
UNIT 11 LOCAL HISTORY

Structure

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11.1 INTRODUCTION

In the first three Units of this block, you have learnt about the historiography in the Middle Ages in Asia and Europe. The present Unit straddles the boundary between the pre-modern and modern periods. In this Unit we have discussed three different types of historiographical practice under the head of ‘local history’. These are ‘local history’, ‘oral history’ and ‘microhistory’. All three concentrate on localised fields, even though their theoretical input and impact are not necessarily local. Moreover, two of these – ‘local history’ and ‘oral history’ – employ methodologies with roots both in the pre-modern and modern historiographies. By concentrating on the small scale and on the ordinary people, these histories contest the dominant historical discourses of both the pre-modern and modern periods.

11.2 LOCAL HISTORY

Local history is generally described as ‘a range of historical writings focusing on specific, geographically small areas, frequently produced by non-professional historians for a non-academic audience’. In the western countries, particularly in Britain, France and the United States, local histories were written in the 18th and early 19th centuries by the local elites. In the late 19th century, this process acquired momentum and several societies were formed to undertake local studies. Under the impact of industrialisation, urbanisation and migration, the local communities were destabilised and a crisis of identity emerged. This resulted in a desire among the local educated people to record their history at local and regional levels. From the 1860s onwards, several history groups emerged which were interested in promoting the studies of their regions. Their works covered many aspects of their past — ‘from the history of local churches and parishes to reports on the discovery of flint axe-heads in previously unknown sites of archaeological importance’. Studies on genealogy and family history were some other areas of interest in local history. In the United States, the late 19th century was a particularly good period for local history. Under the patronage of the local elites interested in consolidating or raising their social status, these histories recorded the establishment of particular regions, lists of early politicians and life-histories of local notables.

Local history started as amateur attempts to promote the locality and community as a matter of pride and even now such trends prevail and the term ‘local history’ continues to be linked with antiquarianism and amateur historiography. However, since the 1930s, there was a certain professionalisation in this sector. Several books were written in the next two decades which centred on localities but could be considered on par with any

national history in terms of professional achievement. A.H. Dodd's *Industrial Revolution in North Wales* (1933), W.H. Chaloner's *The Social and Economic Development of Crewe, 1780-1923* (1950), W.G. Hoskins's classic *The Making of the English Landscape* (1955) and J.D. Marshall's *Furness and the Industrial Revolution* (1958) were some of the books which revolutionised the writing of local history in Britain. Bjorn Hansen's *Osterlen* (1952) in Sweden, Guy Thuillier's works in France and Joseph Amato's works on the American midwest further strengthened this trend towards professionalisation in local history.

This trend was given an academic shape by the establishment of the first university department of local history in 1947 at Leicester in Britain. Academic local history there is still dominated by the perspective developed by what came to be known as the 'Leicester School'. H.P.R. Finberg, in a 'mission statement' in 1952, outlined the objectives of this 'School':

'The primary aim of the department, then, will be to foster, in our own minds and in the minds of any who look to us for guidance, a reasoned conception of local history, such as will set a standard of performance by which our own work and the work of others may be judged.'

Finberg and Hoskins, the two important historians associated with the School, criticised the traditional local history on a number of points. According to George and Yanina Sheeran:

'Ideologically, Finberg and Hoskins were opposed to the elitist conservative approach which underpinned much traditional local history – that is, they criticized the emphasis on the fortunes of armigerous families and the neglect of the common man. Metodologically, they objected to the antiquarian, fact-collecting tradition, the lack of order and method, and the overdependence on documentary sources. Philosophically, they criticized the lack of "a central unifying theme", which would serve to distinguish local history as a discipline....'

To overcome these inadequacies in the traditional local history, Finberg suggested that job of the local historian should be 'to re-enact in his own mind, and to portray for his readers, the Origin, Growth, Decline and Fall of a Local Community'. However, Finberg and Hoskins did not define what constituted a 'Local Community'. They took its existence as self-evident and its size as ranging 'from small parishes to counties'. Their successor at Leicester, C. Phythian-Adams, in his book *Re-thinking English Local History* (1987), tended to outline its contours as a shire county. The basic characteristics of the Leicester School may be summarised as 'dogged empirical research and fieldwork, a concentration on the pre-industrial period, the celebration of the common man and the concept of community'.

