



Part III

Research and Writing Method

Jigjiga
THE PEOPLE'S
UNIVERSITY

UNIT 27 HISTORICAL SOURCES*

Structure

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27.1 INTRODUCTION

Sources form the foundation of any historical research. If there are no sources for a specific period or region, no history can be written about it. The quality of a historical work depends on the availability of good and copious source material. When new sources are discovered they can provide a turning point in understanding of a subject. Quite often close reading of the sources from different angles can also lead to different interpretations. Various methods have been evolved over the centuries to understand, authenticate and analyse different varieties of sources. Disciplines such as archaeology, numismatics, and epigraphy also regularly bring out new sources to light which facilitates and enriches historical research.

27.2 WHAT ARE SOURCES?

The historical sources are available to us in the form of documents, oral testimonies, monuments, artifacts and relics from the past. In fact, anything from which people in general and historians in particular can know about facets of the past can be taken as historical sources. They are our surviving links to the bygone eras and dead people and historians use them to write papers, essays, dissertations and books. It is through the medium of historical sources that we have glimpses of the political, social, cultural, and intellectual activities of the past generations. Through them we try to understand the people whom we have never met. However, these sources

*Resource Person: Prof. S.B. Upadhyay

are only a small part of the past and survive, in most cases, as only vestiges and traces and generally do not represent the entire picture. Moreover, most of these sources were produced by a very small minority of literate and powerful persons, very different from the common people, and such persons generally tend to present their own versions. Yet, it is only on the basis of them that historians, with the help of various methods and their imagination, try to present a coherent story of an era, groups of people, regions and countries.

On the basis of their nature and function, the historical sources are broadly divided into two categories – primary sources and secondary sources. In the following account, we will discuss both these categories as well as their variations.

27.3 PRIMARY SOURCES

Primary sources consist of documentary, oral, visual, or physical records which have been contemporary to an event, or a particular period. Such sources might have been produced intentionally for the posterity, for example, government records, religious documents, journalistic writings, memoirs, autobiographies, etc. On the other hand, primary sources may also consist of unintentional sources such as buildings, agricultural or industrial instruments, private letters, dresses, landscape, and so on. By its very nature, a primary source is generally produced by those who were present during a particular period or at the time of an event, as witnesses or participants in a process which is the subject of enquiry.

There is also a hierarchy in the primary sources. A source which is exactly contemporary in time and space to a specific event or process is regarded as most authentic. The authenticity of a source is reduced in direct proportion to its distant location in time and space from the event or process. Therefore, a written report, diary entry, or letter which was composed when a particular event occurred is regarded to have a higher status compared to similar items penned at a later date.

Primary sources are also differentiated on the basis of unpublished and published records. The unpublished sources contain more comprehensive original reports which are found in archives, special research libraries, local libraries, private collections and historical organizations. There are mostly single copies of these, they are generally kept and preserved at one place, and they are not in circulation between archives, libraries or individuals. A historian must visit specific locations to read these documents. Such published documents are generally regarded as containing more accurate information about the events and individuals in the past. The documents which were not intended for the public and were circulated among restricted members are considered to be providing more authentic information.

The published documents, on the other hand, generally exist in multiple copies in the archives, research libraries, and even on websites. Many published government documents, newspapers, magazines, autobiographies, and memoirs can be viewed at many places relatively easily. Since they were meant for public viewing, the information contained in them might refer to decisions rather than the process through which decisions were arrived at. Their significance as original and comprehensive source materials would also be relatively limited.

Among the published materials, we also have the selected and edited documents which have been done much later by persons much removed in time and space

from the location where the documents were generated. Such selections can be quite subjective and their value in research would be even more limited. Now we will discuss some important types of primary sources popularly used in historical researches.

27.3.1 Government Documents

In terms of the availability, the government documents constitute the largest single category of primary sources. The resources available to the governments over the centuries far outstripped that of any other agency or individual. Thus, the records generated and preserved by governments and many centuries quite voluminous and contain information of various kinds. Such records contain invaluable information about social, political, legislative, cultural, and environmental events. They also provide crucial information about individuals and their lives in socio-political contexts.

There are various types of government records providing extensive qualitative and quantitative information. Government reports, parliamentary and state assembly debates, Bills and Acts, policy decisions by the government and its officials, judicial records relating to civil and criminal investigations and trials, censuses, gazetteers, reports of commissions on labour, agriculture and industry, records of public institutions and several other types of records provide a lot of varied information for the use of historical researchers.

27.3.2 Letters and Diaries

Private correspondences to business colleagues, government officers, friends and relatives may offer very rewarding sources of information. Since they are not for public viewing, their authenticity tend to be more and the writers of the letters are generally less cautious and write about many confidential matters which they would otherwise not reveal. The language and content of the letters can also provide a glimpse of linguistic convention, intellectual atmosphere, social norms, and political activities of a particular period. The letter may also quite often reveal the internal sentiments and feelings of the writers and, if they held responsible public positions, the letters can really be very important sources of history of the period. For example, the letters written by ambassadors to the respective governments and to their own family members can be quite different and even contradictory in showing various facets of reality. Some letters might also have been written to exert influence and pressure on the recipients to affect their decisions. Such letters have to be analysed differently according to their relevance for the topic of research.

Not many persons write diaries but most literate persons have written letters at some point in their lives, and quite a few illiterate persons have also sent letters to their family members and friends by getting them written by others. However, although most people preserve their diaries, letters are generally not preserved and only a fraction of them survive. But whatever are left and are accessible provide invaluable information about the persons concerned and their times. In letters, people often express their everyday problems but also their deep concerns as the letters travel between individuals and are not intended for publication or public display. They, therefore, reveal the real problems besetting the writers as well as the recipients. If a series of letters are preserved, they can outline a connected narrative. The letters by diplomats to their friends and family give inside information about and assessments of the governments.

Diaries are also regarded an important source of information about the real feeling of the writer. Sometimes, the diaries can provide more authentic information than a letter about a situation. They are always useful to understand the mind of the author. If the authors are important public individuals, their diaries can provide insightful and decisive information about social, political and cultural issues. For example, a diplomat's diary can be more reliable than their official letters. However, if a diary is intended for public viewing or publication even later, the writer would tend to moderate its content. Moreover, almost all diaries may contain information about politics and society which would be a mix of subjective opinion and objective information. For example, the diary of a young girl Anne Frank reveals the horrors of Nazi regime in Germany during the late 1930s and early 1940s.

Both letters and diaries are generally dated thereby placing them firmly in time. The everyday and the mundane recorded in them can provide invaluable information for the social historians. Even complaint letters to the authorities may give an idea of certain pertinent issues during specific periods.

27.3.3 Memoirs and Autobiographies

Memoirs and autobiographies are first-person accounts which might exist as published works or unpublished manuscripts. Both of these may provide useful information about persons and society of a period. However, since both are intended for public view and publication, their content is severely edited by the authors. So, they are not very reliable as they provide a biased and partial account of the situation from the particular point of view. Moreover, since both are generally written long after the events, their recollections of events may not be quite reliable. They also tend to eliminate or moderate controversial matters.

Although the conventional usage of memoirs and autobiographies may be somewhat limited, their importance in different forms of history has become quite significant. The link of such literature with wider society, the connection of women and Black and Dalit autobiographies with social protests, and the role of autobiographies in intellectual history are very important.

27.3.4 Fiction

Fictional literature, though mostly a work of imagination, can also be useful in various ways for history-writing. It can provide some idea of social structure, events and individuals existing in a certain period. Some types of fiction are more realistic and can give almost documentary-like information about some events and processes of the past. At another level, certain kinds of novels and stories also shape the mentalities of the people. For example, during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century in India, the portrayal of women in most of literature imparted social values of the emerging middle-class which were, in many cases, at odds with the traditional values. Similarly, the Dalit literature in late twentieth century provided impetus to the emerging Dalit movement in India.

27.3.5 Wills and Inventories

In most cases, these represent the thinking of persons who actually did not write them but got them written by specialized persons. Wills, generally written closer to the time of death, can provide a glimpse into the minds of concerned persons

at those moments. They also give an idea of the family structure, social norms and relationships, religious attitudes, and values of persons concerned. When inventories are parts of wills, they can provide relevant information about financial status of the individuals and families. If a large number of inventories survive from a particular area over the period, they can reveal useful facts about the changes in standards of living, social differentiation, and economic wellbeing of a society.

27.3.6 Newspapers and Periodicals

Newspapers serve as one of the most important sources of information about the past. They are also quite commonly available either in printed form or in microfilms or microform in the libraries, or online on several websites. Most research libraries contain impressive holdings of printed newspapers over decades. Even local libraries possess local publications which can be very useful as sources of social, economic and cultural information about particular areas. Newspapers contain information at two levels – facts and opinions. As sources for facts, they provide details of happenings on any particular day, information about individuals and certain eyewitness accounts of events. Searching through newspapers over a particular period may give us an idea of developing events and processes as well as insights into political, social and cultural atmosphere of the time. Even limited time spent with newspapers can help the researchers to construct a chronology of events and political developments. Newspapers also contain short biographies of prominent individuals in the form of obituaries. Various types of advertisements, such as matrimonials, product promotion, stock prices, government documents, weather reports, information about films and series, can give historians a lot of insights into social, economic, environmental and cultural changes.

On the other hand, the editorials, news articles, essays, opinion pieces, and letters in the newspapers can guide a researcher to the prevailing thinking of the period. The magazines also serve the latter function by systematically providing different opinions along with giving an organized form to the events of the period. Sequence of events, important individuals, different views, and analyses can be easily accessible to the researchers through articles in magazines. Periodicals can be a good primary source for new researchers in their initial survey of the field. They are printed, quite accessible either in the libraries or on the web. The articles in them are generally written closer to the time of the events and contain an outline of the happenings as well as opinions from many sides. Their successive numbers provide regular updates about the events in an organized form. Besides, they contain informed, though sometimes biased, editorials, letters, extracts from diaries and memoirs, and record of interaction between various active persons of the period in several fields like journalists, politicians, novelists, poets, artists, business people, and the readers. In a way, they may provide wholesome information to the beginners.

27.3.7 Non-conventional Primary Sources

Textual and documentary sources have been most commonly used in history-writing. But there are many non-textual historical sources which have also been in use for a long time. There are coins, field surveys, archaeological findings, artifacts, and many other things which historians use for understanding the past. In fact, for pre-historical and early historical periods, and for those societies with less literacy, the physical objects of various kinds provide the main sources for history-writing. Things like gardens, roads, vehicles, coins, tools, buildings, clothes, cooking vessels, etc.

can give us access to the lives in the past. These objects can tell us a lot about the wealth of a society, living standards of people, commercial transactions, modes of agricultural and industrial production, modes of transport and communication, and even labour relations, gift-exchange, and aesthetic taste of the society.

Another very important primary source can be **oral interviews** for understanding and explaining the past. Interviews with persons closely connected with events or related to other persons in proximity with the events of the past can be very rewarding for the researchers. Besides events, such oral sources can give us valuable insights into the memories, thinking, and emotions of individuals which are generally not present in textual sources. In all cases, such oral sources can form important supplements, additions, and corroborations of the recorded events in documents. In certain cases, memories can be used as the main historical source in case of pre-literate or non-literate communities or societies. Even in case of marginalized sections like the working classes and peasants, the historians use oral sources to understand the culture, customs, relationships, and emotions of individuals and groups. Oral evidences may also fill the gaps in the written sources. They may also provide opportunities to the important persons to correct their earlier statements. The increasingly sophisticated methods of collecting oral evidences may make it possible to separate facts from fiction. They are now increasingly used in social history to add, corroborate or enhance historians' interpretations of written records. However, the historians must keep in mind that the oral sources are consciously created records of the past in the much later period. Therefore, they must be subjected to critical scrutiny before being accepted as a relevant historical source.

Statistical records are also used by historians in some cases to write their accounts of the past. It is mostly employed by economic historians but in certain cases they have also been used by political, social and cultural historians to argue their points. In political history, for example in election analysis, large amount of numbers are used for analysis and interpretation of the patterns of voting, or even prediction of the political fortunes of contestants. Quantitative histories based on numbers, charts and tables impart an objectivity to the historical works which is normally missing in qualitative narratives. The use of census, government statistical data, agricultural statistics, industrial records, etc can establish regular patterns and precision which may not be found in narrative evidences. Changes in demography, ethnic composition of the population, national income, per capita income, gender balance, educational levels, employment figures, and many other things can be more concretely described and explained through statistical tables, graphs, and charts than can ever be possible through qualitative accounts.

27.4 VISUAL SOURCES

Visual sources exist in relative abundance all around us in the form of material remains from the past in the forms of monuments, buildings, landscape, roads, dams, bridges and so on. They also exist as forms of artistic creation like photographs, paintings, sculptures, cartoons, maps, and documentary or feature films. While the material remains exist as survivals from the past, the artistic compositions are consciously controlled creations which may serve as a different variety of source.

Monuments and residential buildings can give us significant information about the nature and strength of the state, and about the class structure of the society.

For example, in archaeological findings in Harappa, Mohenjo-Daro and Kalibangan, we discover that there were bigger houses in the citadel situated on an upper level while smaller dwellings built of mud or bricks were placed on lower level. It is quite apparent that the elite groups occupied bigger houses while the working classes lived in tenement-like buildings. Even in modern period we find that generally different areas house different classes of people. Architectural evidences can be very important sources for social, cultural and political histories of distant past for which we find little documentary information. Even if some written information may be available regarding the way the elite groups in a society lived, but historians may not find any documentary records about the dwellings of the poor. The archaeological and surviving architectural evidences may be our only sources for knowing something about the material conditions and cultural life of the poor people.

Maps represent the space and are very crucial to understanding the historical development and changes. All kinds of history – political, economic, social and cultural histories – have their own uses of the maps. Maps are also relevant for the researchers to understand the basic layout of the land in order to evaluate the historical patterns. In political history, maps are invaluable for putting across to the readers the actual expansion of kingdoms, colonies, military conquests, landmarks in expansion or contraction of political rule, and electoral wins in any country.

Paintings, besides being a subject of study on their own, provide us glimpses of the customs, behaviour, and values of past cultures and societies. We may also learn from them about the vegetation, flowers, and other natural features of the landscape of particular societies. Although paintings may not give a real representation of the period, they can still be quite useful for understanding the cultural contours of a society. Moreover, the painted portraits can inform us about the social status and attitude of the subject. For example, a commissioned portrait in oil would give us an idea that such person might have enough wealth for such an undertaking. However, not all oil paintings can be interpreted like this and the researchers have to investigate the circumstance of painting from other sources.

