

Understanding the Nature and Subject matter of History: A Critical Analysis

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Abstract

“As we know, history is the systematic study of past events of humanity, with the intention of remembrance of past history by future generations. The main aim of study is to provide information regarding the past of unknown events with the intention of reminding future generations regarding the past. The idea of history originated along with the evolution of man himself. Different historians of the past and present have given their own opinion of history from time to time. The definition given by different historian with mastery over historiography is discussed in this work in understanding the past properly. The opinions of historians are recalibrated to understand the idea of history in simple modes. History is a unique subject which is conceived as per the understanding of historians. History is the systematic study of the past based literary survey. The debates on history in western and Indian context is discussed with critical appreciation. The nature of history is discussed based on arguments from different schools of thought. How, history made a continuous dialogue between present and past is given more stress. The subjectivity and objectivity of history, are given more importance in this work to better understand the nature of history.”

Key words: Historiography, Scientific study, debates, nature, past, present,

1. Introduction:

History which is a record of unique events in the life of mankind is stir and vibration of life. It is not only the conserving and understanding of what has happened, but also the completion of what has been going on at present. (Georg W.F. Hegel (Author), 2011)

The affairs of men and nations are constantly in motion. In the past it was merely a catalogue of events serialised in a descriptive manner. We have now to study History in a critical and scientific way, wherein the historian thinks for himself instead of merely repeating the stories found in old books. They must have experience of that form of thought, which qualifies him the experience and value of historical thinking. History becomes a study of reality in its aspect of becoming. The function of the historian is neither to love the past, nor to condemn the past, nor to be free from the past, but to master the past in order to understand its bearing on the present. (Ali, 1978)

Experience of historical thinking, so gained, in modelled on text-books, and text-books always describe not what is now being thought by real live historians, but what was thought by real live historians, it is also the Principles of historical thought, that is, the ideas as to the nature, object, method and value of historical thinking, since, History is concerned with analysing, explaining and describing to remember the nature of historical facts. However, much a historian may attempt to be objective he cannot entirely be free from bias. (Carr, 1961)

There is a continuity of growth and development in human society. This growth takes a definite trend; it always implies the development of something complex out of something simple. History is not a subject which lives with us. We are not living with actual History but with the nature of history. In history past events have got to be re valued in the light of fresh developments and new ideas. (Ali, 1978)

1.1. Objectives of Study.

- 1). To understand the unique nature of History.
- 2). To know the nature and scope of history.
- 3) To simplify the comprehension of historical debates
- 4) To Understand the different historiography and its influence on history.

2. The Origin of term History:

History is one of the disciplines among the social sciences, having its own method and theories. The term 'history' is derived from the Greek word historia which was for the first time used by Herodotus, the Greek historian who is considered as the father of this tradition. Herodotus, called his accounts of the past as historia, A Greek term meaning 'Inquiry' since his was an inquiry into the existing traditions to know what factually happened in the past. Historia was a truth seeking exercise of him. The Greek had a tradition of myths and legends about their past which was scrutinized by Herodotus through his inquiry and the facts thus gathered were arranged in a narrative. Herodotus was interested in the events caused by the human beings, thus for him man was the author of historical events he was seeking. Therefore, history was basically a humanist quest for the Greek historians. (Ali, History: its theory and method, 1981)

This Greek term was borrowed by the post renaissance humanist scholars of the Europe and History was developed as a scientific discipline in the modern age since then. This discipline was introduced into the other parts of the world through the process of the expansion of the European civilization, to become the most authentic mode of reconstructing the pasts of different nations and regions. In India the term History is translated as 'Itihaas' literally meaning 'this was how it was'. Itihas is not a humanist knowledge, i.e. knowledge about the man as the ultimate cause of historical events. Its function was to teach the morals through the past events which were believed to have happened in the past. The other term used for history in India is 'Chaitra' meaning the 'deeds or behaviours (of the past)'. (Rajaram., 2008)

3. Some Selected Definitions of History

To define history is to ascertain the meaning of this term. The definitions vary according to the purposes, viewpoints, philosophical outlooks as well as theoretical frameworks of the scholars who have made it. (Rajaram., 2008) However all the historians agree with one point as the English historical philosopher R. G Collingwood puts it: "History is a science or an answering of questions concerned with human actions in the past, which is pursued by interpretation of evidence". History is a discipline that reconstruct the human past, through scientific methods. Though history seeks to reconstruct the human past, the historians cannot and need not deal with everything for the past. (Collingwood, 1985)

