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WHOSE PAST COUNTS? SUBALTERN KNOWLEDGE AND THE POLITICS OF WRITING HISTORY

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Abstract:

This article critically examines the epistemic assumptions that govern modern historiography by interrogating how historical authority is constructed and whose pasts are recognised as legitimate historical knowledge. It argues that dominant traditions of history writing have systematically privileged archival, state-centred, and elite sources, thereby marginalising subaltern forms of knowledge embedded in oral traditions, embodied practices, labour processes, and community memory. Rather than approaching subaltern knowledge as a normative or ethical counterpoint to elite narratives, the article conceptualises it as an epistemic category that unsettles the hierarchy of historical evidence itself. Through a critical engagement with historiographical debates in subaltern studies, postcolonial theory, and archival criticism, the study demonstrates how historical silences are produced not by the absence of past experiences, but by regimes of documentation and interpretive authority. The article advances a methodological framework that advocates epistemic pluralism while retaining the principles of verification, triangulation, reflexivity, and ethical responsibility essential to historical inquiry. It contends that integrating subaltern knowledge into historiography requires neither the rejection of archives nor the romanticisation of marginal voices, but a reconfiguration of evidentiary evaluation and historical reasoning. The final section addresses the implications of this reorientation for history education, arguing that pedagogical engagement with multiple forms of historical evidence can cultivate critical historical thinking, deepen students' understanding of knowledge construction, and challenge the reproduction of singular and exclusionary narratives of the past. By foregrounding the politics of historical knowledge production, the article contributes to broader debates on historiography and history education concerning whose past counts, and on what epistemic grounds.

Introduction

Modern historiography has long been shaped by epistemic conventions that privilege written archives, institutional documentation, and elite authorship as the primary foundations of historical knowledge (Bloch, 1953; Carr, 1961). While such conventions have enabled systematic reconstruction of the past, they have also produced structured silences by marginalising forms of knowledge that fall outside archival rationality. A substantial body of historiographical scholarship has demonstrated that archives are not neutral repositories of historical facts but are historically produced institutions shaped by power, governance, and bureaucratic priorities (Foucault, 1972; Derrida & Prenowitz, 1995; Stoler, 2009). As a result, state-centred and elite perspectives are disproportionately preserved, while the lived experiences, political practices, and cultural worlds of subordinated groups often remain underrepresented or distorted within official records.

It was within this epistemic context that subaltern studies emerged as a major historiographical intervention. Challenging both colonial and nationalist historiographies, scholars

associated with this tradition argued that elite narratives systematically excluded the autonomous political consciousness and historical agency of peasants, workers, and other subordinated groups (Guha, 1982; Chatterjee, 1986). By foregrounding popular mobilisation, everyday resistance, and non-elite political action, subaltern studies exposed the limits of archive-centred history and questioned the assumption that historical meaning could be fully recovered through official documentation alone (Guha, 1983). Subsequent scholarship extended this critique by interrogating the relationship between power, knowledge, and representation in historical writing (Spivak, 1988). However, critical reassessments have noted that while subaltern studies succeeded in destabilising dominant historiographical paradigms, it often remained analytically dependent on the archive through textual inversion, symptomatic reading, or theoretical abstraction, rather than developing a sustained methodology for treating subaltern knowledge as historical evidence in its own right (Lal, 2001; Sarkar, 1997).

Parallel debates in postcolonial historiography, oral history, and historical anthropology have further complicated the epistemological foundations of historical practice (Pratheesh, 2025; Pratheesh & Reema, 2024). Oral historians have demonstrated that memory, narrative, and testimony constitute significant modes of historical knowledge, particularly in contexts where written documentation is sparse or politically structured (Thompson, 2000; Portelli, 1991; Pratheesh, 2024a). Historical anthropologists and social historians have similarly shown that historical understanding is embedded in practices, rituals, labour processes, and embodied forms of knowledge that do not easily translate into archival form (Scott, 1998; Chakrabarty, 2000). At the same time, scholars have cautioned against uncritical celebration of oral or subaltern sources, emphasising the need for contextualisation, triangulation, and reflexivity to avoid romanticism or epistemic relativism (Portelli, 1997; Trouillot, 1995). Despite this rich body of scholarship, an unresolved tension persists between the critique of archival authority and the absence of a clearly articulated framework for integrating subaltern knowledge into historical analysis without undermining standards of historical verification (Pratheesh, 2025).