Photographs can provide a better representation of material reality. They can supplement the documentary sources by providing visually realistic information about the past. Sometimes a good photograph can tell us more than several pages of documents. If the researcher is careful, the photographic evidences can be immensely valuable for a work of history. Even the descriptions by eyewitnesses may not be able to tell exactly what happened during an event compared to a few good photographs of the incident. The photographic evidences may support a textual version of the event or it may even contradict and correct the written testimony. They can provide information about the approximate size of the crowd, the dress worn by the participants, and the implements or arms used by them in the course of a demonstration, an agitation, or a riot.

Films in various forms such as feature films, documentaries and newsreels can be profitably used as historical sources. Such films from both the silent and sound eras can provide us good information about the period. The moving images can provide graphic details of a place or an event in ways which neither the documents nor photographs can capture. Documentaries and newsreels in particular can help the historians a lot in understanding an event, social and economic conditions, riots, conflicts, and wars. The movies have been available only since the late nineteenth

century, and for quite some time they employed heavy equipments for shooting. Moreover, storing the films have been quite difficult and costly until the arrival of digital media. This made their frequent use difficult and cumbersome. Yet, they have captured the imagination of the people in many ways and can provide lasting images of the past. The live and moving images of past people in various social, cultural and political situations like religious ritual, marriages, demonstrations, etc can give the historians particularly compelling picture of the past and can become an important component of historical research.

27.5 SECONDARY SOURCES

Secondary sources are those writings which are composed at least many years after an event and which are based on primary sources of various kinds. Almost invariably the secondary sources consist of interpretive accounts of the past in the form of books, articles, biographies, encyclopedias, and journalistic pieces in printed, oral or online formats. Secondary sources are mostly produced by people who were not present at the events which are described by them.

Secondary sources serve an important function in historical research. They provide the historiographical context involving other books and articles relevant to the topic of the research. They also inform the researchers about the methods and theories used in particular fields of research. They may provide background information about the topic chosen by a researcher and impart the knowledge of the historical periods. Secondary sources must be read by the researchers in the beginning and during the process of their researches to familiarize themselves with different dimensions of interpretations. In the beginning of the research, secondary sources are extremely helpful to the researchers for understanding their areas of research and the ways and methods through which to pursue them.

Secondary sources exist in a variety of forms in the libraries and on the internet. **Books** are one important form which provides comprehensive knowledge about the topic and related areas of research. Both monographs and textbooks may give a lot of useful information. The monographs may be analytical or narrative and they may be complex or simple depending on the audience they are addressing. But in all cases the books not only inform the new researchers about the matter but also about the form in which presentation should be made including footnotes, bibliographies, tables, indices, etc.

Essays and articles provide in short and relatively more accessible forms what the books provide in larger forms. They consist of analysis, narratives, and interpretations based on a variety of sources. They contain much useful information and are also easier to read and finish in less time. Research articles and essays often bring the initial results of an ongoing research much sooner than the books and are found in periodicals, journals, and edited books. Through them, the researchers become familiar with new areas, new methods, and changing conventions of research much before such changes are recorded in books. Sometimes, even renowned scholars do not develop their interests in particular research areas in the form of a book and one can only find their views in specific articles. They are, therefore, indispensable for the researchers to keep themselves updated about scholarly conventions.

Conference papers and dissertations are relatively less accessible than the articles and books because they generally do not exist in formally published form and the access to them is also sometimes restricted. Yet, the new findings and changing directions in research are often located in them. In the conferences and seminars, the new researchers as well as the seasoned historians tend to present the recent scholarship in their fields. It is through the conference papers that new findings of scholars make their first appearances and undergo through the process of scrutiny, criticism and revision. Similarly, the dissertations and thesis are the results of a researcher's basic explorations into sources, including some new sources. They also contain critical and bold thinking by young scholars with original interpretations and analyses. Many scholars present in their dissertations their criticism of the old scholarship as well as their own alternative thoughts on the topic. Both conference papers and dissertations are often the result of revisionist scholarship. Moreover, they can also provide updated bibliographies in the field of their researches. So, the researchers can find new researches and reading lists in these.

27.6 DATABASES

The historical sources – both primary and secondary – exist in a variety of forms and are scattered around the globe. So, it is quite difficult to find and use all or even most of the sources existing on a subject or relevant to a topic. Even the knowledge of such sources is important for the researchers. For this, there are a number of sites, both in printed and digital forms, which prove to be very valuable to researchers. One of the most common sources of such information is the library catalogues. Another source is the lists of newspapers, private correspondences, imprints of old records, etc. found in research libraries. The online library catalogue or Online Public Access Catalogue (OPAC) can easily give an idea of book and journal collections in particular libraries. OPAC is very helpful as one can make a thorough online search according to authors and subjects without going to individual libraries. The bibliographies and references given in books, articles and dissertations can also serve as important guides for the beginners. The annotated bibliographies and historiographical essays can be of great help as they briefly outline many books and articles on the subject. Moreover, the indexes and abstracts of articles which are available online can be enormously helpful.

In our contemporary times, the computers are of great help in the process of historical research. Various search engines, such as Google, can give a preliminary idea about books, articles, journals, and papers relating to the topics of research. Many freely accessible sites also keep many useful books, essays and even primary sources, such as government records like censuses and gazetteers, economic surveys, some financial records, employment data, election statistics, etc, which can be very important sources. Many of such online records can be saved on the computers for future use.

Many online databases store and provide institutional access to a lot of full-text articles from scholarly journals. JSOTR, Project Muse, EBSCO, Proquest, Oxford University Press Journals, Cambridge University Press Journals, can be of great assistance in accessing important sources for research. Generally it is beyond the means of individual researchers to get access to these databases but they can be subscribed by institutions which in turn provide access to individual researchers.

One can make online searches on these sites to find articles relating to one's subject and then can selectively download them on the computer. Besides articles, sometimes these databases also contain full or limited access to books which may of interest.

27.7 SOURCE CRITICISM

The basic idea underlying source criticism is that no source can be accepted by the researchers at face value and they have to determine whether any particular source is genuine or not. Since the nineteenth century, the professional historians have been very particular about confirming the genuineness of their sources before using them for work. Thus, source criticism emerged as a valued part of historical research. It is not that each historian or researcher would individually determine the authenticity of every source. There are various methods evolved over the last three centuries to verify whether particular historical sources are bona fide or not and if they can be used for historical writing. These methods focus on particular fields of historical sources to verify their authenticity and also determine the time, place and the individuals involved in the creation of the sources. Such methods are much required in the areas of ancient and medieval histories because sources from those periods may be difficult to decipher due to language and writing styles, but also sometimes due to conscious falsification of sources by various authorities. But even for the modern period, we need certain tools to verify the genuineness of sources.

Paleography is one specialized area which is very useful for the study of intricate handwritings. The variety of languages written in different scripts and in various calligraphic styles, particularly in pre-modern times before the invention of printing, are made more comprehensible by this method. It also can differentiate a fake document from a genuine one. **Diplomatics** also conducts specialized study of documents particularly relating to broader conventions and general stylistic usage of an age. It can broadly determine the dates of documents and can also detect forgeries created in subsequent periods but claiming to be written in an earlier age. **Archaeology** is another special field of study, which has developed into a discipline of its own and which unearths material culture of bygone eras. **Epigraphy** studies the ancient and medieval inscriptions which is extremely helpful for the historians of ancient India because these inscriptions form the mainstay of history-writing for this period. **Numismatics** is expert study of coins which tells a lot about the economic and cultural situation during a period or a kingdom depending on the quality of metal and figures used in a coin. Sigillography (the study of seals), statistics (study of numerical records), Papyrology (study of writing on papyrus), and some other methods are extremely helpful to decide the authenticity of historical sources and provide the historians data for the study of specific periods.

There are basically two types of source criticism – external and internal. The external criticism deals with the external characteristics of a historical source, for example, the nature and quality of papers used, the nature of material used for inscriptions, the weight of a coin and the pictures imprinted on it, and so on. The internal criticism, on the other hand, deals with the language and content of a source. Both together determine the authenticity and reliability of a historical source. The reliability of the individuals who created the source has also to be determined by exploring the ideological and cultural biases and prejudices of the persons involved, their different

points of view, backgrounds, trustworthiness, and the intended audience. Cross-checking and examination of different documents on the same event can provide a better view.

27.8 SUMMARY

Historical sources are various kinds, such as primary and secondary sources, and published and unpublished sources. New researchers generally begin their work by reading the secondary sources like books and articles. However, it is the primary sources which form the basis of their researches over a long period of time. Primary sources consists of unpublished archival documents, published selections, newspapers and journals, diaries and correspondences, inscriptions, archaeological findings, coins, monuments, and a variety of other things which may provide data to the historians. But the historians have to be cautious about their sources and should verify their authenticity because many sources from remote past can be either tainted or fake. Even for the modern period, the historians have to pay attention to the origins of the sources and ideological and cultural beliefs of the persons who produced those sources.

27.9 EXERCISES

- 1) What are historical sources? Discuss the nature and use of secondary sources.
- 2) Give a description of the different forms of primary sources.
- 3) Write a note on source criticism.

UNIT 28 ANALYSIS AND ORGANIZATION OF EVIDENCES*

Structure

- 28.1 Introduction
- 28.2 Organization of Evidences
 - 28.2.1 Evaluation of the Sources and Cross-checking the Evidences
 - 28.2.2 Preparation of Research Notes and Draft Outline
- 28.3 Analysis of Evidences
- 28.4 Writing
 - 28.4.1 Quotations and References
 - 28.4.2 Use of Computers
 - 28.4.3 Preparation of Drafts: Revision and Editing
- 28.5 Summary
- 28.6 Exercises

28.1 INTRODUCTION

The first step in the process of research is to decide a manageable topic on which the paper, dissertation, or book is to be written. The choice of the topic would determine what kind and what amount of sources are to be collected. Depending upon the sources, your topic may be somewhat revised or even altered. The availability and accessibility of primary source materials have to be determined before finalizing a topic.

After the collection of 'facts' and 'evidences' from the historical sources, the task of analysis and interpretation begins. All the relevant sources need not be exhausted before the analysis is to be undertaken. In fact, the researchers should begin to analyse the collected evidences at various stages. They should also begin the process of writing soon after they have read some secondary sources. This will help them to know the direction in which their work would move and what primary sources would actually be required. It is by analysis their facts that the historians would be able to present an approximate picture of the past. Organization of the evidences is also a part of the research which is very helpful in the process of systematic analysis. Haphazardly scattered evidences make the work of analysis difficult and prolonged. Thus, the researchers should also learn to properly organize their material. In fact, both processes can go together. In this Unit, we will discuss the process of organization and interpretation of the facts which finally result into production of an article or book.

28.2 ORGANIZATION OF EVIDENCES

The researchers should start organizing their evidences as soon as they begin collecting source materials. Organization helps a lot when they start writing their first drafts.

The process of material collection and organization involves prior evaluation of sources regarding their authenticity. In the following sub-sections we will discuss the issues related to organization of evidences.

28.2.1 Evaluation of the Sources and Cross-Checking the Evidences

The various sources explored by a researcher may contain different and even conflicting information. Sources do not speak for themselves. It is the researchers who have to ask questions and seek relevant facts from the sources which can serve as evidences for their arguments. Some sources may or may not offer answers to questions which the historians have been asking. In such cases, the historians have to look for different sources. But in all cases the sources cannot be reproduced as such without subjecting them to a process of analysis. Through the medium of these sources the researcher comes across a variety of individuals who speak in different voices and hold different opinions. To present a coherent and accurate view of the past, therefore, the researchers have to compare various sources and establish connection between evidences. The historians also have to use their discretion to choose between evidences if they contain contradictory information, or they can also put before the readers the contradictory nature of evidences about an event. The historians may also make a distinction between the original source and derivative sources which were generated later on the basis of selective information from the original source. The main problem emerges when it is difficult to prove which source is the most original. Over the centuries, the historians have evolved various methods of source-criticism to determine the originality of a document. We have already discussed it in Unit 27. These methods determine the authenticity of the sources, try to locate them in time and place, and make them readable and comprehensible for the historians. The analysis of the evidences can only start after determining the veracity of the sources and the facts derived from them.

Another important step is to cross-check the evidences. If the same fact is reported from many different and but original sources, it may be taken to be true. Moreover, different sources may provide different dimensions of an event and the researcher has to form a coherent picture out of them. However, if different original sources depict an event in contradictory manners, the historians' task becomes difficult and they have to either analyse these contradictory evidences to bring out reliable version or they have to present all the facts, even if they are contradictory, before the readers. In any case, the verification of the sources and cross-checking of evidences are the first task before the researchers as they begin their process of collection of evidences and their analysis.

One important analytical task is to look for patterns by going through various sources. The sources which the past has left for us may contain apparently unconnected facts. The historians' job is to create some order, to seek certain repetitive patterns in these sources, to pick up facts which may be relevant to their themes and to leave out facts which are not of interest. Comparable and relatable facts can form the basis of confident statements by the historians about the truth of the past. Even the deviations from the pattern should be noted and explained in an impartial and open-minded way. The various evidences which fit a pattern may be brought together in an organized manner.

28.2.2 Preparation of Research Notes and Draft Outline

At the same time, the researchers have to select the facts from the sources in the form of research notes. Material can be photocopied, downloaded from the internet, or notes can be taken from the documents in the archives or libraries. The researchers should then review their notes underlining the important points. While going through their notes they should also try to sort them topic-wise which will make it easier to separate the material and arrange it in an article or a book. The computer can help a lot in this process because dividing and rearranging the material can very easily be done. The researcher may also use cards to systematically arrange their material along with references.

Preparation of research notes is important at this stage. Accurate, detailed and organized notes are of immense help when the researchers would write their drafts afterwards. The researchers should try to visualize their entire subject while preparing the notes because it would guide them to organize their notes according to topics and sub-topics right at this stage. The availability of source material and their relevance pertaining to your work would determine how much research notes will be prepared and what would be the length of the writing or whether the project would turn out to be an essay or a book. Research notes should be detailed and even some superfluous information can be gathered at the initial stage because later it may become difficult and time-consuming to consult the sources again. The notes may be taken on papers, cards, notebooks, or directly into a computer. While taking notes the researchers must write precisely the sources, departments, authors or agencies which generated the sources, the dates, file numbers, page numbers, and all the available information by which the source may be identified later. It would be better if the notes are arranged according to themes and sub-themes right at the beginning.

