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Understanding Alltagsgeschichte: the History of Everyday Life

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Abstract:

This essay aims to present a brief idea about alltagsgeschichte meaning the 'History of everyday life' with case studies from Europe and South Asia and contextualizing with gender relations. The essay main has three parts-the theoretical aspect comprised of basic features, methodology, and practitioners; the case studies of Germany and colonial India, and contextualization with gender studies. It concludes with some brief criticism and future scope of alltagsgeschichte in South Asia.

Keywords: *alltagsgeschichte, history of everyday life, Workers of Germany, Dalit Women in India,*

Introduction:

The term Alltagsgeschichte which contradicted traditional historiography simply means 'the history of everyday life'. 'Everyday life' has been largely excluded by traditional historiography. Alltagsgeschichte endeavored for a radical change in the study of social sciences and suggested a paradigm shift. A group of dissatisfied historians namely Hans-Ulrich, Jurgen Kocka, Bielefeld who were mostly belonged to the younger generation constructed this German concept of 'history of everyday life' back in the 1960s and 1970s. They frequently labeled 'everyday, ordinary people' and focused on their sufferings and actions. The history of everyday life is not only the story and pageantry of the great, but the central focus of this study is about those who remained largely anonymous in history. Alltagsgeschichte urges historians to examine popular experiences, working-class cultures, social structure, political processes, etc. They took the 'value and attitude', 'needs and desires', 'loves and hates', 'eating habits and hunger', 'memories', 'anxieties' under the purview of their

study. It has shown that show 'ordinary people' refused their assigned role of a passive 'object'. Alltagsgeschichte also incorporated the victims and multiple contours into its account. The brutal torture and murder of countless women and children by the wave of witch-hunting hysteria across the early-modern era can be cited as an example.

Theoretical Aspect:

There are two principal focuses of Alltagsgeschichte. The first one emphasizes on those topics which have a 'repetitiveness' nature. According to Peter Borscheid as routine action dissolves uncertainty, via repetition, everyday action, and thinking become pragmatic. The conceptual basis of this argument was taken from Arnold Gehlen. This concept reflects "the continuity of that older conceptualization of social history viewed as 'structural history,' where stress was placed on the "structure" of social forms and configurations". The second view reflects a completely different view. In this view "reconstructions in the history of everyday life involve more than situations recurrent in the daily struggle for survival (and momentary experiencing workaday events). Rather, such reconstructions reveal in particular the way in which participants were-or could become-simultaneously both objects of history and its subjects".

Alltagsgeschichte concentrates on small units. Critiques complain that the historiography of everyday life does not focus on "big issues", such as questions about the formation of states and classes. Thus, it is not capable of arriving at any "knowledge of how things interconnect". No doubt, the history of everyday life interprets and analyses things in a decentralized systematic way. The individual phenomenon's classification and systemization no longer occupied the centre spot. Thus, this view allows "for reckoning the synchronisms of different if not contradictory moments which may coexist without necessarily being mediated or directly linked to each other".

Methodology:

Alltagsgeschichte deals with those who have been backstage for centuries and usually while investigating this they used to get a very less amount of source material. While probing the history of the everyday life of a particular society, direct participants are interviewed. In some cases own sources of materials are created by historians. Re-evaluation of testimonies was an important approach while doing this. Existing testimonies were reinterpreted from different perspectives. Various diverse and intrusive contents are used these include police reports, personal letters diaries, travel notes, and visual testimonies of direct participants. Thus, the process of reconstruction of the history of everyday life comes under the purview of micro history. Investigation of individual biography and individual local context are the main components of the spectrum. Alltagsgeschichte is used to examine long-term changes and continuities. In any event, it should be kept in mind that, "it is important to bear in mind that the remains of dwellings, transportation links, implements, and instruments, or consciously preserved or later discovered written and pictorial texts (the latter often

ignored) such as tax rosters or industrial photos do not automatically disclose the traces of historical praxis.”

Practitioner:

Now it is important to know who is the practitioner of Alltagsgeschichte. This social discipline was encouraged and enhanced not only by historians but also by the filmmakers who made a significant contribution. Eberhard Fechner's work, film *Das Leben der Klara Heydebreck* (The Life of Klara Heydebreck, 1979) is an example of the reel reflection of Alltagsgeschichte. Though it did not have any 'mass impact' but it gathered a considerable amount of acclamation in the media. Television film *Rote Erde* (Red Earth) by Peter Stripp in 1983 was also praised a lot. *Rote Erde* employed “the dramatic elements of natural events, mountain catastrophes, and conflict on the job and in marriage, Reitz experimented with another narrative stance”. Its background was based on substantial research of social history and Alltagsgeschichte.

