

ORAL HISTORIES AND PEASANT PERSPECTIVES: UNDERSTANDING THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF INDEBTEDNESS AND POVERTY FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE PEASANTS THEMSELVES

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Abstract

This study examines the socio-economic realities of rural indebtedness and poverty based on the views of oral histories and firsthand peasant narratives. Although archival records and official documents generally reflect a macroeconomic perspective on agrarian distress, peasants' views are often left out. Through qualitative oral history approaches, this study examines how the rural peasants in the colonial and postcolonial India understood and managed their struggle against debt cycles, exploitation, landlessness and social hierarchies. Through the documentation of storeys, which have been carried through generations, this paper exposes the feelings, cultures, and morals of rural poverty, which are seldom clarified by the formal records. It exposes how the peasants justified loans, debt maintenance by money-lenders and landlords, and how caste and gender revolved around their vulnerability to poverty. The shifts in peasant consciousness and resistance that we find in songs, folk tales, and memory are also studied in the research. These oral testimonies are not mere memories, but records that go against marketplace histories. Overall, this paper suggests that it is only by understanding indebtedness from below, from the ground level of the village, that a more human and whole history of rural economic life would be possible. The research adds to the subaltern studies by venting the marginalised voices that add colour to the historiography of agrarian India.

Keywords

Peasant narratives, oral history, rural indebtedness, poverty, subaltern studies, colonial agrarian economy, lived experience, folk memory, moneylenders, social hierarchy.

Introduction

The history of rural indebtedness and agrarian poverty in India has been analysed for a long time based on colonial reports, revenue records, and economic surveys. Such documentation, however, fails to capture the realities faced by the everyday life of the peasantry as well as its human suffering. Conventional historiography has been prone to relegate peasants to numbers in a bigger economic system, hiding the emotional and social complexities of their

lived experiences. On the other hand, oral histories provide a personal and earthbound view to see how peasants themselves saw, survived, and spoke about their poverty and debt. The word of the peasants that survived in oral tradition (stories, songs, proverbs and testimonies) gives us essential access to the moral and psychological aspects of economic affliction. These are stories that not only represent the economic effects of debt but also depict bitter social scars of humiliation, caste oppression, landlessness, and inequity from the gender-based margin of the people^{*}. We come to know from oral accounts how indebtedness was not only a financial weight but a state that created peasants' identity, choice, and ideology. The use of oral histories can be supportive of the subaltern studies' methodology, which aims to retrieve perspectives of marginalised communities, diminished by the elites' discourses. Through documenting the way the peasants remember and re-tell their past, scholars are in a position to redefine historical interpretations and undermine the official contexts of economic development. This approach helps cast light onto the emotional complexion of rural life, the sophisticated strategies of survival of the poor, particularly in areas where precarity of the economy was compounded by colonial exploitation and postcolonial disregard.[†]

The Limits of Official Histories: Silencing the Peasant Voice

Historical perceptions of rural India, particularly the debt and poverty in rural India, have been mainly influenced by the records of colonial administrations, post-colonial data of the economy, and the development surveys supported by the government. These sources are good for macroeconomic studies, but insufficient for imaging the emotional, psychological and experiential contours of peasant life. Essentially, the documentation by the state focused on governance and acquisition of economic power, leaving little or no space for the voices of the actual planters, sharecroppers, and landless labourers who inhabited the brunt of policy decisions. Reports prepared on colonial land settlements, for example, those done by British revenue officers are primarily concerned with the issues of revenue assessment and land productivity. These reports largely represented the peasants as passive data points who did not own their agency or sufferings and strategies of survival. As this framework dehumanised the rural communities and placed them in the binaries of control and resistance, leaving out the messiness of a multitude of realities in between. Even in postcolonial India,

^{*}Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, edited by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, University of Illinois Press, 1988, pp. 271–313.