After reorganizing the material contained in the research notes, the researchers should prepare an outline of the chapters for a book or thesis, or topics and subtopics for an article or a book. A tentative outline should be prepared divided into subtopics each of which would be answering a particular research question but all the research questions should be related and their answers should be able to present a coherent picture of the past. The sections and subsections are a necessity in an article, but even in a book many writers prefer to divide each chapter into several sections. Besides introduction and conclusion, you should be able to decide many topics or subtopics depending upon the length of your work. Each chapter may address a broader research question while the subsections may deal with smaller research questions. One can arrange these questions and each chapter and section in a logical sequence so as to make one's work coherent. Writing can progress alongside the collection of material and preparation of research notes. This would reveal any lacuna in the work necessitating collection of new material. Thus, the preparation of draft outline will make the researcher aware of any gap which requires to be filled up.

28.3 ANALYSIS OF EVIDENCES

Researchers may start their analysis either by reading the primary sources or secondary sources. It is generally more rewarding to begin with the secondary sources

to clarify one's own research questions, to understand the various approaches to the study of one's subject, and to gain background knowledge about one's area of research. One can also get some idea of what primary sources other authors have used to write on the same or a similar topic.

For a better grasp of the secondary sources, the researchers should do critical reading of the books and articles by looking at them from various angles. It involves questioning the perspectives of other authors and sometimes even looking critically at the evidences used by them. It is only through this process that one's own analysis and explanation can be put forward. The best way to develop a critical appreciation is to read and compare a few books and articles on the same theme. This will also acquaint the researchers about different emphases various writings even if the theme is the same. For example, many books and articles are written on the partition of India. But each of them emphasizes different aspects of the partition. Some may deal with communalism, some may be concerned with British policies, some may focus on Congress politics, and some may take an entirely different approach by viewing the partition from the point of view of the common people who were the victims of this tragedy. A study of all such writings will clarify for the new researchers on this theme to look at different kind of sources, ask different questions, and concentrate on different aspects of the phenomenon of partition.

After spending some time on the study of secondary sources the researchers should start examining the primary sources they have collected. The secondary sources need not be exhausted before focusing on the primary sources, and a combination of both would serve the researchers better.

Most important historical works are based on primary sources. However, primary sources in themselves cannot provide a coherent and interconnected narrative. The researchers have to analyse the evidences and arrange them in the proper order to explain a phenomenon. Thorough reading of the secondary sources prepares the researchers to be able to understand their collected evidences as component parts of a narrative. It would also help them in knowing what kind of primary sources would be needed for their particular studies saving them from fruitless collection of unnecessary fact. Moreover, perusal of new secondary works may also provide different perspectives requiring a revision of the existing work even if the primary sources remain the same. Thus, a good understanding of secondary sources is very important in the process of analysis. A researcher, therefore, should work on both the primary and secondary sources simultaneously.

A particular field of research may contain a lot of primary sources or sources may be scanty. Both situations may create problems. In case of abundance, the researchers would not be sure what is to be left and what is to be utilized. Moreover, the time spent on scrutinizing, selecting, and sifting the evidences from a mass of unrelated material would be too large. On the other hand, sparse material may create the problem of not being able to answer the research questions satisfactorily. So, in any case, the quality of the evidences collected from primary sources and their ability to answer the research questions are the criteria which would guide the researchers.

The lack of sources may sometimes prompt the researchers to substitute their assumptions or unproven hypotheses for facts. But a researcher should not try to fill in the gaps in the evidences with imaginary constructs. In case of lack of primary

sources, over-reliance of secondary sources can lead to problems as the emphasis in such sources may be different from a particular researcher is doing. Moreover, the fragmentary evidences cited may not represent the truth of the past events. So, the historians have to balance their use of primary and secondary sources in their effort to interpret the past.

Even when reading the primary sources, you have to be alert to the possibility of misinformation, misdirection, or inaccuracy. Even when a source is credible, the researchers have to look for meaning beyond what is apparently stated in the document. They also have to understand the context in which a document was produced and the nature and situation of the person or persons involved in creation of a document. For this, they have to learn about the related histories of the period which they are researching. All these are important for proper analysis of the sources.

In the process of analysis, all facts containing information about your topic must be accorded the dignity they deserve. You should closely read them to understand the real meaning and in no case you should either treat the facts cavalierly or use them only in support of your pre-decided arguments. An unbiased and open-minded approach can bring out a lot of information from the sources which would otherwise not be possible. So, the researchers should pay equal attention to the evidences which may or may not be favourable to their earlier hypotheses and arguments.

Looking for causes of the phenomena and establishing them is an important task of analysis. Although the historians derive from multiple theories and various disciplines to seek the reasons for happenings and actions, all these have to be demonstrated through the facts they have collected. The work of interpretation cannot be complete without putting forward sufficient evidences to justify the arguments which the historians are advancing. In this respect, the theories and models which the historians use do not exist on their own but have to seek support from the hard ground of facts. The role of inference and interpretation is important, but they have to be validated by evidences. Therefore, in historical analysis, there is a close interaction between theory and facts and both have to support each other.

28.4 WRITING

The process of writing starts as soon as the researchers begin thinking about a topic, and it goes alongside that of analysis. Writing does not start after the research is complete but both move along together. No research can proceed without some form of simultaneous writing. In fact, writing reveals some of the problems of previous analysis which then needs to be changed. Simultaneous writing also makes the researchers realize the gaps in their sources and prompt them in collecting new types of source materials. The writing need not be systematic, beginning with the introduction, and then going through the body of the text to the conclusion. The best way to go about it is to keep writing haphazardly at each stage of research. All such writings can be collected together later in a coherent form. After the process of analysis and writing, the initially conceived sections and sub-sections may not remain the same, and even the main topic may be somewhat revised.

There are many ways in which an article or a book may be written. It can be a narrative in the form of a story or it may be statistical presentation in which the written text may be less. It can be descriptive or it can opt to be mostly analytical

and interpretative. In most of extended writings, various forms are combined to make them both descriptive as well as analytical. In fact, any good essay or book should contain elements of narrative, description and interpretation. Through narrative, a continuous interconnected and interesting account of the events is given. Description helps in the process by supplying details of the context, persons, and happenings. Both of these together answers the questions about what happened and how it happened. Interpretation is important to lay out the causes of the phenomena to answer the question about why it happened. Any historical writing must be able to address why question, and tell the readers about the causes responsible for events.

28.4.1 Quotations and References

Quotations are central to the presentation of any work of history. Any scholarly writing involves quotations in the precise language used by the primary and secondary sources to support and enhance the arguments put forward by the researcher. Quotations, particularly from the primary sources, create an atmosphere of authenticity for historical works as they bring to the readers the language, style and concerns of the people of earlier periods. Quotations from the interviews in case of recent or contemporary history also convey a feeling of authenticity and accuracy. However, quotations can be placed only within a context already outlined by the author so that the readers can understand the real import of the quoted text. Quotations are mostly used to illustrate a point and support an argument, and they may not be able to prove a point on their own.

You should take care that the quotations should not be very long or too frequent. It should not appear that quotations are out of context and are given only to fill the pages. Sometimes long quotations, mostly a paragraph-length, may become necessary, but the best forms of quotation are those which are short and merge with your own writing. Quoting a phrase or a sentence from primary or secondary sources in a seamless flow with your own narrative would be a more appropriate way of presentation. Yet, short quotations may sometimes be taken out of context and the authors have to ensure that the context and meaning of the quotations are in sync with their original meaning.

Quotations which are brief and in continuation with your own text can be given in usual, mostly single, quote marks. Paragraph-length quotations are given separately from the running text in the form of block quotation which are without quotation marks and are indented. Quotations which exceed the length of a paragraph should be given in boxes, and page-long or even longer quotations are better shifted to the appendix at the end of the chapter or essay as the case may be.

Scrupulous and easy identification of quoted or paraphrased evidences, particularly for important and unfamiliar facts, statements and arguments made in the process of writing, is extremely important. The common form adopted in historical writings to assure the readers about the genuineness of research is to provide accurate references through footnotes, endnotes, in-text notes, and bibliography. They are used to provide exact references but also for giving extra information not included in the text. All quotations must necessarily be referenced either in the footnote or the endnote. This would enable the readers to verify those quotations if they wish to do so. However, the researchers should not use a surfeit of footnoting identifying

each fact they have used. The well-known facts need not be footnoted. Even the well-known arguments do not need exact referencing. Only the new evidences, disputed facts, and paraphrased evidences and arguments from other works should be footnoted. The footnotes or endnotes can be simple reference notes or citation notes which briefly identify the text and page number of the reference given. On the other hand, the content footnotes are longer which may elaborate the brief arguments or explain the evidences given in the narrative. Some footnotes may also contain historiographical discussion in which different opinions can be briefly given. Footnotes can also be used for cross-referencing to different parts of the same book.

28.4.2 Use of Computers

The computers can be of great help in arranging, changing, and shifting the footnotes without any problem. Footnotes or endnotes can be directly inserted into the text through the command in your word-processor. It number the footnotes consecutively, provides a glimpse of footnote content even in the text if cursor is places on the number of the footnote in the text, and automatically changes the number of the footnotes if any footnote is deleted or shifted elsewhere. The computer can also arrange the footnotes or endnotes according to the chapters if necessary command is given. Because of its general usefulness in all facets of research, the computer has become an indispensable asset for the historians. Its enormous word-processing capabilities, smooth creation of footnotes, references and bibliographies, storage and organization of notes, access to online sources, and ability to quickly create charts and graphs provide immense help to the researchers in history. Computers are also of great help when the researchers undertake the work of revising their first draft.

One process of analysis in which the computer is most required is when the researcher is dealing with large amount of statistical data. Economic statistics, environmental data, census data, election data, business records, tax figures, industrial production and trade statistics and even for social and cultural analysis in quantitative terms, there is no replacement for computers which can store and analyse huge amount of data. Computer's spreadsheets are most useful in storing, calculating and analysing such statistical data with speed and accuracy. The computer softwares can be applied to suggest new interpretation which was beyond the capabilities of older forms of tabulated analysis. It can also prepare charts, maps, and graphs for visual presentation.

28.4.3 Preparation of Drafts: Revision and Editing

Writing the first draft is the most important task in the process of interpretation and analysis. All the facts and evidences supporting one's arguments are brought in at this stage. Those parts which appear inadequate or unnecessary can be removed later. Preparation of the first draft takes time and the researchers have to be patient in marshalling their relevant data at this stage. If the first draft is well-prepared, the time taken for revised and edited drafts may become less. In cases of books or dissertations, chapters, topics, and sub-topics have to be introduced. It is also important to decide whether one would present the narrative in chronological or thematic order. Chronological narratives present the events in sequence of time

which sometimes also implies that the earlier events contain the causes of the later ones. On the other hand, thematic narratives deal with similar events or statements under a single head without the constraints of chronology. However, most writers actually choose a mix of both the forms which allows them flexibility of telling their stories in their own ways. In this way, they combine thematic unity with temporal progression. The authors may also decide to follow chronological or thematic narratives or a combination according to the demands of their subjects, or chapters or topics. Thus, one chapter may be chronologically arranged while another may be thematic or a combination of both. Besides these, some authors also use inductive (from particular to general) or deductive (from general to particular) manner of narrating the events.

Multiple revisions of the first draft have to be taken up before finalizing the manuscript of an article or a book. While the first draft presents most of the relevant materials and arguments, the subsequent drafts help in properly organizing, reflecting, and interpreting the evidences. Ambiguities, inconsistencies, aggressive criticism of others' works, and incoherence should be gradually removed over the course of editing and revising your first draft. Some new facts and new themes may also be introduced in the course of revision. This process of revision would go on until a coherent manuscript is ready which meets the requirements of the scholarly conventions. Presentation of papers in conferences, seminars and discussion session may also help in the process of revision because the comments and criticism offered by others may be of immense benefit to the researcher.

The introduction and conclusion require serious attention of the author because they present and summarize one's arguments briefly which should be very accessible to most readers. Therefore, the author of a paper or a book should pay extra attention to these. But it does not mean that one has to be careless about the main body of the text. It should be consistent and coherent in presentation and arguments. Finally, the references and bibliography should be properly prepared and checked.

The introduction should contain the central thesis of the article or book which would present in short form what the author is aiming to do. As the arguments and evidences are yet to be presented, the thesis statement here would be anticipatory in nature which would briefly give a preview of what is to come. Introduction should also have a historiographical account of the important available literature on the topic. It should briefly show the approaches of other scholars and their answers to the pertinent questions on the subject. It should also point out the areas which the earlier scholars have missed and which the present author is intending to explore.

Conclusion of a work is generally a summary as well as the important arguments of the essay or book. It is the end of the narrative which a book or an article has been presenting. A good conclusion should be able to convey to the readers the entire book in a nutshell. The main themes and arguments of the work are to be brought in here, but repetitions should be avoided and main research questions and their answers should be presented in the conclusion. An important thing about writing is to keep the final version within manageable length. The language should also be simple, precise, and comprehensible for the readers to understand your arguments. Unnecessarily long essays or book chapters fail to engage the readers' attention.

28.5 SUMMARY

In this Unit, we have discussed that:

- 1) The researchers should rely only upon those sources whose authenticity has been either checked by other experts or themselves before beginning to collect their material.
- 2) The facts given in one source should be cross-checked with those given in the other sources. If many sources give similar reports about an event or a person, they should be taken as true. When different sources give contradictory facts, the researchers have to search for the most reliable version or inform the readers about the contradictory nature of their evidences.
- 3) Research notes and a draft outline have to be properly prepared for better organization of collected evidences.
- 4) Both primary and secondary sources should be closely studied for analysing the facts.
- 5) The process of writing should start right at the beginning of the research. The first draft should be properly prepared so that the time required for later drafts can become less. The first draft should bring out all the relevant evidences which the research can revise in subsequent drafts. The essay or the book may be divided into introduction, the main body of the text, and conclusion. They may also contain sections and subsections as the research questions are addressed and answered.

28.6 EXERCISES

- 1) What is the importance of research notes? How they should be prepared?
- 2) How are the computers helpful in the process of research and writing?
- 3) Discuss the role which quotations and references play in the process of analysis and writing.