For Seeley 'History is the past politics and present politics in future history because he believed that politics is the quintessential past. Carlyle, a romanticist historian, understood history as 'the biography of great men' because he believed that memorable events are nothing but the creations of the heroes of past superhuman qualities. Burkhart also views history as 'the record of mention worthy things an age viewed by another age. Sir Charles Firth provides a comprehensive definition as follows: "(It is) the record of the life of societies of men, of the changes which those societies have gone through, of the ideas which have

determined the actions of those societies, and of the material conditions which have helped of hindered their development'. (Ali, History: its theory and method , 1978)

Such definitions emphasise that history is not a mere account of the past events but a rigorous science of understanding the historical process. For such an understanding the historian needs a theoretical framework through which tries to explain the historical process. Such a theoretical orientation would influence definitions of history also. For example, D. D. Kosambi, a Marxist historian of India begins his book on introduction to Indian History by defining history as "the presentation in chronological order of successive development in the means and relations of production "Since the Marxists conceived the historical process like that. (Rajaram., 2008)

4. The Nature and Character of Historical information:

Though history deals with the human past, historical past should not be confused with the actual past. History is the historian's reconstruction of the past. There can be as many reconstructions as the historians are. Because as G. R. Elton puts it, "Historical study is not the study of past but the study of the present traces of the past, if men have said, thought, done or suffered anything of which nothing any longer exists". (R, 1967) Historical events which are not directly witnessed by the historian are nothing but the constructed memories. The construction takes place on the basis of whatever little and incomplete sources that are left behind. Historians' methodology, imagination as well as reasoning are the stuffs which make historical knowledge. That is why Marc Bloch describes history as the 'historian's craft'. R. G Collingwood asserts that the only way to understand the past is to re-enact it in our mind' with empathy, or transforming it as a part of our own present experience. (Collingwood, 1985) This reality had led the Italian Philosopher Croce to state much earlier than Collingwood that 'all history is contemporary history', history lives as a present interest and pursuit, in the mind of the historian when he criticizes and interprets those documents'.

4.1. History is Ultimately Reconstructed with Present Interest:

So, History is a present projection of the past. The historians go on changing their picture of the past through new interpretations and explanations. (Rajaram., 2008) This is the way history establishes its relevance in each age because, as Lucien Febvre points it out, "it is the need felt by every human group at each phase of its development to seed out and emphasis those facts, trends of the that prepare for the present, that enable to understand and live it". (Burke, 1973) Apart from such vital needs of the humanity, historical understanding also undergoes change as and when new sources are tapped and new theories and methods are applied.

4.2 History is a Subjective Science:

Historical inquiry is not directed at any object external to the historian. Facts of the past, which do not exist at present, only exist in the historian's mind. (Collingwood, 1985) So the historical facts imbue the historian's bias. Historian can only improvise his understanding about the past with conscious efforts. According to E. H. Carr history is an unending dialogue between the present and past. The historical past takes its shape according to the changing problems, questions and pursuits of the historian. (Carr, 1961)

Historian has scientific methodology to pursue his objective. Thus interpretation constitutes the core of historical knowledge. There is no end to this process.

History can never be absolutely objective, because the historian and his subject matter cannot be separated from each other. Insistences of the Rankean School of historians on the elimination of personality and those of the positivists on Scientific methodology to achieve the objectivity of natural science has led to the misconception that historians should have the objectivity of a scientist. (Rajaram., 2008) Biases and Prejudices are inevitable in history. It is natural for human beings to take sides to censure, to extol, to colour, and to embellish; they are swayed by personal, moral, patriotic and metaphysical considerations. (Ali, History: its theory and method, 1978)