Alltagsgeschichte was exercised mostly in the regional framework. Individuals as well as trade unions and political education projects became highly active. Trying to stimulate public opinion and public action they demanded: "for renaming streets and schools, for memorial plaques, and for the construction or expansion of memorial sites are intended to make it more difficult to repress and forget, to sweep the past under the public carpet”.

Case Study: Everyday Reality and Workers' Lives in the German Democratic Republic:

An example is necessary to understand the History of Everyday Life. Here we can take the example cited by Harlad Dehne in his article named “Have we come any closer to all tag? Everyday Reality and Workers' Lives as an Object of Historiographical Research in the German Democratic Republic”. Here he tried to describe the processes of transformation in the eating habits of wage laborers. As a cultural-symbolic form, the labour community in Germany used to have shared family meals at noon before Industrialization, Proletarianization, and Urbanization. This practice of shared family meals started to dissolve when mass production factories came into existence. There are some factors that led to the alteration of this practice of a common meal. Those are:

- The separation between workplace and residence.
- The tendency of taking a shorter break at noon, increasing production and efficiency
- Increased number of working women in society.

After industrialization, the number of working women increased rapidly. This meant a working-class wife had to perform these external duties added to her old domestic work. She was responsible for preparing food for her family along with working at her factory. Female factory workers used to get an extra noon break for this purpose. This has impacted the husband on the other side. He was obliged to get accustomed to a cold meal if he returned home at noon-break, or he must bring a warm meal from home when joining the work in the morning. Though there were enough

facilities for mass dining at the factories for the workers, they rejected the provided cafeterias and 'mess hall'.

Since women were working outside the home, the children had a certain impact on their lives. They were no longer getting warm meals like before. An alarming amount of malnutrition cases among the elementary school pupils were registered in large urban areas since many of the school children used to have minimal food at breakfast or none at all and they had to wait till afternoon to get their lunch. Some charitable associations started providing warm meals to needy school children. But this was criticized vehemently. According to the author the argument ran as follows, "in a proper household, the family should gather together at a (domestic) dinner table; the woman of the house has a responsibility to prepare a meal for her husband and children-consequently, she should stay at home and not go out to work". Though social democrats across Germany vouched for these school lunch programs and demanded subsidies for such programs from the municipal corporations but the conservative circle strongly opposed it and did not make it happen. Somehow, they permitted some private charitable organizations to serve breakfast to the needy children before the starting of the school and the 10 o'clock break.

Gradually the meal-sharing community reluctantly accepted the dissolution of the traditional practices and got accustomed to the new system. This was more than simply family rituals and values. Being home and having lunch with family not only provided them with familial security but also helped them to escape from the influence of the factory temporarily. Eventually, the practice of shared family lunch was removed with the entry of women into social production. New public forms of consuming noon meals in the place of shared family lunch came into being gradual.

Contextualising Alltagsgeschichte with Gender Relations:

Gender studies can be taken into account to perceive *Alltag* in a better way. For this purpose, Dorothee Wierling wrote a brilliant article on "The History of Everyday Life and Gender Relations". In this article, she tried to examine the changes and importance of gender relations within the coursework of *alltagsgeschichte*. She took a social group that was composed of domestic servant girls as her main focus of study and traced their origin and investigated their working and living conditions. Apart from this their normative values, daily expenses, dreams, success, compromises, failures, and survival strategies are also taken into account. By the middle of 1970s, a group of young women historians in the US rejected the idea of reading about few famous women and their deeds and also criticized the traditional view of treating women as a victim of history. They emphasized women's role in and outside the home and women's movements. Being a part of micro history *alltagsgeschichte* can be a fruitful way of executing this. The author comments "It becomes the history of gender precisely at the locus where men and women interact-at work, in the family, and on the street."

The coalition between alltagsgeschichte and gender studies is essential for dissolving the fixed notion existing in society. Labour is one of such constructs. There prevails a diverse variety of labor relations between men and women. While apart from paid work, men engage themselves in works like repair, manual work in the garden and elsewhere, women were assigned the myriad task of house-keeping and the work done by women was not always examined in monetary values because most of the time it did not have any link with the labour market.