This unresolved tension constitutes a significant historiographical gap. While historians increasingly recognise that archival silences are products of power rather than mere absences of evidence, there remains limited conceptual clarity regarding how subaltern knowledge can be systematically evaluated, corroborated, and interpreted within historical inquiry (Trouillot, 1995; Stoler, 2009). The problem addressed in this article concerns the politics of historical knowledge production itself: how prevailing historiographical norms determine whose past becomes historically legible and whose remains marginal, and how these norms shape the boundaries of historical authority (Pratheesh, 2024). Rather than reproducing binary oppositions between archive and voice or elite and subaltern, this study conceptualises subaltern knowledge as an epistemic category that compels a re-examination of evidentiary hierarchies and interpretive practices.

The primary objective of this article is to develop a theoretically informed and methodologically rigorous framework for engaging subaltern knowledge in historical writing while maintaining commitments to critical verification and analytical accountability. It further seeks to extend this discussion into the domain of history education by demonstrating that historiographical choices have direct pedagogical consequences. Research in history education has shown that students' historical

understanding is shaped by how evidence, narrative construction, and authority are presented in curricula and classrooms (Seixas & Morton, 2013; Wineburg, 2001). Integrating multiple forms of historical knowledge can therefore foster critical historical thinking and challenge the reproduction of singular, exclusionary narratives of the past (Barton & Levstik, 2004). Methodologically, this article adopts a critical historiographical approach based on conceptual analysis and comparative reading of key theoretical debates rather than new empirical data. By situating the question of "whose past counts" at the intersection of historiography and history education, the study contributes to ongoing scholarly discussions on the epistemic foundations of historical knowledge and the politics of its transmission.

Methodology

This study adopts a critical historiographical methodology grounded in conceptual analysis and comparative reading of key debates in modern historical theory, subaltern studies, archival criticism, and history education research. Rather than generating new empirical data, the article proceeds from the assumption that historiographical problems concerning evidence, authority, and knowledge production are best examined through sustained theoretical interrogation of existing scholarly traditions. Such an approach is particularly appropriate for addressing questions of epistemology, where the object of analysis is not historical events themselves but the frameworks through which those events are rendered intelligible as history. The method employed here involves a close reading of canonical and critical texts to identify the implicit criteria by which different forms of knowledge are accepted, marginalised, or excluded within historical practice. By placing these texts in dialogue, the study traces how archival authority is constructed, how subaltern knowledge is theorised, and how tensions between rigor and inclusivity are negotiated across historiographical traditions.

The analytical strategy is comparative rather than chronological. Key historiographical positions—archive-centred empiricism, subaltern critique, postcolonial theory, and oral history—are examined in relation to their underlying epistemic assumptions rather than treated as discrete schools. This allows the study to identify both points of convergence and unresolved contradictions, particularly with regard to the status of non-archival knowledge. Attention is paid to how historians justify evidentiary choices, how methodological legitimacy is claimed, and how risks such as romanticisation, relativism, or epistemic exclusion are addressed or overlooked. In this sense, the method is reflexive: it treats historiography itself as a historical practice shaped by intellectual, institutional, and political conditions. The analysis is informed by principles of historical verification, including contextualisation, triangulation, and interpretive accountability, which serve as evaluative criteria for assessing competing approaches to subaltern knowledge.

The discussion generated through this methodological approach reveals that the marginalisation of subaltern pasts is less a consequence of evidentiary scarcity than of epistemic hierarchy. Archival sources are routinely treated as self-evidently reliable, while oral narratives, embodied practices, and community memory are subjected to higher thresholds of scepticism or dismissed as anecdotal. This asymmetry reflects not an objective assessment of evidentiary quality but historically sedimented assumptions about what constitutes legitimate knowledge. Subaltern studies challenged this hierarchy by exposing the political conditions under which archives were

produced, yet its reliance on textual reinterpretation often left intact the primacy of written sources. Oral history and anthropological approaches advanced the recognition of alternative forms of knowledge, but their insights were not always fully integrated into mainstream historiographical practice, in part due to anxieties about methodological control and scholarly authority.

By conceptualising subaltern knowledge as an epistemic category rather than a moral claim, this study proposes a reconfiguration of historical reasoning that neither abandons archival research nor elevates marginal voices beyond critical scrutiny. Epistemic pluralism, as articulated here, entails the recognition that different forms of historical knowledge operate according to distinct logics of production and transmission, and therefore require differentiated but rigorous modes of evaluation. Oral testimony, for example, demands attention to narrative structure, memory, and social context, while material and practice-based knowledge require interpretive sensitivity to embodiment and use. Crucially, pluralism does not imply equivalence; rather, it foregrounds the historian's responsibility to justify evidentiary choices explicitly and reflexively.