The local history in Asia and Africa is differently situated. Here the traditional form belongs mostly to oral tradition. Royal lineages and achievements in battles form the basic staple of this tradition. Parts of these histories were in written form also, but the oral form was the predominant mode of presentation. In India, *Bakhar* (in Maharashtra), *Raso* (in Rajasthan) and *Vamshavalis* (in south India) were some of the ways in which the traditional local histories were presented. They are genealogies and chronicles narrating the family history of the ruling dynasties and commemorating the achievements of warriors in the battles. In African countries also this tradition was sustained through myths and tales, through theatrical performances, and through more formal narratives. Axel Harneit-Sievers remarks in the introduction to the edited volume, *A Place in the World : New Local Historiographies from Africa and South Asia* (2002):

‘In many societies in Africa and South Asia certain individuals or groups are widely regarded as traditional specialists for the transmission of historical knowledge. There are more or less formalized ways of doing this : In one place, it may just be an elder in the village, generally recognized by the community as the most knowledgeable person on local history. In other places, specifically-trained people like the *griots* in Mali act as professional historians, or even hold official legitimation as keepers of history and royal genealogies, like the *Isekhurhe* and *Ihogbe* title-holders at the Oba of Benin’s court in Nigeria.’

With the colonial domination and the introduction of the western education system, new elites began to emerge in Asia and Africa. Their world-view was influenced by the western education. The establishment of the university system in the late 19th century in India and during the 1940s in Africa brought the historical knowledge within more formal academic purview. However, quite a lot of history-writing was still done by the people outside the university system. Local history was a particularly attractive field for the amateur and non-academic historians who felt interested in the past of their locality and community. Most of these historians were and are born and brought up in the localities and communities they write about and most of them are non-professional historians outside the formal academia. It is true that some of local histories are written within the universities. However, most of it is written by people outside the universities.

Harneit-Sievers uses the term ‘new local histories’ for these writings. In comparison with the traditional local histories which were mostly oral, the new local histories are written and published. Moreover, they are ‘attempts to (re-)construct local identities within larger contexts by means of reference to the past – and as forms which appropriate and adapt “modern” historiography to local needs and purposes’. They are aimed at providing knowledge about the locality and at increasing local self-awareness. They also seek to accord prestige to the locality before the wider world and make its name known.

The new local histories are not completely cut off from the tradition. They use local oral and other primary sources and interact with the local communities to maintain the continuity of tradition. It is true that they hold the power of the written word as against the oral tradition. However, they are not antagonistic to the old histories and the communities concerned consider them as objects of local pride. The new local historians, on their part, ‘frequently view their own undertakings not as a threat to “old” history, but rather as a mission to rescue it in view of vanishing historical knowledge caused by urbanization, the spread of formal education, or by war and displacement’.

History has served as a tool all over the world to ‘imagine’ and ‘construct’ a sense of community. The new local histories in Asia and Africa also endeavour to recreate a sense of identity for the localities and communities by referring to a common past. Within the boundaries of a nation-state, the local communities have become ‘modern localities’ which are, in Arjun Appadurai’s words, parts of ‘a complex phenomenological quality, constituted by a series of links between the sense of social immediacy, the technologies of interactivity, and the relativity of contexts’. The changing atmosphere, inter-regional migration and long-distance communication have created a situation where the members of the local communities are no longer confined to a particular locality either physically or emotionally. The new local histories try to take account of this changed environment and, as Harneit-Sievers points out :

‘New local histories may do so by trying to reduce the complexity of a community’s external interaction and embeddedness, presenting the image of a “traditional”, self-contained and homogeneous locality They may also stress historicity and change, and the importance of being part of larger contexts, as a matter of local pride and indicator of modernity. Many of them oscillate between these extremes and combine both perspectives. The tension between

“the local” and the wider world is present – in more or less explicit forms – in virtually every new local history.’