UNIT 29 GENERALISATION*

Structure

- 29.1 Introduction
- 29.2 What is a Generalisation?
- 29.3 Inevitability of Generalisation
- 29.4 Objections to Generalisation
- 29.5 Role of Generalisations
- 29.6 Sources of Generalisation
- 29.7 How to Improve One's Capacity to Generalise?
- 29.8 Summary
- 29.9 Exercises

29.1 INTRODUCTION

Making generalisations is an important aspect of how historians in practice carry out their task, or, to quote Marc Bloch, how historians 'practice our trade.' It is a very complex and large subject and covers almost all areas of a historian's craft. I will confine myself here to only a few of its aspects:

- i) What is a generalisation? All make it sometimes without knowing that one is doing it. What are the different levels of generalisation?
- ii) Why are generalisations inevitable? And why do some people object to them?
- iii) What is their role or use, what purpose do they serve in the historian's craft?
- iv) From where do we get generalisations or what are the sources of generalisation or how to learn to make them in a meaningful manner?
- v) How can we improve our capacity to make generalisations?

29.2 WHAT IS A GENERALISATION?

A generalisation is a linkage of disparate or unrelated facts, in time or space, with each other. It is their grouping, their rational classification. Basically, a generalisation is a connection or relationship between facts, it is an 'inference' or, as Marc Bloch puts it, 'an explanatory relationship between phenomena.' It is the result of the effort to provide an explanation and causation, motivation and effect or impact.

More widely, generalisations are the means through which historians understand their materials and try to provide their understanding of facts to others. Analysis and interpretation of events, etc., is invariably done through generalisations.

Generalisation is involved as soon as we perform the two most elementary tasks: classify 'facts' or 'data' or 'phenomena' and compare and contrast them, or seek out similarities and dissimilarities among them, and make any inference from them.

Thus we make a generalisation when we put our facts into a series one after another. For example, when we mention the caste or religion of a leader we are making a generalisation. By connecting the caste and the leader or writer we are suggesting that his or her caste was an important part of his or her personality and, therefore, his or her political or literary work. Or even the mention of his or her age. More comprehensively, a generalisation occurs when we try to understand facts, or make connection between data, objects, events, records of the past through concepts and convey them to others through concepts.

Generalisations may be simple or complex, of low level or of high level.

Low Level: A Low-level generalisation is made when we label a fact or event, or classify it or periodise it. For example, labelling certain facts as economic, or certain persons as belonging to a caste, region or religion or profession, or saying that certain events occurred in a particular year or decade or century.

Middle Level: A middle level generalisation is made when a historian tries to find interconnections among the different elements of the subject under study; for example, when we are studying a segment of the social reality of a time, space or subject bound character. In this case – for example peasant movement in Punjab from 1929-1937 – the historian may at the most try to see the backward and forward linkages or connections but confining himself strictly to his subject matter. Themes such as class consciousness, interest groups, capitalism, colonialism, nationalism and feudalism cannot be tested in a research work except through middle level generalisations, such as relating to workers in Jamshedpur in the 1920s, growth of industrial capitalism in India in the 1930s, labour legislation in India in the 1930s.

Wide generalisations or systematising or schematising generalisations: These are made when historians reach out to the largest possible, significant connections or threads that tie a society together. These historians try to study all the economic, political, social, cultural and ecological linkages of a society in an entire era. The historian tries to draw a nation-wide or society-wide or even world-wide picture of these linkages even when he is dealing with a narrow theme. Quite often, even when a historian is studying a narrow theme, wide generalisations *lie at the back of his mind*. For example, quite often when a European scholar studied a specific social or religious aspect of an Asian or African society, a wider Orientalist understanding of Asia or Africa lay at the back of his mind. Similarly, quite often when a British scholar studied – or even now studies – the economic history of an Asian country for a specific period, a wider understanding of colonialism lies at the back of his mind.

The widest form of wide generalisations is the study of a social system (e.g. capitalism), or stage of society (e.g. feudalism or colonialism) or, above all, the transition from one system to another (feudalism to capitalism or colonialism to post-colonialism). Some of the historians and sociologists who have undertaken such wide generalisations are: Karl Marx, Max Weber, Marc Bloch, Fernand Braudel, Eric Hobsbawm,

Immanuel Wallerstein, and in India, D.D. Kosambi, R.S. Sharma, Romila Thapar, Irfan Habib.

Metahistory: Metahistory is often unhistorical, since it tries to impose a principle to organise history from outside history – this principle does not emerge from the concrete study of history itself. Quite often a single cause or ‘philosophy of history’ is used to explain all historical development. Examples of this approach are: Hegel, Spengler, Toynbee or recent writers on ‘The Clash of Civilizations’.

Marxist or Weberian approaches are not examples of Metahistory, for they are theories for analysing concrete history, society, politics, ideology, etc. The elements of these approaches can be tested by analysing concrete history. These approaches can be right even if Marx’s or Weber’s own statements and analysis of concrete historical events, etc., are proved wrong. On the other hand, if Spengler’s or Toynbee’s analysis of any specific event is proved wrong, his entire theory or approach falls to the ground.

29.3 INEVITABILITY OF GENERALISATION

Generalisations are inevitable. All make them or use them. Even when a historian thinks that he does not, he does. Generalisations are inherent in the very arrangement of words. There exists one notion that ‘the historian should gather the data of the past and arrange it in chronological sequence. Whereupon its meaning would emerge or reveal itself.’ In other words, the historian’s task is only to test the validity of data or to certify their authenticity, and not to interpret it, i.e., generalise about it. The opposite view is that sources in themselves, on their own, cannot reveal their meaning, nor can a pile of notes, however meticulously collected, ‘tell’ the historian what to write. The material has to be organised on the basis of some rational principles, i.e., some principle of selection, of importance or significance, of relevance. Even the notes taken of ‘facts’ have to have some principle of selection. Otherwise, the historian will be ‘drowned’ by facts to be noted. All this is a basic fact for three reasons:

- i) Selection is necessary since ‘facts’ are too many. Consequently, every historian selects. Question is how does he do it? Moreover, it is not even a question of selection of facts, for even that assumes that facts are lying before the historian, in a plate as it were. In reality, the historian has to search for them, and that assumes some principle of selection.
- ii) Second, gathered facts have to be arranged and grouped. Both involve explanation and causation, motivation and impact. In other words, analysis is basic to history as a discipline. In reality, except in a very limited sense, a fact becomes a fact only as a result of a generalisation.
 - a) For example, a zamindar, or a peasant, or a slave, or a capitalist looks like a fact, but is the result of a generalisation. It is only after having been analysed and explained that it can serve as a datum for the historian.
 - b) Or take census statistics. They look like facts but in reality they are already the result of generalisations by the persons who decide the headings under which statistics are to be collected by the census worker.

- c) Or take statistical surveys of peasants. How do you determine their class or even caste? Who is a poor peasant? Who is an agricultural worker? Or, even, who is a landlord? Census till recent years produced a demand by many for classification as Brahmins and Rajputs. In U. P. there is a caste group which insists on being called Lodh Rajputs, but which also declares itself to be OBC in order to take advantage of reservations for backward castes.
- d) The very noting of a fact or grouping hides a generalisation. To say Brahmin Tilak (or Bania Gandhi) already involved a historical generalisation. It involved the view that his being a Brahmin was important for his politics. It involved a whole theory of motivation as to why people join and lead a movement or even why and how Indians act in politics. It even leads to the theory of Brahmin domination of the Indian national movement.

It is important, in this respect, to note in which context is the caste brought in: political, social, cultural, or ritual. Kashmiri Nehru can refer to his love for Kashmir or imply that his being Kashmiri had some significance for his politics. Or take an example from Medieval India. The British referred to medieval period as period of Muslim rule, implying the generalisation that the religion of the ruler decides the nature of the rule. But they did not describe their own rule as Christian rule. On the other hand, describing the same period as feudal or medieval implies a different generalisation. We may take another, narrower example. Emphasis in history on parliamentary speeches would imply that these were the chief determinants of politics and government policies.

Recorded facts are, in any case, already the products of the generalisation in the minds of persons who recorded them. This is also true of what and why certain statistics were gathered. Even today, the facts reported by newspapers are the result of the generalising minds of the reporters, editors and owners of newspapers.

- i) In any case, as soon as we go beyond names or dates or mere counting, generalisations come in. Hence, without generalisations one can be a compiler (though not even that as we have explained earlier). No complex analysis or interpretation, or even narration is possible without generalisation. Nor is it possible for a historian to delve deeper than surface phenomenon in understanding events and institutions without generalisations.
- ii) But analysis and causation already involve, in turn, theories or principles of causation. To quote the philosopher Sydney Hook: 'Every fact which the historian establishes presupposes some theoretical construction.'

This has another positive consequence for historians. Even when no new facts are unearthed, two or more historians can work on the same theme or subject. They can work on the same material through fresh generalisation. This is particularly important for historians of the Ancient and Medieval periods. Even in the absence of new sources and material, fresh approaches and generalisations can produce fresh research.

29.4 OBJECTIONS TO GENERALISATION

Some people object to generalisations and raise three types of objections:

- i) The first objection is based on the notion that facts are to be differentiated from generalisations and that generalisations should flow out from facts. We have already answered this objection and pointed out that facts are often made facts through generalisations.
- ii) It is said that every event is unique and possesses an individuality of its own. According to this view, society is atomistic and follows no uniformity. But, the fact is that even uniqueness demands comparison. We cannot grasp the unique unless it is compared with some thing we know. Otherwise the unique is unknowable, even unthinkable. In any case, a historian is concerned with the relation between the unique and the general. For example, Indian national revolution is unique but its uniqueness can be grasped only by comparing it with other known revolutions.
- iii) Often the critics really target those generalisations which are a priori in character and are superimposed on historical reality. These critics are not wrong. Many put forward a generalisation as an assertion and consider it proved when it has to be proved. Similarly, many generalisations are inadequately tested. Many are based on oversimplification of data and relationships and causation. Some generalisations are plainly stupid. For example, the answer to the question: why study Africa? Because it is there. Or that some other countries are undergoing military coups, therefore another country has also to. (By the way, this is different from suggesting that events in one country may have exercised influence on another). Or that because imperialism produced a comprador capitalist class, therefore every colonial country's capitalist class had to be comprador. Or that since other nationalist revolutions took to violence, therefore Indian national revolution also had to be violent. Or that since globalisation led to underdevelopment in some countries, it must lead to the same in all countries. All these objections apply to the unscientific and illogical character of some generalisations or are critiques of the manner in which they are arrived at.

In fact, the real problem is different and may be delineated as follows:

- a) Generalisations should be made explicit so they can be openly debated.
- b) The main problem is the level of a generalisation and of kind it is.
- c) The degree of validity or tentativeness or 'truth' of a generalisation and what kind of proof is used to validate it.
- d) One should study how to make generalisations and learn how to improve one's capacity to make interconnections which are better or more authentic and useful ones (i.e. with greater validity and coverage). In other words, when we say that a particular historian is a good historian, one means that he makes better connection and generalisations apart from having technical skill and integrity as a historian.

29.5 ROLE OF GENERALISATIONS

Apart from the function they perform that we have discussed earlier, generalisations have certain added *advantages* for the students of history:

- i) They serve as the organising principles for his/her data thus resolving a basic problem for the historian with a mass of untidy facts in his notes not knowing how to put them in some type of order.
- ii) They improve a historian's perception or 'broaden his gaze'; they increase his ability to grasp an ever-increasing area of reality and make more and more complex interconnections.
- iii) They enable the historian to draw inferences and establish chains of causation and consequence or effect. In other words, they enable him to analyse, interpret and explain his date.

The five W's of a historian's craft are who or what, when, where, how and why. Direct facts (i.e., low level generalisations) can at the most enable us to answer who (or what), when and where questions but not how and why questions. The latter require wider generalisations.

- iv) More specifically, generalisations lead the historian to look for new facts and sources. Quite often new sources can be properly grasped only through new generalisations. But very often the process is the other way around. In general, the search for new materials is motivated by new generalisations.
- v) Generalisations also enable the historian to establish new connections between old, known facts. When we say that a historian has thrown new light on old facts, it invariably means that the historian has used new generalisations to understand the known facts.
- vi) Generalisations help the historian to avoid 'empiricism' or 'literalism'— that is taking the sources at their face value or literal meaning. Instead, he is led to establish their significance and relevance in his narrative. Take, for example, D. N. Naoroji's statements on (British) foreign rule and the use of foreign capital over his lifetime. Without the use of generalisations, the tendency would be to take his statements at face value and quote them one after other in a chronological order.

Or, the historian can generalise regarding Naoroji's approach and then see how all of his statements 'fit in' the generalisation. May be the generalisation has to be made more complex; may be one has to make separate generalisations for different stages or phases in his thinking. Or may be, the generalisation has to be made that there are differences in his theory and practice. Or may be one has to say that there is general and continuous unsystematic and irregular thinking by him. Then one can make the generalisation that Naoroji was confused and incoherent. The latter would, in any case, be the impression of the reader if 'literalism' was followed. On the other hand, generalisation would enable the historian to look at different options in interpretation; his discussion would be put on a sounder footing.

In Naoroji's case we may say that he was an admirer of British rule during the initial period (till early 1870s) and then became critical of British rule and began

to consider it an impediment to economic growth and a cause of India's poverty. Similarly, we may point out that he initially favoured the use of foreign capital and later, after 1873, started opposing its entry. We may also analyse the reason for his change of views.

Here, we can see the advantages of the use of generalisations, for the mere recitation of Naoroji's opinions would not enable us to understand him or to analyse his economic thinking, it would only amount to compiling or summarising his views.

- i) Generalisations enable a historian to constantly test what he is saying.
 - a) At the theoretical plane: As soon as one consciously classifies or categorises or interrelates persons or events, that is, makes generalisations, one can oneself examine what their meaning or relevance is.
 - b) As soon as one has made a generalisation, one starts looking for facts which may contradict it, or looking for 'the other side'. Without a generalisation one does not look for facts which might contradict one's views; in fact, one may miss contrary facts even when they stare one in the face. This looking for contrary facts is basic to the historical discipline, though it is often ignored.