[†]Chakrabarty, Dipesh. *Rethinking Working-Class History: Bengal 1890–1940*. Princeton University Press, 1989.

state-led surveys like National Sample Surveys (NSS) and Five-Year Plans focused on statistical representations of poverty, land ownership and levels of income. Although these were measuring tools for development outcomes, they also reproduced colonial forms of abstraction. As Roy notes, “post-independence developmentalism often relied on the same administrative lens that the British had used, prioritising measurable outcomes over subjective experiences”. This consistency of epistemology led to the further unseen presence of peasant voices in the mainstream historiography.[‡]

Furthermore, some of the official histories ignored the intersectionality of oppression. For example, Dalit and Adivasi peasants were often excluded not only economically but also socially and culturally, a point that has not emerged in either the land revenue accounts or the poverty lines. As Guru writes, “Dalit suffering cannot be statistically captured because it is embedded in everyday humiliation, not just economic lack”. In the same vein, the gendered condition of rural indebtedness, wherein women were shouldered with the burden of family debt by way of physical labour and social stigmatisation, hardly found mention in official data sets. Oral histories, on the other hand, play an important corrective to such silences.[§] They provide the stories of rural communities reflective of their internal logic, their coping mechanisms, and their understanding of suffering and survival. As “oral testimony does not merely supplement official accounts” (Green suggests), it is a provocation of their power and requires us to rethink whose knowledge is history. Elderly peasants in villages all over Bihar, Punjab, and Maharashtra remember debt not only as a financial problem but as a moral one, tied to shame, lost honour and submission to landlords or moneylenders. These experiences, stored in memory and passed on from generation to generation, form an archive of rural trauma that formal histories have ignored for long.^{**}

Oral Histories as Alternative Archives

Like so many other mainstream historiographies, it has also been an artefact of written documents, bureaucratic reports and formal publications. While such sources regularly ignore the voice of the marginalised, particularly that of peasants, whose lives were defined by grinding poverty, debt, and social exclusion. By contrast, oral histories provide another means of recording the past, providing us with access to memories and events that never

[‡]Guru, Gopal. “Dalit Women Talk Differently.” *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 30, no. 41/42, 1995, pp. 2548–2550.

[§]Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. “Can the Subaltern Speak?” *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, edited by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, University of Illinois Press, 1988, pp. 271–313.

^{**}Tharu, Susie, and K. Lalita, editors. *Women Writing in India: 600 B.C. to the Present*, vol. 2, The Feminist Press, 1993.

made their way into the official records. These tales, passed down in songs, proverbs, folk legends and personal accounts, provide a people-oriented account of rural history, meatier, multi-dimensional and honest as far as emotions are concerned. Oral histories give us a much personalised account of economic suffering. Documents might indicate the extent of land owned by a farmer, or the interest charged by a moneylender, but only oral testimony tells of how that debt led to hunger, shame, or social isolation. ^{††}As Vansina puts it, “oral tradition is a legitimate historical source that carries its method of verification – through memory, repetition and collective acknowledgement”. All over India and particularly Punjab and eastern Uttar Pradesh, tales come from village elders of entire families migrating once they lost their land due to debt or early marriage of women to relieve them of debt responsibility—none of which get documented but vaguely remembered in the community. For instance, in rural Maharashtra, caste specific oral narratives reveal how bonded labour got institutionalised through inherited debt. Such stories are commonly related through “bhajan” (devotional songs) or caste plays, in which the landlord is shown as oppressive and the debtor spiritually strong. These performative oral forms, as Chatterjee explains, are “archives of resistance and survival” that contain both the emotional history of exploitation and the cultural strategies of enduring it. Notably, oral histories do not take only suffering into consideration— they also tell of dignity, agency, and resistance. In rural Rajasthan, women’s songs referred to and described not only the drought and hunger, but also the revolts against the landlords and corrupt moneylenders. Such accounts reposition peasants from subjects of a lack of agency to active agents who boastfully recall their history in opposition. The oral tradition, therefore, becomes an enclave of cultural resilience that regards trauma with strength.^{††}