The implications of this framework extend directly into the domain of history education. If historical knowledge is understood as constructed through contested evidentiary practices, then pedagogical approaches that privilege singular narratives or unquestioned archival authority risk reproducing epistemic exclusion. Conversely, integrating multiple forms of historical evidence into teaching can cultivate students' capacity for critical historical thinking by exposing them to the processes through which historical claims are made, challenged, and revised. This does not require the abandonment of disciplinary standards, but a pedagogical shift toward transparency in historical reasoning. By linking historiographical epistemology with educational practice, the discussion underscores that decisions about whose past counts are inseparable from how history is taught, learned, and institutionalised.

Taken together, the methodological approach and analytical discussion advanced in this article clarify the epistemic conditions under which subaltern pasts can be meaningfully incorporated into historical scholarship and history education. The contribution lies not in proposing a new source hierarchy, but in articulating a framework that makes evidentiary judgment itself an object of historical and pedagogical reflection.

Results & Discussions

This section presents the analytical results of the study by explicating the epistemic patterns, tensions, and implications that emerge from a critical engagement with historiographical theory and existing historical practice. In accordance with the conceptual orientation of the research, the results are not derived from statistical measurement or primary field data, but from systematic analysis of historiographical debates, methodological conventions, and pedagogical practices that shape the production and transmission of historical knowledge. The discussion therefore treats "results" as theoretically grounded findings that reveal how historical authority is constituted, how evidentiary hierarchies are maintained, and how subaltern pasts are rendered visible or invisible within dominant modes of history writing. Consistent with the journal's guideline, the discussion connects theoretical insights with existing realities of historiographical and educational practice, demonstrating how

abstract epistemic assumptions operate concretely within the discipline of history and its pedagogical extensions.

The findings presented here indicate that the marginalisation of subaltern pasts is not an incidental or residual problem but a structurally embedded feature of modern historiography. Across diverse historiographical traditions, the authority of the archive continues to function as the primary criterion for historical legitimacy, shaping both the scope of historical inquiry and the boundaries of acceptable evidence. This section demonstrates that such authority is sustained through implicit methodological norms rather than explicit exclusion, thereby rendering epistemic hierarchy both durable and difficult to contest. By analysing these norms and their effects, the discussion clarifies how historiography produces historical silences while simultaneously claiming objectivity and rigor. The following sub-section develops this finding by examining archival authority as a central mechanism through which historical knowledge is filtered, ordered, and authorised.

Archival Authority and the Production of Historical Silence

The first major result of this study is the identification of archival authority as a foundational mechanism in the production of historical silence. The analysis reveals that archives are not merely repositories of historical sources but epistemic institutions that actively shape what can be known, narrated, and legitimised as history. In prevailing historiographical practice, archival records are routinely treated as neutral carriers of historical fact, while their conditions of production, selection, and preservation remain analytically underexamined. This assumption enables archives to function as arbiters of historical credibility, determining which pasts are recognised as historically valid and which are relegated to the margins of historical consciousness.

The study finds that this privileging of archival sources produces a systematic asymmetry in evidentiary evaluation. Written records generated by state institutions, colonial administrations, or elite actors are accorded a presumption of reliability, coherence, and objectivity, whereas forms of knowledge that originate outside these institutional frameworks are subjected to heightened scepticism or dismissed as anecdotal. This asymmetry is not the result of methodological necessity but of historically sedimented epistemic norms that equate documentation with truth. In practice, such norms obscure the fact that archival records are themselves products of specific political, administrative, and ideological contexts, shaped by priorities of governance, surveillance, and control. Existing historiographical realities demonstrate that archival silences are frequently interpreted as empirical absences rather than as effects of power. When the experiences of peasants, workers, women, or marginal communities are weakly represented or absent in official records, historians often frame this absence as a limitation of available sources rather than as evidence of selective documentation. The result is a historiographical tendency to reproduce elite perspectives while maintaining the appearance of methodological rigor. The findings of this study indicate that this tendency persists even in historiographical traditions that are critically oriented, suggesting that archival authority operates at a deeper epistemic level than overt ideological commitment.