To go back to Dadabhai Naoroji's example, as soon as I have generalised about his critique of British rule, I have to ask the question: how does he reconcile this critique with his praise for British rule. Or does he not make an attempt to do so? If I am merely compiling his statements, I need not look for the contradiction or its explanation. Similarly, if I generalise about his attitude to foreign capital, I start looking for contrary instances. If I am compiling, I need not. Another instance would be Gandhi's statements on the relation between religion and politics. As soon as I generalise, I start looking for any opposite statements as also other statements which throw light on his statements.

- c) In fact, quite often, others have already generalised on an issue or subject, the historian researching afresh on the issue can make an advance, in the main or often, only by testing the earlier generalisations with existing or fresh evidence and thus, constantly, revise or negate or confirm them. The historian's task is made easier if he makes his generalisations explicit along with the generalisations he is testing.

To sum up: Generalisations guide us, they enable us to doubt facts as they appear or as they have been described by contemporaries or later writers; they suggest new possible understanding of old facts; they bring out fresh points and views for confirmation, refutation, further development, further qualification of existing views.

Generalisations help define a student of history's theme whether in the case of an essay, a tutorial, a research paper or a book. They enable him to take notes – whether from a book, an article, or a primary source. In fact, a student of history's essay or thesis has to be a series of generalisations to be tested, whether he puts them as statements or questions. Generalisations also enable him to find out which of his notes are significant and relevant to the theme or subject matter of his research.

Generalisations also enable a researcher to react to what he is reading. He can do so only if he is generalising while he is reading. Generalisations lead to debates

among historians, otherwise the only reaction to each other's work among them would be to point out factual mistakes. Generalisations lead historians to pose issues for discussion and debate and to start processes of fruitful discussion among them. Some would agree with the generalisations presented in another historian's work and find new guides for research and thinking in them. Others would disagree and try to find new and different explanations for the phenomenon under discussion and would look for different evidence for their point of view. Generalisations thus promote search for fresh supporting or countervailing evidence regarding them. We may discuss the case of a paper presented in a seminar. If it has no generalisations, it provides no ground for discussion. Participants can at the most refute or add to the facts presented in the paper. The absence of generalisations also explains the boring character of some of Indian historical writings. The reader does not have anything to react to them.

29.6 SOURCES OF GENERALISATION

It should be realised in the very beginning that no general rule or standard procedure exists for deriving generalisations. However, several sources for the purpose do exist.

- i) A major source is the previous writings on any subject which often contain different generalisations.
- ii) Another major source consists of other social sciences, for example generalisations regarding individual behaviour and motivations, mass behaviour or behaviour of crowds, role of tradition, role of family, caste outlook and behaviour; economic theory and history; functioning of political systems; social anthropology (especially important for ancient and medieval history); linguistics; and so on. These sources of generalisation are especially important in view of this changed nature of historical discipline in India in the last 50 years or so. History is no longer seen merely in terms of wars and diplomacy or from the point of view of the upper classes or ruling groups or males. It now pertains more to study of society, economy, wider political movements, culture, daily life, suppressed, dominated and marginal groups, such as women, lower castes and tribal groups, ecology, medicine, sports, etc.
- iii) Theories of history, society, culture and politics such as those of Marx, Weber and Freud are another major source of generalisation.
- iv) Historians also derive generalisations from the study of the present. For example, movements of dalits and other anti-caste groups, and of the tribal people. Similarly popular discontent and opposition movements can throw up many generalisations pertaining to the Indian national movement.
- v) Many generalisations are derived from life:
 - a) Common sense is a major source. In fact many historians who do not accept the need for a conscious process of acquiring generalisations, use their common sense as their usual source of generalisation.
 - b) Another usual source is historian's personal experience or life-experience. This experience is, of course, limited by various factors : area of one's activity; quality of one's life; one's status or position in life as also one's

upbringing. One example is the tendency of some historians to see political struggle among groups, parties and individuals in terms of quarrels in the family or in a government or company office.

- vi) We also derive generalisations from active data collection, that is, from systematic analysis of the sources. However, this does not so much help in acquiring of generalisations but the testing of generalisations. In other words, one does not first gather or take notes and then generalise but rather constantly comment on evidence of notes even while taking them. The point to be noted is that even while taking notes, the student or scholar must not be passive recorder but should function with an active mind.

Thus, the skill to make or generate generalisations is best acquired by having an active mind, doing everything one learns to make a correction the way a child does. A child asks even the most stupid-looking questions to make connections, many of which he may discard later. For example, when meeting a new male person: who is this uncle? Why is he an uncle? Where is his wife? Why has he not brought his children? Why have you asked him to eat with us? Why do you address him as sir and not other uncles who visit us? Why do you serve him a drink and not other uncles? Why is he fair or dark or why has he got a beard and so on. A child's questions can open up so many aspects of a society. **A historian has to be like a curious child.** Thus if one reacts to the sources, etc., like a child and asks questions and generalises while reading and noting them, his thesis would start getting forward.

Thus a generalisation is basically a connection, which can come to one's mind any time, especially when one's mind is 'full' of the subject. Many possible connections or generalisations come into one's mind when reading, taking notes or thinking on the subject. Many of them would be given up later, but some will survive and form the basis of one's research paper or thesis. They will be stuff of one's original contribution. They are what we mean when we say that an historian is original and he has something new to say.

29.7 HOW TO IMPROVE ONE'S CAPACITY TO GENERALISE?

Or how does one acquire and improve the capacity to grasp the underlying deeper connections and not rely on surface or superficial connections? This is perhaps a very much open area and the answers are both tentative and inadequate. The reader has enough scope for improvisation.

To start with, the problem may be restated, so that it also provides a part answer. Having recognised the need for generalisations, this need should become a part of one's very approach or mind-set. One should acquire the habit of always looking out for relationships or linkage between events and things not only when researching but also in day-to-day life. In other words, one should acquire a generalising and conceptualising mind.

- i) One should acquire and improve the capacity to handle ideas since all generalisations are grasped as ideas. One should learn to handle ideas, however poorly one may do so in the beginning. One should constantly conceptualise

one's problems in place of mere narration. Even while narrating, one should see one's material as an illustration of the general, at however low a level.

- ii) One should learn to apply logical principles. Logical fallacies such as circular reasoning have to be avoided. Restatement of a question in a positive form is not an answer to it. For example, to the question why does wood float in water, the answer that it has the quality to float in water is not an answer; it is merely a positive form of the question. Similarly, the answer to the question why Akbar was a great ruler because he knew how to rule is no answer.
- iii) Language is a historian's basic tool. One should use clear language in thinking or writing, even if it is simple. Obscurity in language does not represent clarity or depth of thought. Postmodernist and structuralist language are prime examples of such obscurity as C. Wright Mills has pointed out in the case of structuralism. They do injustice even to the insights that postmodernism and structuralism provide. The latter two would survive and their contribution would acquire abiding character only when their practitioners learn to express themselves in simpler, easily graspable language.
- iv) One should study and examine in a systematic manner the 'things' historians talk about.
- v) Refinement of concepts and generalisations is a perpetual process. Consequently, discussion around and about them with friends, colleagues and lecturers is very important. Conversation, in any case, is important in the development and refinement of ideas, for conversation cannot be carried on without conceptualisation. Two or more people cannot go on talking merely by narrating facts to each other. For example, even while discussing a film, people cannot go on citing instances of what an actor said or did. They must argue around the quality of the dialogue and its delivery, as also other aspects of the acting in and direction of the film.
- vi) One should acquire the quality of critical receptivity to new ideas. One does not have to accept new ideas simply because they are new. (Ideas are not like new clothes!) But one should be willing to discuss them, examine them, argue about them, and accept them if found useful or reject them, as the case may be.
- vii) One should be familiar with prior generalisations in one's area of study. One should develop the capacity to utilise them after critical examination. Consequently, historiographic study of past and current generation of historians is absolutely necessary. Quite often, we do not evolve or generate new generalisations, we improve on the earlier ones, sometimes even turning them upside down or rather right side up! This is what almost all historians do. For example, I started by testing A. R. Desai's generalisation, in *Social Background of Indian Nationalism*, that the Moderate nationalists represented the commercial bourgeoisie of India, and gradually evolved the generalisation that they represented the emerging industrial bourgeoisie. Similarly, most Indian historians of the 19th and early 20th centuries began by examining the generalisations made by the earlier and contemporary British historians of India.
- viii) Comparative history, social sciences and natural and physical sciences are rich sources for generalisations. One can and should take 'leads' or suggestions

from them. Studies of national movements in China, or Indonesia or Algeria can, for example, enable us to develop generalisations about the national movement in India. There can, however, be no direct or one-to-one application from the study of other countries or social sciences, etc. The latter should lie at the back of one's mind; they should provide broad hypotheses to be tested and possible connections for one's own materials; they should enable one to search for fresh evidence for one's own theme of research.

- ix) One should acquire better knowledge of the present; one should be in better 'touch' with the present and, in fact, should even participate in the making of the present. The capacity to understand the living would certainly enable one to better understand the dead. There is a popular advice which parents give to the children which is quite relevant in this respect: "You will understand us better when you become a parent." In fact we daily borrow from the present to generalise about the past. Hence, we should improve the quality of our life-experience and what is called *common sense*, for often the 'truths' of poor common sense can be very misleading. This is the case for such common examples of poor axioms or common sense as: there are two sides to a question. This is just not true in many cases. For example, in case of caste-oppression of the dalits, or oppression of women, or communalism or anti-Semitism, racialism, colonial oppression, and so on.

If one's life-experience is narrow, one will have a tendency to view past events, movements and persons too from a narrow or 'little-minded' angle. For example, one will see the reason for the anti-imperialism of a Surendranath Banerjee, or Dadabhai Naoroji or Gandhi to lie in personal frustration.

Similarly, one may see questions of political power in terms of family quarrels with which one is familiar, or of political prestige in terms of personal insult, or of state policy in terms of personal gratefulness or vengeance or betrayal, or of national budget in terms of household or kitchen accounts.

One should also develop the capacity to see human beings in all their complexity. People can live at several levels; for example, they can be very honest at one level, and dishonest at another. There is the wrong tendency among many to link political statesmanship with personal virtuous life. It is possible for a political leader to be very humane in personal life and yet very cruel in political life. Another may not betray his wife but easily betray his colleagues or vice versa. Victorian moral outlook has been the bane of many Indian historians of earlier generations.

A historian must, therefore, expand the limits of his/her common sense. He/she must also lead a fuller life with a variety of experiences and activities. Acloistered life invariably tends to limit a historian's vision.

Since no one person can lead a life of multi-experiences, however hard he/she may try, one way to have a multi-layered understanding of life is through literature. A good historian has to be fond of fiction and poetry – even of detective and science fiction.

I may sum up this aspect by saying that better quality of understanding of life makes for better history and better history makes for better quality of life.

- x) One's position in life certainly influences one's capacity to generalise and understand the march of history. Is one, for example, for change or for *status quo*? And if one is for change, what type of change? For example, does one believe in the caste system? Or in male superiority? This does not mean that one's position in life would *determine* one's historiographic position; but the nature of its influence will be determined by the extent to which one is *aware* of the issue.

29.8 SUMMARY

In this Unit, we have tried to deal with various aspects of generalisation. Our position is that generalisation is a very important part of historical work. Although there are many objections to generalisation, no writing is possible without using general terms and concepts. These are derived from earlier works and serve as the starting points for the current work. The generalisation may keep changing as the work progresses. However, at every stage, the historians have to make generalisations which provide the basis for understanding their facts and source material.

29.9 EXERCISES

- 1) What is a generalisation? Discuss the various types of generalisations?
- 2) Do you think that there is a need for generalisation in history-writing? Discuss the various objections to generalisation.
- 3) What are the different stages in which you may generalise about your work? What are the sources on the basis of which you can generalise even before starting empirical work?
- 4) How can you improve your capacity to generalise?

UNIT 30 CAUSATION*

Structure

- 30.1 Introduction
- 30.2 What is Causality ?
- 30.3 Social Sciences and Causation
- 30.4 Historians and Causation
- 30.5 Summary
- 30.6 Exercises

30.1 INTRODUCTION

All scientific inquiry begins with the question ‘why?’ Why does oil float on water? Why do we have earthquakes? Why do famines occur? Why did England industrialise before Germany? Why was India colonised? In one form or another all disciplines ask the question ‘why?’ History is no exception. Like other natural and social sciences it too addresses the ‘why’ interrogative. Even as historians study the past they try to explain why a particular event or phenomenon did or did not occur. They ask, for example, why did the Roman Empire decline? Why did World War I occur? Why did the British transfer power to India in August 1947? Why did Gandhi withdraw the Non-cooperation Movement? The writing of history thus begins with why questions. However, unlike many other social sciences history does not focus upon generalities. It does not explain a category of events but analyzes a specific occurrence. Instead of offering an explanation for why de-colonisation occurs, or why civilisations decline, or why revolutions occur, it examines why the British left India in 1947, why the Minoan population decimated, why the socialist revolution occurred first in Russia. Historians, in other words, explain the occurrence of specific events. In place of treating the event as an instance of a general category it perceives it as, to borrow a phrase from Patrick Gardiner, a unique particular. Consequently it concentrates on those dimensions that are specific to the given event and offers an account that explains fully why the event *E* happened when it did.

30.2 WHAT IS CAUSALITY?

Even though the event is taken to be a unique particular, historians nevertheless endeavor to explain its occurrence. The analysis of an event as a particular does not undermine either the effectiveness of the offered explanation or its claim to represent the truth. Like other social scientists, historians offer a complete explanation of the phenomenon under consideration, and they do this by determining what caused that event to occur. Search for causes is thus central to historical analysis. Up until the eighteenth century philosophers and historians commonly believed that the cause must be an antecedent event — one that occurred prior to the event that is being explained; and that the antecedent event must be regularly associated with the effect. However, following upon the work of John S. Mill, the cause is no longer identified as an event that occurs before. Rather it is conceived as a condition or a set of

*Resource Person: Prof. Prof. Gurpreet Mahajan

conditions that are always present when the event E occurs, and always absent when E does not occur.

The cause, in other words, is a condition that is both necessary and sufficient for bringing about the given event E . It is said to be necessary because its absence implies the absence of the effect E , and it is sufficient because its presence yields the given result E . If a study shows that individuals with Vitamin A deficiency suffered from night-blindness, and in all those individuals where Vitamin A was present in sufficient measure, night-blindness did not occur, then all else being the same, we can say that deficiency of Vitamin A is the cause of night-blindness. We can designate Vitamin A as the cause because its absence meant night-blindness and its presence meant the absence of the effect – namely, night-blindness.