The new local histories in Africa and Asia ‘construct’ the locality in several ways : by referring to common ancestry, common culture, ancient kingship, kinship relationships and religious, cultural and political achievements. This way they try to portray the locality as ‘a moral community that shares, or should share, a common value-system’. This is done by an acceptable mixture of local traditions and modern academic historiography.

The writing of the new local histories in Asia and Africa is largely influenced by the western methods of research and presentation of material. These histories are chronological and there are large-scale references to the sources. Moreover, they are generally conceived within an evolutionist perspective. The conceptualisation is not in religious or mythological terms, but in modern, secular terms. However, in terms of content, they derive largely from the traditional oral and written sources and their use of sources are generally uncritical. Although they sometimes adopt a linear sense of time as per the western model, they often include in their narrative tales of origins and mythical and legendary heroes whose lives and actions cannot fit into any chronology and cannot be verified. Thus while the form of these histories may resemble the western concepts and methods, their content and narrative technique are based on local traditions.

The audience of these histories are both local and national or even wider. Since they are written and published and use the modern academic methods of presentation, their reach is beyond the locality. Still, they deal with the locality and its traditions. Moreover, these local histories are not simple academic texts. They also act as agents in establishing local pride and providing a sense of community and local identity.

The new local histories in Africa and Asia, therefore, operate at two levels – local and translocal. Their writers are generally products of the modern education system and adopt the modern historical concepts and methodology which may be alien to the local society. At the same time, their works derive from local traditions and directly participate in local discourse. Even as these histories challenge the traditional ways of representing the past, they thrive on and do not necessarily replace the local traditions.

11.3 ORAL HISTORY

The boundaries of oral history are extremely porous. It crosses the lines between the pre-modern and the modern periods, between the pre-literate and literate cultures, between the individual and the collective, and between the subject and the writer. Thus Ronald J. Grele, in his entry on ‘Oral History’ in Kelly Boyd (ed.) *Encyclopedia of Historians and Historical Writing*, (1999), writes with exasperation :

‘When oral historians, or those who use the term “oral history” in their writings, describe what it is they do, they mix genres with abandon. Sometimes what is being described is oral tradition; at others life history, life review, or life course. For some oral historians the practice is the collection of interviews for archival purposes, to provide a record for the future. For others it is the conduct of interviews for particular publications or public history projects, and for still others it is a pathway to “community empowerment”. In addition the term “oral historian” is applied with great looseness. Some argue that the oral historian is the person who conducts the interview, others that the oral historian is the person being interviewed – the narrator who tells the history. Neither is there any agreement on what to call people being interviewed : they can be interviewees, narrators, subjects, respondents. In recent years oral history has become a noun, the thing itself is the thing being collected, rather than the

activity for interviewing for historical purposes. Indeed there is even debate over whether oral historians simply collect oral histories, or create them.'

Such confusion apart, oral history in any form is unacceptable to the hardliners trained in the Rankean tradition which places enormous premium on the 'primary sources'. Anything else is the second best, and the oral testimony is, of course, the worst. To the literate culture of the modern West, anything which is not written did not exist. Hence, Hegel declared in 1831 that Africa 'is not historical part of the world'. As late as 1965, Hugh Trevor-Roper stated that Africa had no history. He said that 'Perhaps in the future there will be some African history to teach. At the present there is none, or very little : there is only the history of Europeans in Africa'. As for the value of the oral sources for writing history, A.J.P. Taylor firmly announced : 'In this matter, I am an almost total sceptic. Old men drooling about their youth? No!' Besides these extreme reactions, there are those who are doubtful towards this exercise because its form is imprecise, chronology is uncertain, the data are unsupported and it can be practiced only at a very small scale.

Such derision has expectedly invited angry retort from the oral historians. Paul Thompson, one of the leading figures in oral history, writes in his famous book, *The Voice of the Past : Oral History* (1978), that

'the opposition to oral evidence is as much founded on feeling as on principle. The older generation of historians who hold the Chairs and the purse-strings are instinctively apprehensive about the advent of a new method. It implies that they no longer command all the techniques of their profession. Hence the disparaging comments about young men tramping the streets with tape-recorders.'