The analysis further reveals that archival authority is sustained through disciplinary training and professional norms that prioritise textual literacy over other forms of historical engagement. Historians are socialised to treat archives as the primary site of legitimate research, while alternative

sources of historical knowledge—such as oral narratives, embodied practices, and material culture—are positioned as supplementary or illustrative rather than analytically central. This hierarchy of sources is reinforced through citation practices, peer review standards, and pedagogical models that equate archival depth with scholarly seriousness. Consequently, even when historians acknowledge the partiality of archives in principle, they often reproduce archival dominance in practice.

A significant finding of this study is that archival authority not only excludes subaltern pasts but also shapes the interpretive frameworks through which those pasts are understood when they do appear in the historical record. Subaltern actors frequently enter archives through moments of conflict, resistance, or administrative intervention, resulting in fragmented and mediated representations. Historiographical reliance on such records tends to frame subaltern agency in reactive or episodic terms, obscuring everyday practices, knowledge systems, and modes of historical consciousness that do not intersect directly with state power. This reinforces a narrow conception of historical action that privileges visible political events over less formal but equally consequential forms of social practice.

The production of historical silence, as identified in this analysis, is therefore not reducible to the absence of sources but must be understood as an epistemic outcome of archival centrality. Silence emerges where forms of historical knowledge fail to meet the evidentiary standards established by archive-centric historiography, regardless of their social significance or historical depth. This finding challenges the assumption that expanding archival access alone can resolve issues of historical exclusion. While archival expansion may recover additional voices, it does not address the underlying epistemic hierarchy that continues to privilege certain forms of knowledge over others.

Importantly, the study finds that the authority of archives is rarely subjected to the same level of critical scrutiny applied to non-archival sources. While oral testimony and community memory are routinely interrogated for reliability, bias, and subjectivity, archival records are often exempt from equivalent questioning. This uneven application of scepticism reflects an implicit epistemic trust in institutional documentation that masks its constructed and contingent nature. By foregrounding this asymmetry, the analysis demonstrates that archival authority functions less as a neutral methodological tool and more as a normative framework that shapes historical judgment.

In connecting these findings to existing historiographical reality, the study underscores that challenges to archival authority have not fundamentally altered disciplinary practice. Despite extensive theoretical critique, archives continue to structure research agendas, define scholarly legitimacy, and delimit the boundaries of historical knowledge. The persistence of this structure suggests that the problem of subaltern exclusion cannot be addressed solely through representational inclusion but requires a deeper reconsideration of evidentiary hierarchies themselves. This result sets the foundation for the subsequent discussion, which examines how subaltern knowledge can be conceptualised as an epistemic category capable of unsettling these hierarchies without undermining historical rigor.

Subaltern Knowledge as an Epistemic Category

Building on the identification of archival authority as a central mechanism in the production of historical silence, the second major result of this study concerns the epistemic status of subaltern

knowledge within historiographical practice. The analysis reveals that subaltern knowledge has predominantly been treated either as a representational supplement to elite narratives or as a moral corrective aimed at restoring historical justice. While such approaches have played an important role in challenging exclusionary histories, they have also limited the analytical potential of subaltern knowledge by framing it primarily in ethical or political terms rather than as a mode of historical knowing. As a result, subaltern knowledge has often remained conceptually underdeveloped within the discipline, acknowledged in principle but marginal in methodological practice.

The findings indicate that subaltern knowledge is best understood not as an alternative body of content competing with archival history, but as an epistemic category characterised by distinct modes of production, transmission, and validation. Unlike archival knowledge, which is typically generated through institutional processes of documentation, subaltern knowledge is embedded in oral narratives, embodied practices, labour routines, ritual forms, and community memory. These modes of knowing are historically structured and socially regulated, even though they do not conform to the formalised procedures of record-keeping associated with state or elite institutions. Existing historiographical practice, however, frequently evaluates such knowledge using criteria derived exclusively from archival rationality, thereby misrecognising its epistemic logic and historical significance.

A key result of this study is the identification of an evaluative mismatch between subaltern knowledge and the standards applied to it. Oral narratives, for instance, are often scrutinised for inconsistency, selectivity, or retrospective reconstruction, while similar characteristics in archival records—such as administrative bias, selective reporting, or ideological framing—are treated as manageable limitations rather than disqualifying flaws. This asymmetrical scrutiny reveals that the marginalisation of subaltern knowledge does not stem from its inherent unreliability, but from the application of epistemic standards that privilege textual permanence, bureaucratic authorship, and institutional authority. In existing historical practice, this mismatch reinforces the perception that subaltern knowledge is supplementary rather than constitutive of historical understanding.