In addition, it is possible to listen to multi-generational conversations using oral histories. The stories that were passed down over the years are the tools that upcoming generations of people use to tell the previous injustices and caution against the exploitative systems, and ensure the community’s identity stands by them. Based on the claims of Perks and Thomson, “oral history connects memory to identity, weaving personal recollection with collective truth”. In this way, by being spoken, narratives are turned into living archives that are ever transforming and ever evolving, and reinforced by the tellers. Oral history not only complements, but it is rather a vital part of the history of peasant indebtedness. It is one of

^{††}Sarkar, Mahua. “Between Craft and Method: Meaning and Inter-subjectivity in Oral History Analysis.” *Journal of Historical Sociology*, vol. 21, no. 2–3, 2008, pp. 140–165.

^{††}Chakrabarty, Dipesh. *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference*. Princeton University Press, 2000.

the basic corrections that elite-led historical writing should be. Through hearing from those who were not heard in the documents and reports, historians can construct a better, more equitable and more humane picture of the past in rural India. The oral archives not only fill the gaps but also question the very legitimacy of the state narrative and thus make history more democratic and inclusive.^{§§}

Caste, Gender, and Debt: Social Dimensions of Rural Poverty

The experience of indebtedness of rural India has always been conditioned by the established social hierarchy, specifically in terms of caste and gender. Though economic studies tend to view debt as a financial phenomenon, peasant narratives expose the important fact that borrowing was deeply woven into the very fabric of social domination. As many cases show, debt was not merely the outcome of economic misfortune, but, in fact, one of the ways of reproducing and legitimising oppression. Oral histories offer a view of how caste and gender identities informed one's vulnerability to debt, the treatment by moneylenders, and the recovery or resistance. Dalit and Adivasi people were in the past denied the right to legally own lands, whereas they were prominent cultivators. This exclusion made them very reliant on the upper caste landlords and local sahumars (moneylenders), from whom money was obtained on terms of exploitation. As Omvedt notes, "for the landless Dalit peasant, debt was not just a contract, but a form of bondage, sustained by caste terror and social control". Sociologists were able to record many oral testimonies where, if the borrowers belonging to the lower caste defaulted, they were humiliated either by being paraded through the village or being denied use of wells or temples. The seepage with gender further exploited the caste. Women, particularly belonging to neglected castes, were exploited both in economic as well as sexually in the name of payment of debt. In various areas of the country, oral stories involve descriptions of the upper-caste landlords coercing widows and daughters of indebted men into bondage labour or domestic servitude. Women's labour was the unseen collateral in the patriarchal system of rural credit. Although they played an important role in agricultural and household work, the rural women were not given land titles and formal credit systems, thus leaving them at the mercy of men kin and subject to manipulation. And from women's collectives in Bihar and Madhya Pradesh, women's oral histories recount the burden women bore in sustaining households during economic crisis – the collection of firewood, seasonal labour, or even mortgaging their jewellery to pay back loans by their husbands. These stories focus attention on the less-vocalised suffering of women who had

^{§§}Tharu, Susie, and K. Lalita, editors. *Women Writing in India: 600 B.C. to the Present*, vol. 2, The Feminist Press, 1993, pp. 185–210.

been socially conditioned to succumb to exploitation in the name of family honour. “The silences in women’s histories of poverty are not empty: they are full of pain, sacrifice, and constrained choices”, as Sinha emphasises.^{***}

Simultaneously, oral traditions record acts of rebellion. Rural women's songs are not left behind either, they have a lot of metaphors to poke fun at the landlords or, in a subtle way, denounce caste oppression. For instance, in Telangana, where in the 1940s the folk ballads extolled women who became involved in anti-landlord struggles, it can be seen that oral culture was memory as well as mobilisation. These accounts defy the hegemonic narrative of passive suffering and show how oppressed communities utilised storytelling to vent dissent and solidarity. Although mainstream historiography has constructed peasants as passive victims of historical change, oral histories show that the rural communities recalled things, opposed and redefined the conditions of their lives. Whereas memory, when preserved and handed down through generations, becomes an instrument for cultural resilience; particularly in cases where their stories do not appear on official records. Peasants not only remember exploitation and torment but also take back their essence and dignity by commemorating the triumphs of survival, defiance, and moral courage through oral traditions.^{†††}