Jan Vansina, another great oral historian who has worked in Africa, is equally assertive about the importance of oral sources in history :

'Oral traditions have a part to play in the reconstruction of the past. The importance of this part varies according to place and time. It is a part similar to that played by written sources because both are messages from the past to the present, and messages are key elements in historical reconstruction. But the relationship is not one of the diva and her understudy in the opera : when the star cannot sing the understudy appears : when writing fails, tradition comes on stage. This is wrong. Wherever oral traditions are extant they remain an indispensable source for reconstruction. They correct other perspectives just as much as other perspectives correct it.'

It is clear that the lines are drawn between the mainstream history which relies almost exclusively on written sources and the oral history which accords great significance to the oral sources for reconstruction of the past. It should, however, be recognised that oral history now is not simply concerned with enriching the archives by collecting interviews. Instead, it has matured into a branch of historiography which seeks to understand all forms of subjective experiences. Popular beliefs, memory, myths, ideology, perceptions and consciousness have all become legitimate grounds for exploration by oral historians. Oral history now hold great promise for being a new kind of historiographical effort which is involved in 'not just the creation of documents of the heretofore ignored populations but the ways in which those in the community become their own historians and present their history'.

Despite disparagement from the mainstream historians, the oral historians have broken new grounds and produced many works of great quality. Paul Thompson's *The Voice of the Past : Oral History* (1978) joins issue with positivist and empiricist orientation of much of historiography and seeks to correct it. It is, moreover, concerned about the presentation of history of those who have been neglected not only by the professional

historiography but also in the written sources. Jan Vansina, in his *Oral Tradition as History* (1985), explores in detail how oral traditions can serve as rich sources of historical evidence. His another masterpiece, *Paths in the Rain-forest* (1990), deals with the pre-colonial history of equatorial central Africa. *The Death of Luigi Trastulli, and Other Stories* (1991), Alessandro Portelli's insightful study of the Italian workers and of people of several Appalachian communities in the United States, is a great contribution to oral history. David K. Dunway and Willa K. Baum (eds.), *Oral History* (1984, 1996) contains essays on oral history in various countries. Luisa Passerini's *Fascism in Popular Memory* (1984), Devra Weber's *Dark Sweat, White Gold* (1994), Deborah Levenson-Estrada's *Trade Unionists Against Terror* (1994), Raphael Samuel's *Theatres of Memory* (1994) and Kim Lacy Rogers's *Righteous Lives* (1995) are some important studies using oral sources effectively. Apart from these writings, the *International Journal of Oral History*, the *History Workshop Journal*, and some others have endeavoured to create forum for oral history in various countries. There are several formal and informal oral history associations in Britain, America, Argentina, Brazil, Mexico, Russia, Spain, South Africa, Sweden, and in many other countries. There have been several international level seminars and conferences on oral history. From these developments it is clear that oral history has arrived on the international scene as an important historiographical practice.

However, there is a creative tension which oral history faces in its efforts to produce history which can equal the document-based history in richness. Even those advocating the use of oral sources concede that there are certain problems involved in it. Thus Eric Hobsbawm writes that 'most oral history today is personal memory, which is a remarkably slippery medium for preserving facts. The point is that memory is not so much a recording as a selective mechanism, and the selection is, within limits, constantly changing'. He argues that the importance of such history is not just to record facts but to understand the mentalities of people, to know 'what ordinary people remember of big events as distinct from what their betters think they should remember, or what historians can establish as having happened; and insofar as they turn memory into myth, how such myths are formed'. Even though this suggestion is important as it lifts oral history above the routine work of 'checking the reliability of the tapes of old ladies and gentlemen's reminiscences', it dampens the enthusiasm of oral historians to rival their traditional counterparts. It is true that oral history has now acquired an independent status insofar as it is no longer a recording activity but a historiographical practice in its own right. It succeeds in those areas and situations which the conventional history has either ignored or where it has failed. Nevertheless, it is conceded even by its practitioners that oral sources alone may not be sufficient for a knowledge of the past. In conclusion, we may quote in detail from Jan Vansina, one of the most distinguished oral historians :