4.3. History is Value loaded or Value Judgement in History:

Historians have expressed different opinions regarding value judgement in history. Thinkers like Ranke instruct that historian should represent historical facts in their naked form. Though it is not the business of the historian to pass moral judgements over the historical events, the very act of history writing is historian's moral choice. Historian writes history for his community, to understand its past and present, to understand it's good and bad, and to help it evolve its values. Such histories are written for national communities, for the movement and for the institutions as a process of reconstructing the self of the respective communities. (Rajaram., 2008) Thus history becomes an essential need for the present to evolve the value system. Historian should be conscious of his bias and should be guided by a suitable methodology to overcome his prejudice. Historian also possesses value-judgements on the individuals participating in the historical events. Lord action thinks that it is not only desirable but also an essential part of a historians work. Evaluation, assessment and verdict are all very vital ingredients of a good historical work. (Bajaj., 1987)

According to R.G. Collingwood History is 'for' human self-knowledge, it is generally thought to be of importance to man that he should know himself, means knowing not his merely personal peculiarities, the things distinguish between him and the other man, but his nature as man. (Collingwood, 1985)

Nobody will know until, man tries what he can do, with the only due that what man has done. The value of history then, is that it teaches us what man has done and what man is. History has its value; its teachings are useful for human life, notable events in history are worth remembering in order to serve as a basis for prognostic judgements, not demonstrable but probable, laying down not what will happen, but what is likely to happen. (Rows, 1963)

The other powerful reason for value-judgement is the influence of philosophy on history. Action draws a conclusion saying that the greatest achievement of history is to develop and perfect and arm conscience. (Ali, History: its theory and method, 1978)

5. The following are certain important views or debates about the Nature of History.

5.1. The Debate Whether History is A Science or An Art?

The development in historical theories and research in the 19th century led the historian to place it in par with science. The enlightmen science was based on the principles of objectivity, rationality, and

experiments with which it comprehended the natural laws followed by mechanical applications to bring a revolutionary change in the western society. This influenced the social thinkers. (Rajaram., 2008)

A controversy has long existed amongst scholars whether history is science or an art.

5.2. History as Science:

Leopold Von Ranke, a German historian of the 19th century emphasized on historical objectivity and evolved the methods of historical criticism so scrupulously as to have a factual perception of the historical events. He insisted that historian should perceive the facts by distancing himself from them. A Positive philosopher of 19th century, August Comte, includes social studies among the positive sciences like Mathematics, Physics, and Chemistry etc. The positivist historian's conceived history, to be as scientific method of investigations of the social facts to reveal the underlying laws that govern the society. (Ali, History: its theory and method, 1981)

They believed that just like there were natural laws too. History with the help of these laws would serve the mankind by enabling it to predict the future course of the social events. J.B. Bury in 1903 made the historical statement, "history is a science, no less and no more". Bury was mainly reacting to the Romanticist like Macaulay, Carlyle and Froude who had almost taken history to be a kind of literature which can be written without any scientific training. Some Romanticist went to the extent of saying that history is ultimately an art because its effect depends upon the beauty of expression. Prof. Seeley was even more emphatic in impressing that History was a Science, he said "History is a Science and has nothing to do with Literature". (Rajaram., 2008) A.L. Rows described history as an Art and declared categorically that however much historical writings may be supplemented by scientific methods and acquisition there will always remain history as Art". (Rows, 1963)

It is indeed difficult to decide as to which of these two views is correct much will depend as to what meaning is assigned to the term science. If science is taken to mean a knowledge based on the most careful examination of all the available evidence, then history can be described as a Science and the main Job of the historian is that of investigation to find out what happened at a given time and place. (Ali, History: its theory and method, 1978) It is Scientifically valuable only in so far as the new arrangement give us the answer to a question we have already decided to ask, that is why all science begins from the knowledge of our own ignorance, not our ignorance of everything but our ignorance of some definite thing the origin of parliament, the cause of cancer, the chemical composition of the sun, the way to make a pump work without muscular exertion on the part of a man or some other animal, science is finding things out, and in that sense history is a science. (Ali, History: its theory and method, 1981)

5.3. History as Art:

The post-modernist thinkers consider history as a kind of fiction because; they say that the historian's narrative contains no facts of past but the elements of storytelling.