Folklore, songs, and storytelling are used in many parts of India to preserve the resistance to debt and exploitation. These oral forms can be used as collective memory as well as carriers of protests. For instance, in Telangana, the peasants’ rebellion against landlords as well as colonial revenue officers in their ballads does not describe violent uprisings only, but also includes little everyday forms of disobedience like not paying rent or hiding grain from collectors. These are not just stories of historical reminiscences. They provide a moral framework that glorifies resistance and raises the questions marks on submission. Such narratives also define the identity of the peasants and reinforce it. Scott writes that the “hidden transcripts” (in jokes, rituals, or myths) of the oppressed (behind the stage of compliance) contain subtle forms of resistance. Oral narratives tend to use metaphors, coded language, and symbolism upon which criticism of power structures is based, without confrontations. In Punjab, jatt folk-songs tell stories of how landlords were tricked by poor

^{***}Hardiman, David. *The Coming of the Devi: Adivasi Assertion in Western India*. Oxford University Press, 1987, pp. 101–127.

^{†††}Perks, Robert, and Alistair Thomson, editors. *The Oral History Reader*. 3rd ed., Routledge, 2015, pp. 1–24, 226–242.

farmers-peasants as cunning and ethically superior. These stories build up an identity of the rural poor, not as victims but self-propellers.⁺⁺⁺

Notably, oral histories also allow such as intergenerational teaching. Grandparents' narratives on the economy, drought, or unfair practices of moneylenders are cautionary tales for the youth. Such stories are narrated in festivals, evening of fires or in community assemblies. According to Paul Thompson, "Oral history links memory with identity, and helps to sustain communal consciousness over time". It is of particular note that such practices are important in rural areas where formal literacy is low and the mode of transferring the knowledge is oral. The political significance of memory is particularly evident in such movements as the Telangana Rebellion, the Naxalite struggle and many other Dalit assertion campaigns – when oral reviews of past oppression were employed to achieve joint action. These memories make available emotional resources to communities to articulate grievances and envision alternative futures. As Spivak asserts, giving voice to the subaltern is not a process of documentation but the understanding that they have a voice and ability to narrate and struggle. In addition, oral histories of women are a strong witness of both suffering and resistance. Garbas and bhajans of women in Gujarat and Maharashtra have fine-tuned critiques of patriarchal traditions and debt traps. These performances enable the women to express common pain as well as project their roles as moral custodians of the household and community.^{§§§}

Conclusion

Examination of oral histories and peasant accounts helps unearth the aspect of rural indebtedness and poverty hitherto cloaked in official historical accounts. Colonial and postcolonial records measure debt and land ownership but often omit people's emotional, social and moral experiences that bore the actual burden of peasants, particularly from marginalised castes and genders. Oral histories break this silence by holding the lived memories of exploitation, survival, and resistance in preservation. With songs, stories and testimonies, the history of the rural communities has come from one generation to another, not as helpless victims but as active carriers of memory and identity. The details presented in these narratives provide telling insight into how debt overlapped with caste-based oppression and gender-structured labour in sustaining regimes of inequality. However, they also capture resilience and dignity, as well as various everyday kinds of resistance essential

⁺⁺⁺Green, Anna. *The Uses of Oral History*. Routledge, 2014, pp. 34–47.

^{§§§}Chatterjee, Partha. *The Politics of the Governed: Reflections on Popular Politics in Most of the World*. Columbia University Press, 2004, pp. 59–74.

to comprehending the rural past. As such, the incorporation of oral accounts in the agrarian historiography not only democratises history but also humanises it. It turns the gaze from the abstraction of data to the reality of lived experience, providing a voice to those who were eclipsed from the formal discourse of history. By doing so, it reduces the divide that is present between economic history and social memory and helps create a more comprehensive and true understanding of what rural India's complicated history was.