'Where there is no writing, or almost none, oral traditions must bear the brunt of historical reconstruction. They will not do this as if they were written sources. Writing is a technological miracle. It makes utterances permanent while not losing any of their faithfulness, even though the situation of immediate intimate communication is lost. Hence, where writing is widely used, one expects very detailed and very diverse sources of information, which also allow for a very detailed reconstruction of the past. Historians who work with the written sources of the last few centuries in any of the major areas of literacy should not expect that reconstructions using oral materials will yield as full, detailed, and precise a reconstruction, barring only the very recent past. The limitations of oral tradition must be fully appreciated so that it will not come as a disappointment that long periods of research yield a construction that is still not very detailed. What one does reconstruct from oral sources may well be of a lower order of reliability, when there are no independent sources to cross-check, and when structuring or chronological problems complicate the issues.'

11.4 MICROHISTORY

Microhistory has a curious relationship with local history and oral history. It resembles local history as its subject matter is often confined to a locality. Moreover, its sources are local in origins and nature. The oral sources, folk tales and legends and local records, which are staple of local history, are also used extensively by the microhistorians. But the resemblance ends here. M.M. Postan once distinguished between ‘microscopic’ and microcosmic’ studies. ‘Microscopic’ studies are those which remain confined to issues of local interests and significance, whereas ‘microcosmic’ studies are based on an intensive research of small area located within a larger context. In this perspective, while a large part of local history belongs to the ‘microscopic’ studies, the microhistory almost entirely belongs of the ‘microcosmic’ variety.

Carlo Ginzburg, one of the best-known historians identified with microhistory, traces the first use of this term to an American scholar, George R. Stewart. In his book, *Pickett's Charge : A Microhistory of the Final Charge at Gettysburg, July 3, 1863*, published in 1959, Stewart uses the term. The book is centred on an event which lasted for only about twenty minutes. In 1968, Luis Gonzalez used the term ‘microhistory’ in the subtitle of his book which deals with the changes experienced over four centuries by a tiny, ‘forgotten’ village in Mexico. In fact, as Gonzalez himself pointed out, the term was also used in 1960 by Fernand Braudel. But, for Braudel, it had a negative connotation and was synonymous with the ‘history of events’. The word appears in a novel by Raymond Queneau in 1965. This novel was translated into Italian by Italo Calvino in 1967. From this and from its use in Primo Levi's *The Periodic Table* (1975) that this word came to be used extensively for certain kind of historical practice. Giovanni Levi was the first Italian historian to extensively use this term.

Thus microhistory, as a conceivable historical practice, emerged during the 1970s and the 1980s in Italy. Although it had its variants in Germany in *Alltagsgeschichte* or the ‘history of everyday life’, and in France and the United States in the new cultural history, it is the Italian microhistorians who set most of the agenda for writing this version of history. Carlo Ginzburg, Giovanni Levi, Carlo Poni, Edoardo Grendi and Gianna Pomata are some of the Italian historians who made the word famous through their writings. Ginzburg's *The Cheese and the Worms : The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller* (1976), *The Enigma of Piero : Piero della Francesca* (1981), and *Ecstasies : Deciphering the Witches' Sabbath* (1990), and Giovanni Levi's *Inheriting Power : The Story of an Exorcist* (1985) are some of the representative texts of this historiographical trend. The Italian journal *Quaderni Storici*, right since its foundation in 1966, has served as the channel for this trend in historiography. However, microhistory is part of a wider trend which includes intensive local and individual studies by Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie in France, Hans Medick in Germany, and Robert Darnton and Natalie Zemon Davis in the US.

Microhistory is a late modern, sometimes, postmodern, response to the problems of modern historiography. The microhistorians are critical of not only the Rankean paradigm (about which you have read in the **Unit 3** and will read more in **Unit 12**), but also the macrohistorical paradigms developed by Marxism, the Annales School (see **Unit 14**) and even the old social history. The microhistorians do not have an optimistic view about the various benefits brought about by the modern technology. Thus the objection to the macrohistorical discourse is not only methodological, but also ethical and political. The macrohistorical conception, they argue, praise the achievements of modernisation, modern science and technology while ignoring the human cost; they also neglect the experiences of the ‘little people’ who has to bear the brunt of ‘progress’. The microhistorians define their historiographical practice against approach of the analytical

social science, metahistory of Marxism and the non-human grand history of the *Annales* School, particularly Braudel.