The analysis further demonstrates that even historiographical approaches sympathetic to subaltern perspectives often stop short of fully integrating subaltern knowledge into historical reasoning. In many cases, subaltern voices are incorporated through selective citation, illustrative anecdotes, or interpretive commentary, while the underlying analytical framework remains archive-centred. This practice allows historians to acknowledge marginal perspectives without fundamentally altering the evidentiary hierarchy that structures historical explanation. The result is a form of inclusion that is representational rather than epistemic, in which subaltern actors appear in historical narratives without their modes of knowing being recognised as analytically productive.

Another significant finding concerns the tendency to conflate subaltern knowledge with immediacy or authenticity, thereby exposing it to romanticisation. When subaltern voices are treated as unmediated expressions of lived experience, they are either idealised as pure alternatives to elite discourse or dismissed as subjective and unreliable. Both responses obscure the historically mediated nature of subaltern knowledge. Like archival records, oral and practice-based knowledge is shaped by social relations, power structures, and historical contingencies. The failure to recognise this mediation

contributes to the persistence of epistemic hierarchy by positioning archival knowledge as structured and critical, while treating subaltern knowledge as either naïve or excessive.

By conceptualising subaltern knowledge as an epistemic category, this study reframes its role within historiography. The findings suggest that subaltern knowledge should be evaluated through criteria appropriate to its mode of production, rather than through standards borrowed uncritically from archival practice. This does not entail lowering standards of evidence, but rather expanding the conceptual vocabulary through which evidence is assessed. Contextualisation, corroboration across different forms of knowledge, and reflexive interpretation emerge as central principles for engaging subaltern pasts without sacrificing analytical rigor. Existing historiographical reality shows that such principles are inconsistently applied, resulting in fragmented and uneven incorporation of non-archival knowledge.

Importantly, the study finds that recognising subaltern knowledge as epistemically significant has implications beyond source selection. It challenges prevailing assumptions about historical causation, agency, and temporality. Subaltern knowledge often foregrounds continuity, everyday practice, and relational forms of action that do not align neatly with event-centred or state-driven historical narratives. When such knowledge is marginalised, historical explanation becomes skewed toward moments of visible intervention or disruption, reinforcing a narrow conception of historical change. Integrating subaltern epistemologies therefore enables a more expansive understanding of historical processes that includes routine practices, local rationalities, and long-term social reproduction.

In connecting these findings to existing historiographical practice, the study demonstrates that the failure to recognise subaltern knowledge as an epistemic category limits the transformative potential of critical historiography. While theoretical critiques of elite narratives are well established, their impact remains constrained so long as evidentiary hierarchies remain intact. The result underscores that the question of whose past counts cannot be resolved through representational inclusion alone, but requires a fundamental reconsideration of how historical knowledge is constituted, evaluated, and legitimised. This insight prepares the ground for the next sub-segment, which examines how epistemic pluralism can address these challenges while preserving the disciplinary commitments of historical inquiry.

Epistemic Pluralism and the Question of Historical Rigor

The third major result of this study concerns the relationship between epistemic pluralism and historical rigor. The analysis reveals that resistance to incorporating subaltern knowledge into mainstream historiography is frequently justified through appeals to rigor, objectivity, and methodological control. In existing historical practice, rigor is commonly equated with archival depth, textual verification, and documentary consistency, while non-archival forms of knowledge are associated with subjectivity, instability, or interpretive risk. This association has contributed to a disciplinary environment in which epistemic pluralism is perceived as a threat to historical standards rather than as a potential resource for strengthening historical explanation.

The findings indicate that this perception rests on an implicit conflation of rigor with uniformity of evidence. Archival sources are treated as the benchmark against which all other forms

of knowledge are measured, resulting in the uneven application of scepticism. While oral narratives, community memory, and embodied practices are routinely interrogated for bias, selectivity, or distortion, archival records are often accepted as reliable despite well-documented problems of omission, misrepresentation, and administrative framing. This asymmetry reveals that rigor is not a neutral methodological principle but a historically contingent standard shaped by disciplinary norms and professional training. As a result, the exclusion of subaltern knowledge is frequently justified through appeals to rigor that themselves remain insufficiently examined.

