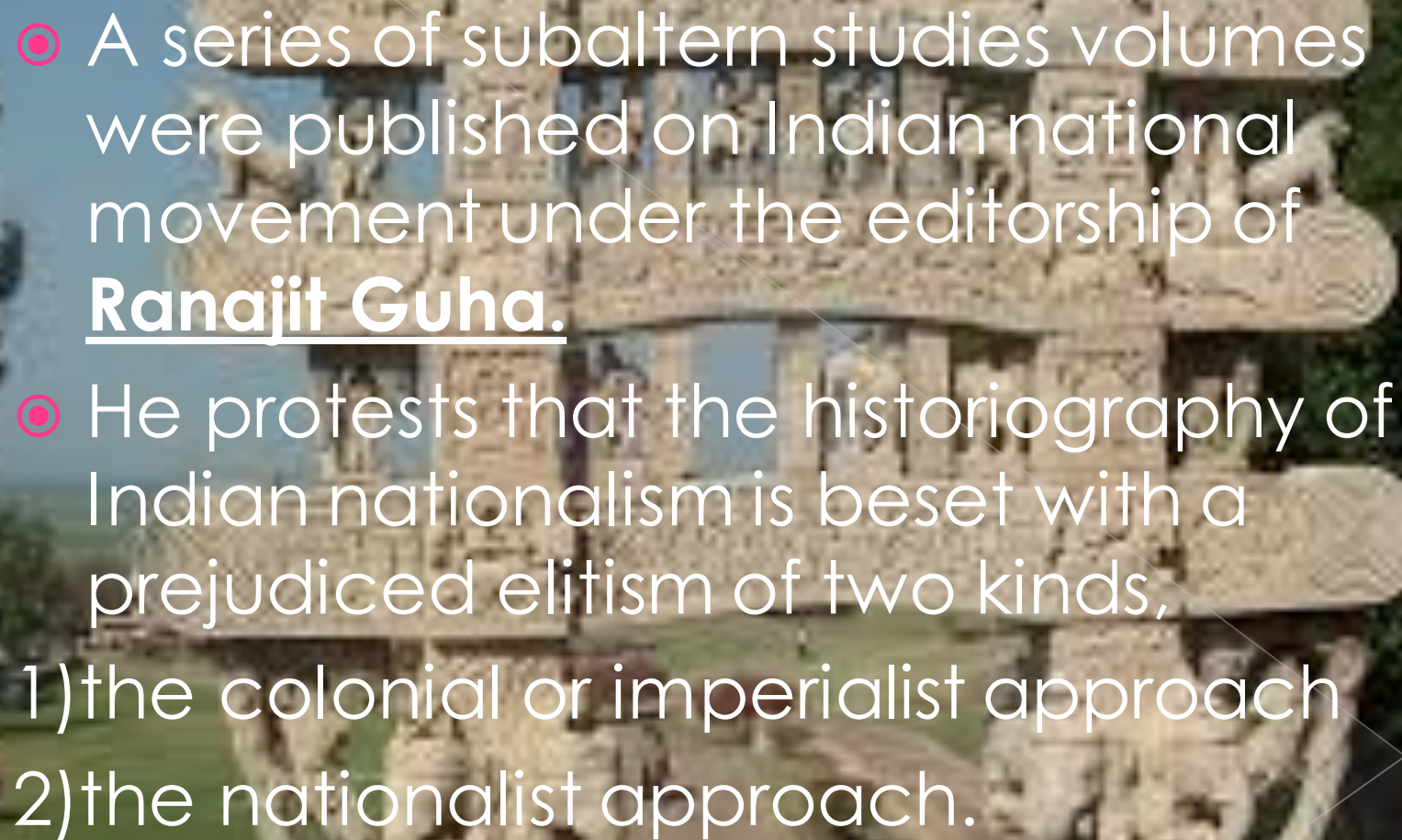
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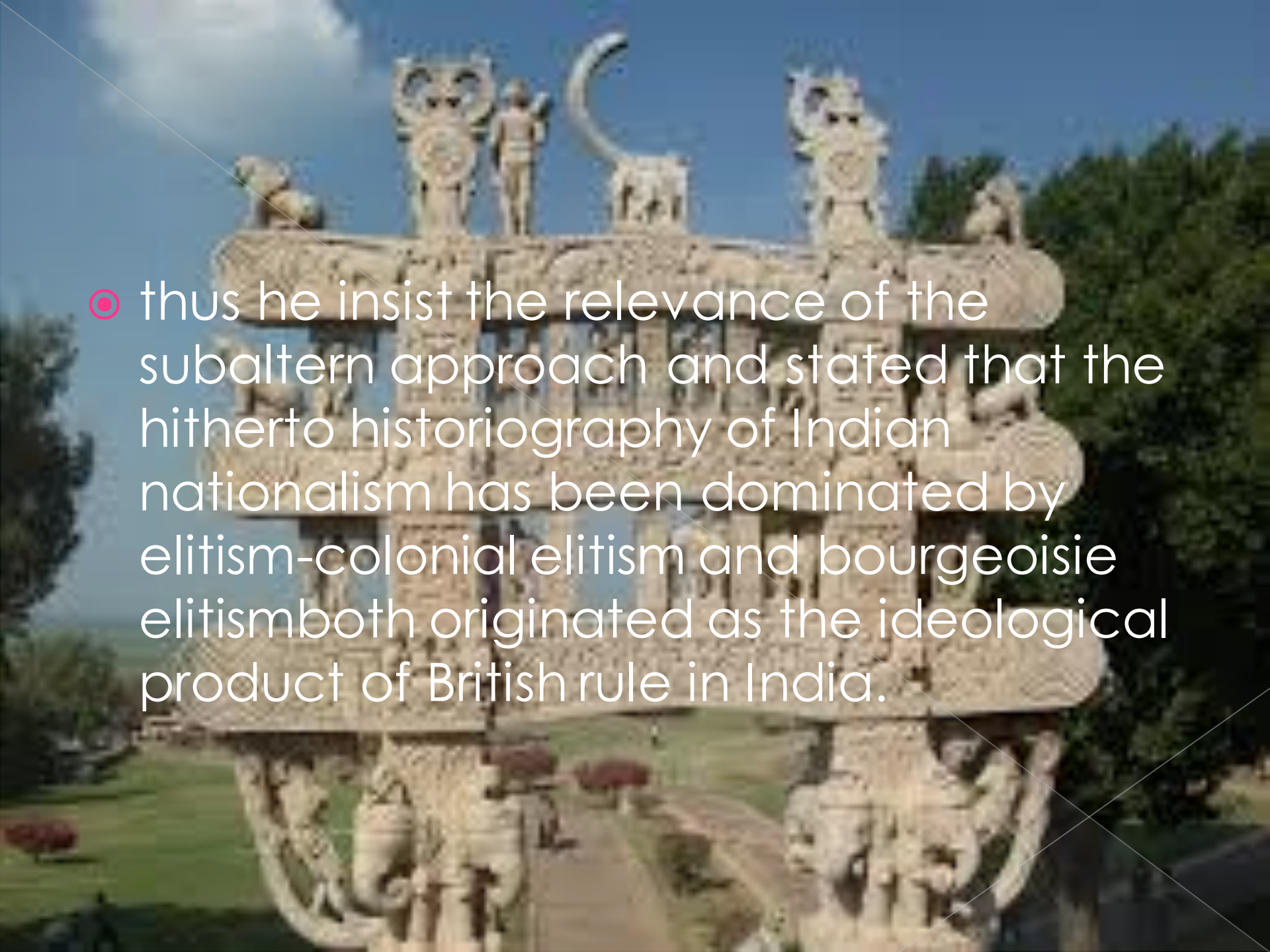
- The Marxist writings broadened the history from the state to society. They brought the interdisciplinary approach in the recent studies, a new style of explanation to the problems.