The twentieth century philosophers like Collingwood raised objections against the view that history is a science: 1) History deals with unique and complex events which cannot be generalized to form any laws out of it. 2) History is essentially subjective. The object of historian is human thought which is complex and

variable, thus the object is not an external reality to the historian. 3) Since we cannot understand the laws that govern the course of history we cannot predict the future. 4) History cannot conduct the experiments to verify its facts like natural sciences. (Collingwood, 1985)

The type of imagination used by these artists, in their works, quite different from the kind of imagination required by a historian. A historian tries to reconstruct the past on the basis of the past records. In this reconstruction he has to use this imagination and in this a historian is an artist. Another sense, a historian in which is an artist is the manner in which he gives his narrative. G.M. Trevelyan challenged the views of Bury and Seeley argued that history was both a science and an art. He argued that "the discovery of historical facts should be scientific in method. But that, the exposition of them for the reader, part took of the nature of Art: the Art of written words commonly called literature? (Ali, History: its theory and method, 1981)

As History is mother of all Social Sciences, it has all the ingredients in it of Science and Art. Hence it is indeed difficult to decide as to which of these two views is correct, that whether "History is a Science or an Art". (Carr, 1961) The above controversy has come into existence due to certain misunderstandings about the term 'Science' which is equated with natural sciences. The nature of fact in natural sciences is different from that of social science. So the methods and concepts of natural sciences cannot be copied exactly by the social sciences. Science is systematic pursuit of knowledge through certain methods and theories adopted according to the nature of each subject. Historians also have their own scientific method to seek truth. Since the pursuit of the historian is his self-understanding, it is basically a subjective approach and science of its own kind. (Rajaram., 2008)

6. There are quite a few other aspects involved in the nature of historical facts:

6.1. The Subject Matter of History:

History is a study of the human past. Its scope is determined by what it studies, how it proceeds, and what its purpose is.

6.2. The subject matter of history includes every aspect of the human past:

The social, political, economic, cultural, and religious and whatever system that man has evolved for his existence. It is also extends its studies to the ideas, norms and belief systems of men, thus the histories of thought, aesthetics, metaphysics, etc. also find place here. It also covers the histories of science, technology, medicine etc. No branch of human knowledge is outside the scope of history. (Rows, 1963)

6.3. The scope of history is ever widening according to the innovations in its methods and changing pursuits.

Up to the end of 19th century, the historical past was confined to the literate societies alone because, the historians based their studies entirely upon literary texts as source material. However the development of archaeological methods tapped an altogether new source, i.e. the material antiquities, through which the historians are able to reconstruct the hoary prehistoric past which extends up to 2 to 3 million years before the present. Historian can even study the societies of recent past which have no literary records to mark their

existence. Historical research is advancing with new methodologies through interdisciplinary approaches. (Bajaj., 1987)

6.4. The changing pursuits and theoretical orientation also have widened the scope of history.

Once upon a time the historians conceived history as a study of past politics and confined to the political events of the past. Gradually the inquiries were extended to different aspects of human past. New theoretical models helped historians to call out new information and unravel new dimensions of reality from the very same old material. (Rajaram., 2008)

6.5. Historian is interested in the social actions of man.

That too the actions that he thinks to be significant. Those actions which man performs as a biological being are not the topics of investigation here unless they have a bearing on the historical analysis. It is wrong to say that historian has nothing to do with the natural world. Nature as a force of shaping and influencing the human society finds a relevant place in historical investigation. Thus the geographical features like rivers, mountains, forests, climate, soil, mineral, etc. should also be subjected to study if we want to have a better understanding of the human societies. (Rajaram., 2008)

6.6. Every History is a Point of View History:

It is argued that every history is written from a certain point of view, and it makes sense only from that point of view elaborating this view Karl popper Pines that the objectivity is to be clear about, the necessity of adopting a point of view, to state this point of view plainly and always to remain conscious that it is one among many and that even if it should amount to a theory it may not be tenable. (Croce, 1921) But a point of view to history is like a soul to the body. Without a point of view, history or historical evidence has no meaning. (Rajaram., 2008)

Historian is obliged to select facts on the basis of the hypothesis of his study and his personal judgement. He subjects his facts to him own understanding which to a great degree, allows his personal interests, beliefs and values to creep into his analysis and evaluation of the significance of the selected events.