Family can be classified as an arena of shared uncertainty. The meaning of family is quite different for men and women. For women family in most cases is the sole place of work. Even if they work outside, they are spatially, emotionally, and economically more bonded towards her family. When family affairs get mixed with the public sphere it becomes a community matter. Women used to participate in the traditional public sphere through a wide gamut ranging from various forms of gossip to other neighbourliness.

John Scott seeks to reinvestigate gender studies on the level of institutions, norms, symbols, and subjectivity. For this purpose, alltagsgeschichte is necessary as a tool. The History of everyday life earlier failed to recognize the absence of women experience and gender relations in the course of its studies. For this reason, despite gender studies and alltagsgeschichte is not close kin, but they can be together into a careful alliance.

Case Study of South Asia: How Christianity Changed the Clothing and Everyday Life Style of Lower Caste Dalit Women in India:

The Depressed class converts constituted a major part of the Christian community in India. The Christian missionaries have taken various propaganda to convert the so-called untouchable caste people. These include preaching religious texts in markets and other festivals, interactive sessions with villagers, distribution of Bible among those people in vernacular language, initiating open services in public places. Many of the Lower caste people like sweepers, Lai Begis, Chandals, Doms, Chamars from the wide areas of Meerut, Etah, Bijnor, Moradabad, Bareilly, etc. They took Christianity to obtain, education, employment opportunities, integration into the higher social and political representations.

The Christian missionaries focused especially on Dalit women while carrying out the conversation program. The conversion of these lower caste women brought significant changes in their lives. For example, these women took teaching, small-scale nursing work, Bible teaching instead of unpaid labour at home.

Conversion reflected a significant change in their clothing. Earlier they used to face humiliating restrictions on dresses which marked their bodies as substandard and sexually promiscuous. Her intimate being was deemed public by her dressing and her sexuality was there to be seen and consumed. Christianity freed them from this bondage. For example, when lower caste

women were prohibited to wear bodice, jewellery, nose rings, it was converted into Christianity which gave them the license to wear that. In the late 18th and early 19th centuries, the Christian missionaries of south India empowered the Dalit women to cover their breasts. H Munro who was the diwan of Rani Laxmibai passed an ordinance in 1812 and permitted the converted lower caste people to cover their breasts. The Dalits of colonial India found these Western attires as a symbolic expression of upward movement and incorporation into the western culture. Though we can find beside giving the converted Dalit women a considerable amount of dignity this conversion created a distinction between the converted and unconverted lower caste women.

Two cartoons can be taken as examples. Both published in Chand (Moon, 1922-1940) and Arya Samaj. Figure 1 depicted a converted Dalit woman walking royally, wearing a hat, skirt, high heel shoes, and carrying an umbrella. The head bent unconverted women walking barefoot, carrying the child of the converted women behind her. Figure 2 captures a Christian Dalit woman sitting comfortably on a chair while her unconverted servant was taking care of her master's dog. Though these cartoons didn't give us the real picture it is sufficient to express the perception of the upper caste Hindu people of that time on converted Dalit women. Most of the time Dalit Christian women wore traditional sari and blouses in missionary schools.

Conversion to Christianity challenged the age-old discriminations and monopolies of the upper caste people. The converted Dalit community started wearing shoes, breast clothes, and umbrellas after joining Christianity. The western clothing was a symbolic expression of social upliftment and dignity for the lower caste.

Conclusion:

It is said that *alltagsgeschichte* romanticizes the past. Also, sometimes it fails to connect with the larger picture as it excludes the big issues of history. *Alltagsgeschichte* is used and practiced mostly in a regional framework. It has its benefits. Being a part of micro history, it can depict the facts and incidents from a microscopic angle and in most of the time provides a different perspective. As it uses first-hand sources and oral testimonies *alltagsgeschichte* is more interesting and produces a personal angle. Though there was not so much work done in south Asia involving this history of everyday life. But if exercised carefully with gender studies *alltagsgeschichte* can be a useful weapon for the reconstruction of the South Asian past.

(Word Count: 2695)

Illustrations:

Figure 1 Converted and unconverted Dalit Women, Vyanga chitravali (1930)

Source: Charu Gupta. "Intimate Desires: Dalit Women and Religious Conversions in Colonial India." *The Journal of Asian Studies* 73, no. 3 (2014): 671.

Figure 2: Converted Dalit mistress and unconverted Dalit servant; Vyanga chitravali (1930).

Source: Charu Gupta. "Intimate Desires: Dalit Women and Religious Conversions in Colonial India." *The Journal of Asian Studies* 73, no. 3 (2014): 671.

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