Three points need to be emphasised here. First, the relationship of necessity is significantly different from that of sufficiency. Second, the cause is considered to be a condition that is both necessary and sufficient; and third, constant conjunction is not an adequate indicator of a causal relationship. If in a given instance cardiac arrest leads to the death of a person, we may say that heart failure was a condition that was *sufficient* for producing the effect – namely, the death of a person. However to assert that cardiac arrest was a *necessary* condition for the death of the individual we need to show that the absence of cardiac arrest would have meant absence of the effect - death. If death could have occurred due to some other condition – for example, liver failure or hemorrhage, then cardiac arrest may have been a sufficient condition but it cannot be designated as a necessary condition for the occurrence of the event - death of the individual. Since the person could have died due to the presence of other conditions the absence of cardiac arrest would not have prevented the effect. Hence, it cannot be a condition that is necessary for the event under consideration. What is being suggested here is that **the relationship of necessity is different from that of sufficiency, and in philosophies of science the cause has been conceived as being both a necessary and a sufficient condition.**

If the cause is a necessary and sufficient condition, it implies that it is regularly associated with the given effect. That is, it is always present when the effect E occurs, and always absent when the event E is absent. **Constant conjunction is thus an important observable attribute of causation.** Further, the causal condition is almost always antecedent to the effect. However, this does not mean that a condition that is regularly observed before the event E takes place is the cause of the latter. Constant conjunction and spatial contiguity are features of a cause-effect linkage but the cause cannot be identified on this basis alone. On a record, songs appear in a specific sequence. However, the song that comes first is not the cause of the one that follows. Likewise, lightning may be regularly observed before we hear a thunder but this does not mean that it is the cause of the latter. It is possible that both lightning and thunder are the visible effects of an altogether different cause. What needs to be underscored here is that regular association is not by itself sufficient for claiming that the condition that is observed first is the cause of that which comes after. To show that something is the cause of an event we need to show that its absence would have implied the absence of the event being explained.

Similarly, listing events in the correct sequential order does not also provide an explanation of an event. We may enumerate in the correct time-sequence all that happened on a particular day but that may not offer an explanation of why E happened. For instance, simple listing of events that happened one-after-another

may give us no indication why the concerned person met with an accident or fell ill. We may learn how a particular event occurred – e.g., the correct sequence in which things occurred when the accident took place but it cannot provide an explanation as to why the accident occurred or why the person was fatally injured. Likewise, the historian may place events that occurred from January 1947 to August 1947 in the proper time sequence, but these would not constitute an explanation of why the British left India in 1947. Once again, explanation or answering the question why requires something more than the mere sequencing of events one-after-the-other in the correct order. At the very least it requires that we show that the presence of a particular condition, that may have come before, yielded that effect and that the absence of that condition may have meant non-occurrence of that event. In brief, identifying the cause is not a matter of placing things one-after-another. One needs to locate a condition that was necessary: that is, a condition without which the event may not have occurred.

30.3 SOCIAL SCIENCES AND CAUSATION

In the natural sciences researchers conduct controlled experiments to determine what is the necessary and sufficient condition. By controlling and manipulating one condition while all others remain exactly the same they determine the impact that the condition has on the effect. If the elimination of condition *C* results in the absence of *E* while all else is the same, then *C* is said to be the cause of *E*. In the social sciences it is not always possible, or even desirable, to conduct experiments under controlled conditions. For example, if we are analysing the cause of communal violence that occurred in a given region, it is not possible to set up a controlled experiment. Since the event that is being explained has already occurred, the experiment cannot be conducted in its natural setting. The experiment can only be re-created in an artificial or laboratory condition and it is indeed questionable whether we should produce conditions in which individuals inflict physical harm upon each other. In addition to it, there is the difficulty of finding exactly similar groups of individuals whose behaviour is replicable. Given all these considerations, conducting controlled experiments poses innumerable problems in the social sciences, and researchers in these disciplines do not rely on this technique for arriving at causal explanations.

Social scientists identify causes by using what John Stuart Mill called the Method of Agreement and the Method of Disagreement or Difference. The Method of Agreement draws an inventory of all those circumstances/conditions that are present whenever the event *E* occurs. It identifies a condition that is invariably present in all instances where *E* has occurred. The method of Difference, on the other hand, searches for that condition in terms of which the antecedent circumstances and the phenomenon differ. That is, a condition whose absence translates into the absence of that event. Social scientists combine these two methods to determine what caused *E* to occur. They pinpoint the cause by studying a number of positive and negative instances: instances where event of the type *E* occurred and situations where *E* did not occur. If in all cases where *E* occurred condition *C* was always present and in all cases where *E* did not occur condition *C* alone was absent, then *C* is regarded as the cause of *E*.

To take an example: if the analysis shows that in all instances where factionalism existed Congress lost elections and in all those states where the party was free of factional politics, it won the support of the voters, then it can be said that factionalism

was the cause of party losing elections. The causal condition is identified here by studying contrast cases – contexts where Congress won elections and states where it lost. It is of course assumed that the states compared differed only in this one aspect and that all other prevailing conditions were more or less the same. If, for instance, factionalism is found in states where Congress has been losing successive elections or where opposition parties have been increasing their vote percentage over the years, then factionalism cannot be identified as the cause. Alternately, if the states in which Congress won elections were marked by a high concentration of rural population and there is previously some evidence that these are sections that have supported the Congress in the past, then again one cannot easily conclude that factionalism is the cause of winning elections. And, if the states in which it lost elections were also those that had witnessed a spate of communal violence, then again, the disparity in initial conditions existing in the two kinds of states would prevent one from inferring that factionalism is the causal condition. The existence of one common condition – namely, factionalism within the party — in states where it lost elections and the absence of that one condition in states where it won is not in itself sufficient for claiming that factionalism is the cause of lost electoral support. The election may have been won and lost due to completely different causal conditions. Hence, the crucial factor is that all other conditions in the compared situations must be “at par”. If the compared units differ in significant respects then it is not possible to infer with any degree of certainty what the causal condition is.

It follows from the above discussion that in social sciences a cause is identified by studying a number of situations that are similar in terms of their antecedent conditions but different with regard to the outcome or phenomenon that occur. However, what happens when comparable contexts are not available? What happens when we study and try to explain events are unique? How do we then identify a cause? One option is to say that in all such cases there is no satisfactory way of identifying the causal condition. Indeed several philosophers have, on account of the distinctiveness of the object and purpose of inquiry in history, argued that we abandon the search for causes. The natural sciences, they maintain, are generalising sciences. They aim to discover law-like generalisations. History, by comparison, focuses on that which is unique to the case being analysed. Further, natural sciences seek to gain knowledge with a view to enhancing technological control. Causes are sought not only to explain why something happened but also to predict circumstances in which we might expect similar events to occur and what might be controlled – manipulated or altered – to ensure that the said event does not occur. History, on the other hand, seeks to *understand* why the event occurred. It tries to make sense of a phenomenon by identifying the meaning that it had in a given historically defined context. Since its aim is to enhance communication and interaction, it is permeated by a different knowledge interest and therefore relies on a different methodological orientation. In place of identifying a condition that causes or produces a given effect it makes sense of the event by treating it as an expression of a specific world-view. It, in other words, explores the link between life, expression and a historical *weltanschauung* and understands rather than explains a given event.

Here it needs to be emphasised that determining the cause of an event that is unique, or a one-time occurrence, poses a serious challenge. Historians, who affirm the relevance and importance of causal form of inquiry, have met this challenge by redefining the idea of cause. In particular they have attempted to dissociate explanation from prediction and argued that the cause refers to a condition that made the *crucial*

difference in a given situation. While the cause was previously associated with the assertion, ‘whenever *C* also *E*’, they claim that the identified cause *C* only explains a given event *E* rather than all events of the type *E*. In saying that the cause explains fully why a specific event occurred at a given time and place, they suggest that historians search for a condition that was necessary *under the circumstances*. They make, what might be called, singular causal assertions.

30.4 HISTORIANS AND CAUSATION

In offering singular causal assertions historians separate explanations from predictions. They argue that a complete explanation does not entail accurate predictions. In fact several philosophers of history maintain that explanation and prediction are two different kinds of activities, involving different kinds of evidence and justifications. Prediction assumes regularity and recurrence of sequence. We can say that the sun will rise in the East tomorrow and the day after that only because we believe that the structure of the universe and the laws by which it is governed will continue to operate unchanged. It is the assumption that patterns and regularities observed today will recur and repeat themselves that allows us to predict the future course of events. However, this assumption is irrelevant for stipulating causal connections. We can determine with reasonable accuracy what caused *E* to occur even when *E* is a one-time occurrence, or a unique particular. In the absence of the presupposition that social reality will remain unaltered and existing patterns will recur we cannot claim that whenever *C* occurs, *E* will follow.

A distinction is here made between explanation and prediction. In empiricist theories of science, explanation and prediction are inextricably linked together. Indeed one is considered to be a condition of the other. When it is said that *C* is the cause (necessary and sufficient condition) of the event *E*, it is simultaneously suggested that whenever *C* is present *E* will necessarily follow. And, *vice-versa* a successful prediction is considered to be an indicator of the accuracy of the explanation. Thus, explanation and prediction are taken as two sides of the same coin. In history, particularly, this proposed link between explanation and prediction is questioned. Instead it is argued that causal inquiry and explanation is distinct from the act of prediction. Complete explanation does not entail a successful prediction and *vice-versa* a successful prediction is no indication of the accuracy or the truth of the offered explanation. We may, on seeing dark clouds in the sky, predict accurately that there will be rainfall in the next twelve hours. But making a successful prediction here does not give us any explanation of why this event occurs. Similarly, on seeing red spots on the face of a child we may accurately predict that he is coming down with measles. But once again making the correct prediction is no indication of the fact that we have an adequate explanation of this occurrence. The act of prediction is thus different from that of explanation, and historians may not offer predictions but they nevertheless can, and do, provide complete explanation of why a particular event occurred.

By de-linking explanation from prediction, historians not only challenge the ‘general law model’ of explanation used by positivists, they redefine the concept of causation. In place of conceiving the cause as a necessary and sufficient condition they see it as a condition that is *necessary under the circumstances*. The need to visualise the causal condition as one that is necessary under the circumstances is further

reinforced by the realization that most historical events are over-determined. That is, they are characterised by the presence of more than one causal condition. Since each of these conditions could have independently yielded the same result, the analyst cannot specify a condition that was necessary in absolute terms. All that can be said is that it was necessary under the circumstances.

Let me elucidate this further with the help of an illustration. If we know that rioting mobs are headed towards an assembly hall with the intention of burning the place, and around the same time lightning could strike the building, thereby burning down the hall, then we cannot say which was the necessary and sufficient condition for the burning of the hall. The assembly hall could have been burnt by the violent crowd as well as by lightning. If the crowds had not planned on this action, the lightning would have burnt the hall and, *vice-versa*, even if lightning had not struck the building the marauding crowds would have yielded the same result. Thus the absence of one condition would not have meant the absence of the effect – namely, burning down of the hall. In situations of this kind, which are marked by the presence of two or more conditions each of which could have produced the same result, we cannot identify the necessary moment. All we can do is to say which condition intervened first. If lightning struck before the crowds could embark on their action we can say that it was the condition that was *necessary under the circumstances*.

Situations that historians analyse are, it is said, of a similar kind. Being unique and most often over-determined, the researcher can at best identify a condition that was necessary under the circumstances. For example, based on existing understanding of the processes of de-colonization and a survey of available documents, the historian may conclude that popular assertions against the Raj as well as adverse balance of payments were making it extremely difficult for the colonizing power to continue ruling over India. A calculation of the British military and strategic interests in the region also favoured the transfer of power to India. Since each of these conditions pushed in the same direction what might we identify as the cause of British leaving India, and more specifically, of British leaving India in August 1947? The historian seeks to answer this question by pinpointing a condition that made the *crucial difference* in the given conjuncture. Available documentary evidence is drawn upon to assess which of these conditions was perceived by the British as being most significant, and which generated pressures of a kind that made the administration of the colony extremely difficult, if not also unviable at that point.

In identifying the causal condition that was necessary under the circumstances evidence is drawn from within the case. Comparisons are made with analogous situations before and perceptions and actions of different agents are used to assess the relative significance of different existing conditions. Objective conditions and subjective reasons are thus woven together to determine what made the crucial difference. Since most historical analysis draws upon purposes and actions of agents as well as operating external conditions it is sometimes said that historians explain a given event / phenomenon by describing how it happened. That is, they answer the ‘Why’ interrogative by analyzing what happened and how it happened. Two points need to be made in this regard. First, as was mentioned earlier, merely placing events in a sequence does not provide an explanation of an event. Telling a story with a beginning, middle and end is therefore never enough. At the very least the historian needs to identify the configuration of external material structures within which particular

actions are conceived and performed, and within which they yield a specific result. Second, and this is of the utmost importance, an exhaustive description of all possible conditions and range of actions does not constitute a causal explanation. The latter requires that we determine a condition that was *necessary* at least under the circumstances.

The difference then between simple story telling and causal analysis of a historical event is that the latter, unlike the former, focuses upon what made the crucial difference. It does not merely link the different moments together in a way that makes sense but goes a step further. It identifies a condition in the absence of which the event may not have occurred at the precise time that it did. In other words, it locates a necessary moment. The necessary moment may be a single condition or a part of a complex of conditions. Analyzing the issue of transfer of power to India in 1947, a historian may argue that mutiny in the naval ratings made the crucial difference. That is, it was the causal condition – the necessary moment in the absence of which transfer of power may not have taken place at that time. Alternately, the historian may argue that mutiny in the naval ranks was the necessary moment of a set of popular mobilizations and these collectively yielded the result – namely, transfer of power.