6.7. All History is Contemporary History:

The view is advanced that all is-contemporary-history. Croce is a strong advocate of this view, where by the past and the present are linked in one chain of common process. In support of his contention, Croce gives three inter-connected ideas. One, History is essentially an attempt of seeing past through the present. Two it is so because historical reality is lived, suffered experienced and even re-experienced in the imagination of the historian. And three, all history is therefore historiography. (Croce, 1921)

R.G. Collingwood too subscribes to this idea through his philosophy that history is nothing but the re-enactment of past experience and that the subject matter of history is reflective thought, Collingwood believes that "the past is an aspect or function of the present". Historians attempt to grasp intelligently the past as a part of the present. He says that history writing is mental activity, in which the historians form a

mental image by his study of past records. Since, (Collingwood, 1985) the historian belongs to the present period, and since he is not free from the compulsions of the present are brought closer together into one homogenous whole for the instance, the message of either Buddha or Jesus Christ or Gandhi etc., will always be as fresh at any point of time as during their days.

6.8. History is an Unending Dialogue between the Past and Present:

A View is held by E.M. Carr that" History is an unending dialogue between the present and the past. A history without a problem to solve or a fresh idea to display is a bare chronicle, a sort of catalogue of events lacking in soul and spirit. What gives history real life is that the mental activity of the historian lies in solving as many controversies relating to the past, as possible, and in throwing a powerful flood of light as he can. (Carr, 1961) The past is never fully known to us and every historian attempts to discover a portion of it and comes closer to reality either by adding new information or by offering a new interpretation. All this involves a very intimate dialogue. Between the historians, who is in the present and the events, which are in the past. As the objects of the past are not present before him, he adopts the indirect method, uses his imaginative power, reflects on the subject and thus enters into a dialogue with the past. To a historian, the past is an un-explored region waiting to be discovered, and the past is his reflective ability which forms an image on his mind through closer discussion or dialogue with the subject. Life has meaning and to find this meaning is the main job of the historian... (Ali, History: its theory and method, 1981)

7. Uses of History:

To seek the utility of history the way we seek it from material goods will lead us to disastrous conclusions. Uses of history cannot be simplified.

7.1. The historical awareness is a vital force in shaping the individual as well as the collective life.

History is a constructed memory for the society. As an individual realizes his self through his memories, societies do it through history. R. G. Collingwood opines that the aim of history is to seek self-knowledge. The human groups shape their identities and project their self-interest through it. They construct a world of meaning hand it through historical traditions to the younger generations. (Rows, 1963)

7.2. History also caters to the mundane needs in its own way.

It fulfils the socio-culture need by constructing the past records for the present use. History acts as a storehouse of factual information. Every sphere of society needs a history of its own as well as every discipline needs it as a memory to remember for future purposes. All sciences including natural sciences need historical thought for their existence. It helps understand the social, political, economic and other problems of the present which is essential for forming policies and resolve the issues. It is an effective means of education to the younger generation. (Rows, 1963)

8. Conclusion

The nature of history is very complex. Arriving at certain conclusions which still remains to be examined is whether history can be treated as a science or art. Nature of history lends itself to various

explanations. History has contemporaneity and it is an unending dialogue between the past and the present. Value-judgement is an aspect of history which we cannot ignore. It is very often coloured by the current ideas of a period or country. It is a prophecy in reverse, as it helps to some extent in knowing what to expect in future. The historian must re-enact the past in his own mind, to look more closely at this idea, what we must now do is and see what it means in itself and what further consequences it implies. The only condition on which there could be a history of nature is that the events of nature are actions on the part of some thinking being or beings and that by studying these actions we could discover, what were the thoughts which they expressed and think these thoughts for ourselves. (Ali, History: its theory and method, 1978)

However, no one can dispute the dynamic nature of history, which concerns itself on ever changing drama of life which has a purpose and a meaning. The historian has to discuss every issue in the context of its time, space, nature and extent in order to make the story Namier exhaustive and meaningful. Humber has seemed up the nature of history. He says the functions of the historian is akin to that of the painter and not of the Photographic camera', to discover and set forth, to single out and stress that which is of the nature of the thing and not to reproduce indiscriminately all that meets the eye. What matters in history is the great outline and the significant detail, what must be avoided is the deadly morass of irrelevant narrative. History is thus a subject which studies the unique past events with chronological order. (Ali, History: its theory and method, 1978)

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