A central finding of this study is that epistemic pluralism does not entail the abandonment of rigor but requires its rearticulation. Rather than imposing a single evidentiary standard across all forms of historical knowledge, pluralism recognises that different sources demand different modes of critical engagement. Oral testimony, for example, requires attention to narrative structure, memory formation, and social context, while material and practice-based knowledge demands sensitivity to use, embodiment, and transmission. Archival records, in turn, require critical analysis of institutional context, authorship, and purpose. The study demonstrates that rigor is maintained not through evidentiary homogeneity, but through methodological reflexivity and transparent justification of interpretive choices.

The analysis further shows that historiographical practice often underestimates the analytical potential of triangulation across epistemic domains. Existing historical studies that successfully integrate archival, oral, and material sources demonstrate that cross-verification enhances rather than weakens explanatory power. However, such integration remains uneven and frequently marginal to the core analytical framework of historical research. The findings suggest that this marginalisation is less a consequence of methodological difficulty than of epistemic conservatism, wherein established evidentiary hierarchies are reproduced to preserve disciplinary boundaries. This conservatism limits the capacity of historiography to account for forms of historical action and knowledge that do not align with state-centred or event-focused narratives.

Another significant result concerns the relationship between epistemic pluralism and historical interpretation. The analysis reveals that fears of relativism often obscure the fact that interpretive disagreement is already intrinsic to historical scholarship. Archival sources themselves require interpretation, selection, and narrative construction, processes that involve judgment and contestation. Recognising subaltern knowledge as epistemically significant does not introduce subjectivity into an otherwise objective discipline; rather, it makes visible the interpretive labour that is already present but frequently naturalised. By foregrounding this labour, epistemic pluralism enhances the transparency and accountability of historical reasoning.

The findings also indicate that epistemic pluralism has important consequences for how historical causation is conceptualised. Archive-centred historiography tends to privilege moments of visible intervention, policy change, or institutional transformation, often framing historical change as the outcome of elite decision-making or state action. Subaltern knowledge, by contrast, foregrounds continuity, routine practice, and relational forms of agency that operate outside formal political arenas. Integrating these perspectives enables a more layered understanding of historical processes, in which change is understood as both episodic and cumulative. Existing historiographical practice

shows that such integration remains partial, resulting in explanations that overemphasise rupture while underestimating social reproduction.

In connecting these findings to existing disciplinary realities, the study demonstrates that epistemic pluralism offers a viable pathway for addressing the exclusion of subaltern pasts without undermining historical standards. The persistence of archive-centred rigor reflects not an inherent incompatibility between pluralism and scholarship, but the inertia of established epistemic norms. By reconceptualising rigor as reflexive, context-sensitive, and transparently justified, historiography can expand its evidentiary base while preserving analytical discipline. This result directly informs the final sub-segment of the discussion, which examines how these epistemic choices are reproduced or challenged within history education and pedagogical practice.

Historiographical Epistemology and Its Implications for History Education

The final result of this study concerns the implications of historiographical epistemology for history education and the transmission of historical knowledge. The analysis demonstrates that the epistemic hierarchies governing historical research are not confined to scholarly practice but are reproduced, often implicitly, within educational contexts. Existing pedagogical models frequently present history as a stable body of knowledge derived from authoritative sources, thereby naturalising archival dominance and obscuring the contested processes through which historical narratives are constructed. This reproduction of epistemic hierarchy within classrooms contributes to the continued marginalisation of subaltern pasts, even in educational settings that aim to promote inclusivity and critical thinking.

The findings indicate that history education commonly privileges textual sources—such as textbooks, official documents, and canonical historical accounts—while relegating oral histories, community memory, and local knowledge to peripheral or supplementary status. In many curricula, non-archival sources are introduced primarily as illustrative material rather than as objects of critical analysis. This practice reinforces the assumption that historical authority resides in institutional documentation, while alternative forms of knowledge are treated as anecdotal or culturally interesting but analytically secondary. As a result, students are rarely encouraged to interrogate the epistemic foundations of historical claims or to consider how evidentiary hierarchies shape historical understanding.

A significant result of this study is the identification of history education as a critical site where epistemic pluralism can be operationalised. When pedagogical practices explicitly engage students in evaluating different forms of historical evidence, they reveal history as a process of inquiry rather than a fixed narrative. Existing research in history education demonstrates that such engagement fosters critical historical thinking by encouraging learners to assess source context, authorship, purpose, and limitations. The findings of this study extend this insight by showing that incorporating subaltern knowledge into educational practice also enables students to recognise how power, exclusion, and authority operate in the production of historical knowledge.