When historians endorse the latter path they define the cause as an INUS condition. That is, the cause is considered to be a condition that is an *insufficient* but *necessary* moment of a complex of conditions that is *unnecessary* but *sufficient* for producing the given event. Let me explain it further. In identifying mutiny in naval ratings as the cause all that the historian is saying is that this condition made the crucial difference. Had it not been for this mutiny transfer of power may not have occurred in August 1947. Further, the mutiny in naval ratings yielded this effect in association with other popular assertions, such as, the Quit India movement and peasant rebellions. Collectively these constituted a complex of minimal sufficient condition and in this complex the mutiny in navy was the necessary moment. However, this complex of conditions cannot be regarded as necessary for the event (transfer of power). Had this condition not prevailed, adverse balance of payments or calculation of strategic interests may still have led to the British leaving India, albeit not in August of 1947. Consequently, popular mobilizations cannot be regarded to be a complex that is necessary in absolute terms. All we can say with confidence is that under the given circumstances it was sufficient to bring about that result. The mutiny was, in this way, a necessary moment of a complex of conditions that are collectively unnecessary. The same event could have been produced by another set of conditions but at this time the mutiny along with other popular mobilizations was sufficient for producing the result – namely, transfer of power to India.

What bears some repetition here is that historians redefine the idea of causality. Instead of treating the cause as a necessary and sufficient condition they regard it as an INUS condition or a condition that is necessary under the circumstances. The idea of causality is conceptualized in this form because the events that they deal with are taken to be unique occurrences, constituted by a conjuncture that is specific to that context. And the context itself is characterized by the presence of several conditions each of which could produce the same result though not in the same way or at the same time. The redefinition of cause does not however affect the explanatory potential of the inquiry. To put it in another way, even though the causal condition is seen as being necessary only under the circumstances, or in

conjunction with other conditions, nevertheless it explains fully what happened and why it happened. It does not allow us to predict what might happen in other similar circumstances with any degree of certainty but it does enable us to explain the event that occurred.

When the cause is defined as a necessary moment of a complex of condition or as a condition that is necessary under the circumstances, it is assumed that the historian is only explaining why the event *E* occurred in this instance. The explanation is complete but it is offered *post-hoc* (i.e., after the event has occurred) and no prediction follows necessarily from this explanation. To use an example given by J.L.Aronson, 'Suppose we had a gun that shot bullets through a force field at a screen, what is special about the force field is that it is composed of force vectors that change with time in a completely randomized fashion'. In this situation we cannot predict in advance where the bullet might land, but once the bullet makes it to the screen we can explain as to why it reached in that position. We can, after the event, examine the speed of the bullet, the angle at which the vectors must have been when the bullet hit it, the position of the gun, friction and other intervening elements, and on the basis of these explain why the bullet arrived at the point *P* on the screen. The offered explanation is complete in so far as it provides a satisfactory answer to the 'why' interrogative but it cannot help us to predict where the next bullet will arrive on the screen.

Historical explanations are often of a similar kind. They explain fully what happened and why it happened but do not, by and large, predict. Laws may be implicit in the stipulated causal connections but the historian neither "dredges up" these laws nor regards it as his task to do so (see, Dray 1970). Historical accounts do not aim to discover general laws and the causal explanations they offer must therefore be distinguished from predictions. The fact that they do not seek to predict or pinpoint a set of laws and the initial conditions under which they operate does not imply that they offer partial explanations. Contra what is argued in the "Covering Law model" used by Carl Hempel and other positivist philosophies of social science (Hempel 1959), historians explain completely what happened through singular causal assertions.

What needs also to be clarified here is that these singular causal assertions are distinct from explanations involving reasons and purposes. Events that historians study – e.g., rebellions, battles, treaties of peace, movements, revolts, etc. – are all outcomes of the actions of individuals and groups. In studying these events historians often make sense of what happened and why it happened by mapping the intentions and motivations of actors. They explain, for instance, the withdrawal of Non-cooperation movement in terms of the intentions of its leaders – in this case, Gandhi. The reasons they accept are at times those that are avowed by the agents themselves, or else, those that can be deduced from the purposes that are either averred by them or purposes that may reasonably be attributed to the agents. Whatever be the basis of identifying the relevant reason what is significant is that events are treated not merely as happenings in the external world, rather they are perceived as performances of particular agents that can be explained by uncovering their reasons and motivations. Such reason-action explanations are frequently treated as being similar to causal explanations and reasons are often confused with causes. It appears that reasons explain by building a link between purposes/motivations and action just as causal explanations link a cause with an effect. However, even though beliefs

and motives are often seen as producing a given event it is essential to remember that reasons are not the “right kind of causes” (Ryle 1980:109).

In a causal explanation, causes are external conditions operating in the physical world and the cause is linked to the effect contingently. Reasons, by comparison, are linked internally and the connection between a reason and action is a logical one. For example, when we explain why *A* murdered *B* by pointing to revenge as the motive for this action we suggest an intrinsic link between the motive – reason – and the action – murder. We also assume that referring to revenge as the reason for murder does not require any further elucidation for the latter can follow from the former. While we may need evidence to show that murder was committed by the said person and that he could have had this motivation, the link between motive and action requires no external corroboration. Indeed the action is said to follow from the motive and having this motivation provides good reason for assuming that he could have performed this action. Similarly when we say that the loss of popular support was the reason for the decision to withdraw the strike an internal connection is stipulated between the reason and the action. Further, the postulated connection rests upon the assumption of rational behaviour. It presupposes a background of beliefs that prompt the given action. For instance, the decision to withdraw the strike because it was losing support among the cadre assumes that the leadership considered it desirable to withdraw before the strike fizzles out; or that they preferred to call off the strike so that they do not lose the gained advantage. Such rational calculations of interests is an integral part of reason-action explanation but these considerations are not, and must not indeed be, considered as initial conditions under which certain laws operate.

Reason-action explanations are teleological in nature. Here, the desired end-state that is to be realized through the action is also the motive or the purpose. It therefore logically precedes the action. In a causal explanation, on the other hand, the effect is subsequent to the cause. That is, it comes after the causal condition and it follows it due to the presence of certain conjunctive conditions. Historians, in offering causal explanations seek to identify the set of conditions that collectively yield a given effect; and within that collectivity they aim to pinpoint a condition that made the crucial difference. Such explanations are distinct from explanations based on reasons as well as the covering law model used by the positivists. In addition, as was argued earlier on, these are explanations that tell us why a specific event occurred at a given time. They are, in other words, singular causal statements that seek to explain and not predict future events. The relative neglect of prediction in these explanations however does not weaken these explanations nor does it render them inadequate. The offered explanations are complete and their truth can be debated by the community of historians on the basis of available evidence and documentation.

30.5 SUMMARY

The discipline of history, as other social sciences, constantly seeks the causes which give rise to various phenomena. The search for causes is crucial to historical analysis. The causes are **not** specific events which occur before certain other events whose origins can then be traced back to the former. Rather the causes are conceived as a set of conditions under which particular events take place. These conditions provide both the necessary and sufficient ground for the occurrence of certain events. However,

unlike in the natural sciences, the search for causes in history cannot be conducted in a controlled atmosphere as in a laboratory. Instead, the social scientists look for similar and different conditions for the occurrence of an event. In other words, they look for the conditions which are present and those which are absent when an event takes place. Moreover, causes are generally sought to explain a phenomenon and not to predict it.

30.6 EXERCISES

- 1) What is causality? How is it used to explain an event or phenomenon?
- 2) Discuss the different approaches of the natural scientists and the social scientists in seeking the causes of a phenomenon.
- 3) Discuss the method followed in history for establishing the causality and explaining the occurrence of an event.



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UNIT 31 OBJECTIVITY AND INTERPRETATION*

Structure

- 31.1 Introduction
- 31.2 What is Objectivity?
- 31.3 Development of the Principle of Objectivity
- 31.4 Critiques of Objectivity
 - 31.4.1 Constraints of Evidence and Individual Bias
 - 31.4.2 Cultural Relativism
 - 31.4.3 Linguistic and Postmodern Turn
- 31.5 Historians' Concern
- 31.6 Possibility of Objectivity
- 31.7 Summary
- 31.8 Exercises

31.1 INTRODUCTION

The principle of objectivity has been the most important principle of the Western historiography over the ages. In fact, it is the foundation on which the edifice of historical profession stands. In the Western world, the historians since the early ages have believed that their writings about the past are true and objective. This belief was challenged by many philosophers and thinkers who said that the quest for objectivity was futile. However, the mainstream of historiography remained stuck to the notion of objectivity. In the words of Peter Novick, an American historian and a radical critic of the principle of objectivity, it was 'the rock on which the (historical) venture was constituted, its continuing *raison d'être*.' Most, if not all, historians wrote in the belief that their writings presented an objective picture of the world. Even when they disagreed among themselves, they believed that their accounts were more objective than those of others whom they criticised. Thus the historical battles were fought on the grounds of objectivity. However, it is since the 1970s that the notion of objectivity faced its most serious challenge. Now it has become rather difficult to forcefully assert that objectivity is possible to achieve in the writing of history. In fact, some of the critics of objectivity even doubt whether it is desirable to achieve it. The controversy has become really bitter, even though most of the functioning historians still go about their work believing in the possibility of presenting a true account of the past. This Unit will acquaint you with many sides of this controversy.

31.2 WHAT IS OBJECTIVITY?

Objectivity has been the founding principle of the historiographical tradition in the West. Right since the days of Herodotus, the historians have believed in the separation

of the subject and the object, in the distinction between the knower and known and in the possibility to recover the past. Peter Novick, a critic of the principle of objectivity, has clearly defined it in the following words :

‘The principal elements of the ideal of [objectivity] are well known and can be briefly recapitulated. The assumptions on which it rests include a commitment to the reality of the past, and to the truth as correspondence to that reality; a sharp separation between knower and known, between fact and value, and above all, between history and fiction. Historical facts are seen as prior to and independent of interpretation : the value of an interpretation is judged by how well it accounts for the facts; if contradicted by the facts, it must be abandoned. Truth is one, not perspectival. Whatever patterns exist in history are “found”, not “made”. Though successive generations of historians might, as their perspectives shifted, attribute different significance to the events in the past, the meaning of those events was unchanging.’

(Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream : The “Objectivity Question” and the American Historical Profession*, Cambridge : CUP, 1988, pp. 1-2)

For this purpose, however, the historian has to be impartial and should not take sides. He/she should be able to suspend his/her personal beliefs and rely only on the truth of the evidences. In the words of Peter Novick :

‘ The objective historian’s role is that of a neutral, or disinterested, judge; it must never degenerate into that of an advocate or, even worse, propagandist. The historian’s conclusions are expected to display the standard judicial qualities of balance and evenhandedness. As with the judiciary, these qualities are guarded by the insulation of the historical profession from social pressures or political influence, and by the individual historian avoiding partisanship or bias — not having any investment in arriving at one conclusion rather than another. Objectivity is held to be at grave risk when history is written for utilitarian purposes. One corollary of all this is that historians, as historians, must purge themselves of external loyalties : the historian’s primary allegiance is to “the objective historical truth”, and to professional colleagues who share a commitment to cooperative, cumulative efforts to advance toward that goal.’

Thomas Haskell, a historian, has questioned this conflation of objectivity and neutrality. In his article ‘Objectivity is not Neutrality’, he has argued that objectivity and neutrality are two different things, even though in most of nineteenth-century historiography they were equated with each other. Now, ‘among the influential members of the historical profession the term has long since lost whatever connection it may once have had with passionlessness, indifference, and neutrality’. He cites the cases of historians, particularly, Eugene Genovese, the American historian on slavery, whose history is objective, though not neutral. Haskell further clarifies his position :

‘My conception of objectivity . . . is compatible with strong political commitment. It pays no premium for standing in the middle of the road, and it recognizes that scholars are as passionate and as likely to be driven by interest as those they write about. It does not value even detachment as an end in itself, but only as an indispensable prelude or preparation for the achievement of higher levels of understanding . . .’

We, therefore, now have two somewhat differing perceptions of objectivity, so far as its relation with neutrality is concerned. However, in other areas such as objectivity's position as the founding principle of the historical profession, its distance from propaganda and from wishful thinking, its reliance on evidence and logic, and its requirement for a minimum level of detachment are common to all its definitions.

31.3 DEVELOPMENT OF THE PRINCIPLE OF OBJECTIVITY

The belief that there is a reality of the past and it is possible to historically capture it has been engrained in the dominant tradition of the Western historiography. The mainstream historiography in the Western world since the time of Herodotus maintained that the historical records referred to a real past and real human beings. The objectivist tradition believed in both the reality of the past as well as in the possibility of its mirror representation. It maintained that there was a correspondence between the intentions and actions of the people and the historians should exert themselves to comprehend the mental world of the people in the past.

The development of modern science added a new dimension to this belief. It was now asserted that the methods used in the sciences could be applicable to various branches of human knowledge. The Positivists asserted this claim most strongly, even as it developed as a common belief in the nineteenth century. August Comte, the founder of Positivism, believed that the inductive method used in the natural sciences needed to be applied to the history as well as the humanities in general. He also claimed scientific status for the humanities. He thought that all societies operated through certain general laws which needed to be discovered. According to him, all societies historically passed through three stages of development. These stages were :

- i) The 'theological' or fictitious stage, during which the human mind was in its infancy and the natural phenomena were explained as the results of divine or supernatural powers.
- ii) The 'metaphysical' or abstract stage is transitional in the course of which the human mind passes through its adolescence. In this stage, the processes of nature were explained as arising from occult powers
- iii) The 'Positive' stage which witnessed the maturity of human mind and the perfection of human knowledge. Now there was no longer a search for the causes of the natural phenomena but a quest for the discovery of their laws. Observation, reasoning and experimentation were the means to achieve this knowledge. This was the scientific age which is the final stage in the development of human societies as well as human minds.

The followers of Comte, also known as the Positivists, time and again asserted the existence of universal laws applicable to all societies and all branches of human knowledge.

However, it was another tradition which laid the foundation of objectivist history in the nineteenth century. It was the tradition starting with Niebuhr and Ranke in Germany. Although it was Niebuhr who first introduced the critical method in writing of history, it was Ranke who truly and elaborately laid the foundation of a genuinely

‘objective’ historiography. He clearly distinguished history from literature and philosophy. By doing so, he attempted to rid it of an overdose of imagination and metaphysical speculation. For him, the historians’ job was to investigate the past on its own terms and to show to the readers ‘how it essentially was’. It did not mean, however, that Ranke had a blind faith in the records. He, in fact, wanted the historians to subject the sources to strict examination and look for their internal consistency so as to determine whether they were genuine or later additions. He wanted the historians to critically examine and verify all the sources before reposing their trust in them.