The microhistorians trace the origins of this trend to the crisis of macrohistory in the 1970s. There was an increasing disenchantment with grand narratives and the social scientific studies based on quantitative data not because these approaches were inherently wrong but because they did not capture the reality at the micro level. According to the microhistorians, the attempt should be 'to open history to peoples who would be left out by other methods' and 'to elucidate historical causation on the level of small groups where most of life takes place'. Giovanni Levi, one of the founders of this trend, points out that it is now generally accepted that 'the 1970s and 1980s were almost universally years of crisis for the prevailing optimistic belief that the world would be rapidly and radically transformed along revolutionary lines'. Moreover, 'many of the hopes and mythologies which had previously guided a major part of the cultural debate, including the realm of historiography, were proving to be not so much invalid as inadequate in the face of the unpredictable consequences of political events and social realities – events and realities which were very far from conforming to the optimistic models proposed by the great Marxist or functionalist systems'. This crisis also entailed conceptual and methodological failure to comprehend the reality at the ground day-to-day level. Levi states that the 'conceptual apparatus with which social scientists of all persuasions interpreted current or past change was weighed down by a burden of inherited positivism. Forecasts of social behaviour were proving to be demonstrably erroneous and this failure of existing systems and paradigms required not so much the construction of a new general social theory as a complete revision of existing tools of research'. Microhistory was one response to this comprehensive crisis. It was a groundbreaking and radical response and it took the historiography away from its focus on the 'big structures, large processes and huge comparisons'. Instead, it concentrated on the small units in society. It was severely critical of the large quantitative studies and macro-level discourses because it distorted the reality at small level. It focused on the small units and on the lives of the individuals living within those units. It was felt that this would lead to better understanding of reality at small level. As Giovanni Levi put it: 'The unifying principle of all microhistorical research is the belief that microscopic observation will reveal factors previously unobserved.' However, according to Levi, it was not at the theoretical level that its significance should be seen. Microhistory is 'essentially a historiographical practice whereas its theoretical references are varied and, in a sense, eclectic'. It was a historiographical experiment which has 'no body of established orthodoxy to draw on'.

There were various other reactions to this crisis. One of them was, in the words of Levi, the resort to 'a desperate relativism, neo-idealism or even the return to a philosophy riddled with irrationality'. However, Levi believed that the 'historical research is not a purely rhetorical and aesthetic activity'. He firmly takes the side of historians and social scientists who believe that there is a reality outside the texts and it is possible to comprehend it. Thus the microhistorian is 'not simply concerned with the interpretation of meanings but rather with defining the ambiguities of the symbolic world, the plurality of possible interpretations of it and the struggle which takes place over symbolic as much as over material resources'. Thus, for Levi, microhistory is poised delicately between the approach of the analytical social sciences and the postmodernist relativism

'Microhistory thus had a very specific location within the so-called new history. It was not simply a question of correcting those aspects of academic historiography which no longer appeared to function. It was more important to refute relativism, irrationalism and the reduction of the historian's work to a purely rhetorical activity which interprets texts and not events themselves.'

Carlo Ginzburg supports Levi 'against the relativist positions, including the one warmly espoused by Ankersmit, that reduce historiography to a textual dimension, depriving it of any cognitive value'.

The adherents of microhistory in Italy had started as Marxists and, in keeping with their Marxist past, they retain three elements of the Marxist theory of history. They believe :

- i) that social and economic inequality exists in all societies;
- ii) that culture is not completely autonomous, but is associated with economic forces; and
- iii) that history is nearer to social sciences than to poetry and is, therefore, based on facts and requires rigorous analysis. Moreover, the subject matter the historians deal with is real.