# Subaltern School of Historiography



- Subaltern a term taken from the Antonio Gramsci's, the Italian socialist and thinker , his manuscript 'Prison Notebooks' , meaning of inferior ranker, or common people; whether of class, caste , age, gender etc. it bring to light the lower sections of the Indian people hitherto neglected by historiography

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- A series of subaltern studies volumes were published on Indian national movement under the editorship of **Ranajit Guha**.
  - He protests that the historiography of Indian nationalism is beset with a prejudiced elitism of two kinds,
    - 1) the colonial or imperialist approach
    - 2) the nationalist approach.

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- thus he insist the relevance of the subaltern approach and stated that the hitherto historiography of Indian nationalism has been dominated by elitism-colonial elitism and bourgeoisie elitismboth originated as the ideological product of British rule in India.

# Contd...

- To the subaltern historians there are only two sections in the society

1) the elitists and

2) the subaltern.,

so it is the time to write the history of subalterns. Thus the subaltern historians focussed on the subjugated or subordinated people such as tribals, peasants, oppressed women, workers, poor and other marginalised sects of the society who have played a key role in making the history and society.

# Subaltern School of Historiography

The modern historiography of India is a continuing dialogue between colonial, nationalist and post-colonial interpretations. This has enriched historical theory and has also sharpened the debate and evaluation of comprehending the Indian past.

# conclusion



- To conclude, we noticed that there was no poverty of historical knowledge and no dearth of historical works in ancient India. The works produced as a whole throw light on various aspects of ancient Indian history and culture.



*Thankyou*