The analysis further reveals that integrating subaltern epistemologies into history education does not require abandoning disciplinary standards or replacing established curricula. Rather, it involves a pedagogical reorientation that makes evidentiary judgment explicit and reflexive. For

example, examining oral testimony alongside archival records allows students to compare different modes of historical knowing and to understand why certain sources have been privileged over others. This comparative approach does not dilute rigor; instead, it deepens students' understanding of historical methodology and enhances their capacity to evaluate competing interpretations. Existing educational practice shows that such integration remains uneven, often limited by curricular constraints and assessment models that prioritise factual recall over analytical reasoning.

Another important finding concerns the relationship between historical epistemology and civic understanding. When history education presents the past as singular and uncontested, it limits students' ability to engage critically with contemporary debates about identity, memory, and justice. By contrast, pedagogical engagement with subaltern pasts highlights the multiplicity of historical experiences and the contested nature of historical truth. This fosters a more nuanced understanding of the past and its relevance to present social relations. The study finds that epistemic pluralism in history education can therefore contribute to broader educational goals by encouraging reflective citizenship and sensitivity to historical exclusion.

In connecting these findings to existing educational realities, the study underscores that the persistence of epistemic hierarchy in history education mirrors similar patterns in historiography. Both domains are shaped by institutional norms, professional training, and evaluative standards that privilege certain forms of knowledge while marginalising others. Addressing the question of whose past counts thus requires coordinated reflection across research and teaching practices. The findings suggest that without such reflection, efforts to diversify historical content may result in symbolic inclusion without substantive epistemic change.

Taken together, the results of this study demonstrate that the politics of historical knowledge production extend beyond the archive and into the classroom. Historiographical choices about evidence and authority shape not only scholarly narratives but also the ways in which historical understanding is transmitted to new generations. By foregrounding the epistemic dimensions of subaltern knowledge and their pedagogical implications, this analysis completes the argument that addressing historical exclusion requires rethinking both how history is written and how it is taught.

Conclusion

This article has examined the question of whose past counts by situating subaltern knowledge within the epistemic politics of historiography rather than within a purely representational or ethical framework. Through a critical engagement with debates on archival authority, subaltern studies, and epistemic pluralism, the study has shown that historical exclusion is produced less by the absence of past experiences than by historically entrenched hierarchies of evidence and authority. Recent conceptual interventions in Indian historiography further demonstrate that epistemic decolonisation requires engaging philosophy, pedagogy, and history together (Pratheesh, 2025; Pratheesh & Saritha, 2025). The findings demonstrate that archives function not only as sources of historical information but as epistemic institutions that shape the boundaries of historical legitimacy, thereby structuring both what is known and how it is known.

By conceptualising subaltern knowledge as an epistemic category, this study intervenes in longstanding historiographical debates concerning rigor, objectivity, and historical method. While

critics of epistemic pluralism caution against relativism and methodological dilution, the analysis presented here shows that such concerns rest on an unexamined conflation of rigor with archival uniformity. Rather than weakening historical inquiry, the reflexive integration of multiple forms of historical knowledge enhances analytical transparency and interpretive accountability by making evidentiary judgment explicit. The challenge, therefore, is not to choose between archives and alternative forms of knowledge, but to critically examine the standards through which different forms of evidence are evaluated and authorised.

The article has further demonstrated that the epistemic choices made within historiography are reproduced within history education, where archival dominance is often naturalised through curricular and pedagogical practices. By extending historiographical debates into the domain of history education, the study highlights the role of teaching as a key site where epistemic hierarchies are either reinforced or contested. Pedagogical engagement with diverse forms of historical evidence does not entail abandoning disciplinary standards, but rather fosters critical historical thinking by exposing students to the constructed and contested nature of historical knowledge.

This study is limited by its reliance on conceptual and historiographical analysis rather than empirical investigation, and future research could extend its framework through comparative case studies or classroom-based pedagogical research. Nevertheless, the article contributes to ongoing discussions on historiography and history education by clarifying the epistemic conditions under which subaltern pasts can be meaningfully incorporated into historical knowledge. Ultimately, the question of whose past counts remains a matter of epistemic negotiation, shaped by evolving debates over evidence, authority, and interpretation within the discipline of history.

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