Thus microhistory, although recognising that 'all phases through which research unfolds are *constructed* and not *given*', is categorised, according to Ginzburg, by 'an explicit rejection of the skeptical implications (postmodernist, if you will) so largely present in European and American historiography of the 1980s and early 1990s'. It is defined by its 'insistence on context, exactly the opposite of the isolated contemplation of the fragmentary advocated by Ankersmit'. It focuses on what Edoardo Grendi, one of its ideologues, called the 'exceptional normal'. Methodologically, as Levi points out, it is characterised 'as a practice based on the reduction of the scale of observation, on a microscopic analysis and an intensive study of the documentary material'. He further emphasises that 'For microhistory the reduction of scale is an analytical procedure, which may be applied anywhere independently of the dimensions of the object analysed'. The microhistorians believe that it is only at the small level that the real nature of various values and beliefs held by people may be revealed. Roger Chartier, commenting on Ginzburg's famous book, *The Cheese and the Worms*, captures this aspect of microhistory clearly :

'It is this reduced scale, and probably on this scale alone, that we can understand, without deterministic reduction, the relationships between systems of beliefs, of values and representations on the one hand, and social affiliations on the other.'

The study of the small scale is also undertaken by the cultural anthropologists, led by Clifford Geertz, whose method of thick description finds resonance in some of the works of these historians. However, there are many points of differences between the two. Firstly, the microhistorians accord more importance to theory than what Geertz and his followers do. Secondly, they are not willing to go far in the direction of relativism. And, lastly, they criticise a homogeneous conception of culture in the works of Geertz. As Levi says :

'It seems to me that one of the main differences of perspective between microhistory and interpretive anthropology is that the latter sees a homogeneous meaning in public signs and symbols whereas microhistory seeks to define and measure them with reference to the multiplicity of social representations they produce.'

Levi summarises the basic features of microhistory : 'the reduction of scale, the debate about rationality, the small clue as scientific paradigm, the role of the particular (not, however, in opposition to the social), the attention to reception and narrative, a specific definition of context and the rejection of relativism'.

But microhistorians should not be viewed as a monolithic bloc even in Italy. There are wide differences between them. On the one hand, there is Levi who is theoretically much closer to the analytical history and believes that history is a social science, and not a work of art. On the other hand, Gianna Pomata believes that there is ‘a dazzling prospect of a history that would be thoroughly up to the most rigorous standards of the craft while also matching, in terms of vitality and intensity of vision, the work of art’. Carlo Ginzburg stands somewhere in the middle. On the whole, it may be said, as Georg G. Iggers points out, that microhistory ‘has never been able to escape the framework of larger structures and transformations in which history takes place’. However, it can be said in defence of the microhistorians that it is a conscious choice and not some theoretical slip. Most of them have chosen to criticise the methodology of macrohistory; but, at the same time, they have thoroughly rejected the relativism associated with the linguistic turn, postmodernism, and cultural relativism.

11.5 SUMMARY

In this Unit we have dealt with three branches of historiography which focus on the local areas and communities, on the small scale and on the ordinary people and groups generally ignored by the mainstream historiography. In this sense, these streams of historiography serve as corrective to national, large-scale and macro-level histories. They attempt to capture the lives of little people and neglected communities. They also energise and re-orient the practice of history both in terms of interests and sources. Two of these streams – local history and oral history – cross the lines between the pre-modern and the modern and between the pre-literate and literate societies. Moreover, they are cherished and nurtured by the communities concerned, and they, in turn, help the communities to develop an identity and reconstitute themselves. The third stream discussed here – microhistory – differs from these two in many significant respects. Although it focuses on the locality and the ordinary people, it has nothing traditional about it. It is a late modern reaction to the disenchantment from the macro-level histories. Starting in the 1970s and 1980s, microhistory focussed on the small units, individuals and groups. The microhistorians felt that it was only at this micro level that it was possible to know the reality.

11.6 EXERCISES

- 1) What is local history? Discuss the differences between the old style of local history and the new one.
- 2) Do you think that oral history can come under the category of proper history? Give your answer with example.
- 3) What are the points of similarities and differences between microhistory on the one hand, and local and oral histories on the other?

11.7 SUGGESTED READINGS

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