But, once it was proved that the records were genuine and belonged to the age which the historian was studying, the historian may put complete faith in them. He called these records as ‘primary sources’ and maintained that these sources would provide the foundations for a true representation of the contemporary period. Thus the historians should trust the archival records more than the printed ones which might be biased. He, however, believed that it was possible to reconstruct the past and that objectivity was attainable.

This trend emphasised that the facts were in the records which the historians needed to discover. If the historians were impartial, followed a proper scientific method and removed his / her personality from the process of investigation, it was possible to reconstruct the past from these facts. There was an enormous belief in the facts in the nineteenth and the early decades of the twentieth centuries. It was thought that once all the facts were known, it was possible to write ‘ultimate history’ which could not be superseded. As Lord Acton, the Regius Professor of History and the editor of the first edition of the *Cambridge Modern History*, said :

‘Ultimate history we cannot have in this generation; but we can dispose of conventional history, and show the point we have reached on the road from one to the other, now that all information is within reach, and every problem has become capable of solution.’

This confidence in being able to get hold of all the sources and to write ‘ultimate history’, even though at a future date, was reflected in his belief to achieve complete objectivity which would transcend nationality, language and religion. Therefore, in his instructions to the contributors to the volumes of the *Cambridge Modern History*, he wrote :

‘Contributors will understand that our Waterloo must be one that satisfies French and English, German and Dutch alike; that nobody can tell, without examining the list of authors, where the Bishop of Oxford laid down the pen and whether Fairburn or Gasquet, Libermann or Harrison took it up.’

This belief in possibility of uncovering all the sources and thus writing ‘ultimate history’ was asserted in an extremely popular text book in historical method by French historians, Langlois and Seignobos :

‘When all the documents are known, and have gone through the operations which fit them for use, the work of critical scholarship will be finished. In the case of some ancient periods, for which documents are rare, we can now see that in generation or two it will be time to stop.’

The scientific status of history was forcefully asserted by J.B. Bury, Acton’s successor to the Regius Chair at Cambridge. He believed that although history ‘may supply

material for literary art or philosophical speculation, she is herself simply a science, no less and no more’.

Even George Clark, in his general introduction to the second *Cambridge Modern History*, though he did not believe in the possibility of writing ‘ultimate history’, made a distinction between the ‘hard core of facts’ and the ‘surrounding pulp of disputable interpretation’.

It is evident that in such thinking interpretation had very little role to play. The writing of history was simply related to the documents. It did not matter who the historian was as long as verified documents for the period were available. In this view, as E.H.Carr put it :

‘History consists of a corpus of ascertained facts. The facts are available to historians in documents, inscriptions and so on, like fish in the fishmonger’s slab. The historian collects them, takes them home, and cooks and serves them in whatever style appeals to him.’

But even before the nineteenth century ended, such beliefs started to look implausible. Application of some new techniques in archaeology and other areas uncovered ever-increasing information even about most ancient societies. Moreover, in the beginning of the twentieth century, historiography moved to other directions away from political history which the nineteenth-century historians specialised in. Social, economic and cultural histories began to be written. The historians started to look at already available documents from new perspectives and for different purposes. It was also pointed out that the works of even those historians, including Ranke, who believed in complete objectivity and professed the use of ‘primary sources’ were full of rhetorical elements and were many times based on printed ‘secondary sources’.

The Rankean tradition was criticised in the twentieth century for being too naïve and being concerned with individual facts instead of the general patterns. Moreover, it was also criticised for being narrowly political and being concerned with elite individuals. The new trends in the historiography in the twentieth century focused on economy and society as opposed to the political and on common people as opposed to the elite. The most influential among these trends were the Marxist and the *Annales* schools of historiography. However, they shared with the Rankean tradition two fundamental themes. They believed that history could be written scientifically and objectively and that there was a direction in which the history was moving continuously.

However, the scientific and objectivist claims of historiography suffered somewhat between the wars. The records and facts were blatantly manipulated by various national political establishments. The continued tension led to partisan assertions both by various governments and respective intelligentsia. History-writing was also affected by this. After the Second World War, the Cold War also influenced the academia and prompted the intellectuals to take sides or, conversely, to hide their opinions to avoid repression.

But most of functioning historians retained their faith in the possibility of achieving objectivity in history. The proponents of objectivity from Ranke in the 1820s to Robert Fogel in the 1970s believed in the scientific status of history. They thought that if proper scientific methods of inquiry were used, it could be possible to get

close to what really happened in the past. It was also necessary for them to make a sharp division between history and literature.

31.4 CRITIQUES OF OBJECTIVITY

By the late twentieth century the confidence in the objectivity and scientificity of history faced increasingly radical challenges. Anthropologists like Claude Lévi-Strauss denied that the modern western civilisation, based on rationality and science, was in any way superior to the pre-modern, or even 'savage', communities so far as successfully coping with life is concerned. At another level, many historians and theorists of history began to think that history was closer to literature than to science. Moreover, the new linguistic theories starting with Saussure strongly professed that the role of language is not to refer to reality but to construct reality. Thus the world which is conveyed to us through language is not the real world. Similarly, the historians' accounts of the past does not refer to the real past, but to the world imagined by the historians. History, therefore, is the story told by the historian. In the words of Louis Mink, an American philosopher of history, 'Stories are not lived but told.' Mink further argued that life 'has no beginnings, middles or ends'. Such sequences belong only to stories as well as to history. And, therefore, history is much like the story.

Although they are related in certain ways, there are broadly three lines of criticism on the notion of historical objectivity : constraints of evidence and individual bias, cultural relativism and postmodern and linguistic turn.

31.4.1 Constraints of Evidence and Individual Bias

Ironically, it was Kant, the great German philosopher influenced by the ideas of Enlightenment, who propounded the ideas which were taken up by Dilthey, Croce, Collingwood and Oakeshott for criticising the philosophical quest that the human world could be comprehended in the same way as the natural world. Kant's formulation that there was a separation between the real world and the subject trying to make sense of it led to the idea that it was not possible to reconstruct the reality and that the correspondence theory of truth was not valid. This view was developed later to challenge the notion that history could be like science. It was, however, the tradition of philosophical thinking that followed Nietzsche which posed a more serious challenge to objectivist historiography.

Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911), a German philosopher, clearly demarcated between scientific knowledge and cultural knowledge. In his book, entitled *Introduction to Historical Knowledge* and published in 1883, and in some later articles, he differentiated between science and history on the basis of their different fields of research, different experiences and different attitudes of the researchers. According to him, while the scientist was external to the reality in nature, the historian was involved in the process of constructing reality. Thus, unlike the scientist, the historian could not be just an observer. It is, therefore, impossible to achieve objectivity in history-writing.

Benedetto Croce (1866-1952), the Italian historian and thinker, followed Dilthey in the belief that there is a fundamental distinction between science and history. According to him, the past exists only through the mind of the historian. He declared

that ‘all history is contemporary history’. It was, however, R.G. Collingwood (1889-1943), a British historian and philosopher, who provided a detailed exposition of this line of criticism. In his posthumously published book, *The Idea of History*, Collingwood elaborated his idea of historical relativism. He believed that ‘the past simply as past is wholly unknowable’. Therefore, the history was not at all about the real past but a creation of the historian. In his opinion, ‘historical thinking means nothing else than interpreting all the available evidence with the maximum degree of critical skill. It does not mean discovering what really happened....’ Each historian writes his / her own history which may or may not have things in common with others. He wrote:

‘St Augustine looked at history from the point of view of the early Christian; Tillamont, from that of a seventeenth-century Frenchman; Gibbon, from that of an eighteenth-century Englishman; Mommsen from that of a nineteenth-century German. There is no point in asking which was the right point of view. Each was the only one possible for the man who adopted it.’

History is, therefore, written by the people who are basically concerned about the present. And there is nothing wrong with it. Collingwood thought that ‘since the past in itself is nothing, the knowledge of the past in itself is not, and cannot be, the historian’s goal. His goal, as the goal of a thinking being, is knowledge of the present; to that everything must return, round that everything must revolve.’

Thus the present is, and should be, historian’s only concern. And since all history is historian’s ideas about the past, ‘all history is the history of thought’.

E.H. Carr approvingly summarises some of these views. He says that the historians are products of their own times and their mental world is shaped by the ideas and politics of their contemporary world. They are driven by contemporary concerns and their viewing of the past is through the lens of the present. It is, therefore, difficult for them to be objective in the representation of the past. Their researches and presentations are always coloured by their present concerns. Even the evidences they collect do not present the whole picture of the past because they are chosen according to their contemporary preoccupations and ideological bent. Moreover, even the records which the people in the past bequeathed to us are selective. In Carr’s words, ‘Our picture has been preselected and predetermined for us, not so much by accident as by people who were consciously or unconsciously imbued with a particular view and thought the facts which supported that view worth preserving.’ It is difficult to rely upon the evidences and be complacent about the facts because ‘the facts of history never come to us ‘pure’, since they do not and cannot exist in a pure form: they are always refracted through the mind of the recorder.’ It is in this light that Carr concludes :

‘No documents can tell us more than what the author of the document thought – what he thought had happened, what he thought ought to happen or would happen, or perhaps only what he wanted others to think he thought, or even only what he himself thought he thought.’

Thus there are two levels at which the process of selection goes on : one by the contemporary recorder who decides what is worth recording and second by the historian who further narrows the selection by deciding what is worth presenting. In this opinion, the past, therefore, is doubly constructed for us.

31.4.2 Cultural Relativism

Inspired by the cultural anthropologist, Clifford Geertz, some of the recent historical thinkers have argued that the historians' accounts of the past are coloured by the ideas, concepts and language of their own societies. This means that such narratives are necessarily influenced by the cultural prejudices and social preoccupations of the historians. Since different cultures perceive the world differently, the descriptions of a different society or of the past, which belongs to a different culture, cannot be objective. These descriptions are culturally determined. Thus a solar eclipse may be described variously by people belonging to different societies. Similarly, the death of a king may be attributed to evil spirits, illness or conspiracy by his enemies. Therefore, the history written by the historian is shaped by the concepts and beliefs of his / her own culture. Paul A. Roth has argued in support of this belief that 'There is no warrant for maintaining that there is some static past world which diligent research in the archives ... uncovers.' He, therefore, suggests that it is important to rid 'oneself of a notion of historical truth', because

'past events exist, qua events, only in terms of some historically situated conception of them. The notion of a historical truth for events, that is, a perspective on happenings untainted by human perception and categorization, proves to be incoherent. There exists a world not of our own making, but any subdivision of it into specific events is our doing, not nature's.'

Moreover, Geertz also derives from the new linguistic theories in his conception of culture as an 'interworked system of construable signs'. In his opinion, culture should be seen as 'an assemblage of texts' which are 'imaginative works built out of social materials'. Even society is 'organized in terms of symbols ... whose meaning ... we must grasp if we are to understand that organization and formulate its principles.' Thus society and culture become 'texts' whose meanings can be understood only through semiotic codes. He further emphasised the point about the textual nature of society and culture by asserting that 'the real is as imagined as the imaginary'. In such a theoretical framework, any notion of reality, and history, disappears. As Gabrielle Spiegel, an historian of medieval Europe, remarked:

'If the imaginary is real and the real imaginary and there are no epistemological grounds for distinguishing between them, then it is impossible to create an explanatory hierarchy that establishes a causal relationship between history and literature, life and thought, matter and meaning.'

31.4.3 Linguistic and Postmodern Turn

This tradition offers the most radical critique of the possibility of retrieving truth from the past. It considers language, instead of reality, as constitutive of social meaning and human consciousness. It all started with Ferdinand de Saussure, a Swiss linguist, who propounded the theory of structural linguistics. His theories influenced many intellectual movements such as structuralism, semiotics and poststructuralism.

In his book, *Course in General Linguistics*, posthumously published in 1916, Saussure radically questioned the referential function of language. According to him, language is a close autonomous system and words in any language (which may be called 'signifiers') refer to concepts (which may be called 'signified') and not to concrete things in the world. In other words, the language does not refer to real

things in the world. It is not a medium to communicate meaning of the world, and the relationship between the language and the world is arbitrary. Language, according to Saussure, creates meaning on its own and human thoughts are constituted by language.

Rolland Barthes, a renowned French linguist and thinker, carried the arguments further. According to him, the claim of the historians to write about the reality of the past is fake. The history written by them is not about the past but ‘an inscription on the past pretending to be a likeness of it, a parade of signifiers masquerading as a collection of facts’. According to Barthes, historians’ description of the past basically refers to a number of concepts about the past and not the reality of the past. He states that :

‘Like any discourse with “realistic” claims, the discourse of history thus believes it knows only a two-term semantic schema, referent and signifier. . . . In other words, in “objective” history, the “real” is never anything but an unformulated signified, sheltered behind the apparent omnipotence of the referent. This situation defines what we might call the *reality effect*.’

Thus Barthes considers objectivity as ‘the product of what might be called the referential illusion’. This illusion lies in the historians’ belief that there is a past world to be discovered through meticulous research. In fact, the past, which the historians refer to, is all their own creation. All the paraphernalia fashioned by the historical profession such as verbatim quotation, footnotes, references, etc are façade to create a make-believe world which the readers may consider real. In fact, Barthes says, these are the devices to produce the ‘reality effect’ which may persuade the readers to believe in the world created by the historian.

The most radical challenge to history-writing came from the theory of deconstruction developed by Jacques Derrida. It completely denied the possibility of human beings to comprehend reality outside the language-system of which they are a part. And the language does not refer to an external reality but is a self-contained system which has no relationship to reality. Even the author has no role to play in determining the meaning of the text. Moreover, the language itself has no logical and coherent pattern. Derrida considered language as a system of arbitrary codification without any fixed meaning. Thus the text contains several meanings which may be at variance with each other. Derrida states that a text:

‘is henceforth no longer a finished corpus of writing, some content enclosed in a book or its margins, but a differential network, a fabric of traces referring endlessly to something other than itself, to other differential traces. Thus the text overruns all the limits assigned to it so far.’

Therefore, Derrida proposes the use of ‘deconstruction’ to reveal the hidden meanings in a text. However, deconstruction ultimately does not bring out any meaning from the text. It only shows the incapacity of language to refer to any reality outside its own boundaries. In Derrida’s difficult prose, this process is explained:

‘Through this sequence of supplements a necessity is announced: that of an infinite chain, ineluctably multiplying the supplementary mediations that produce the sense of the very thing they defer: the mirage of the thing itself, of immediate presence, of original perception.’

Gabrielle Spiegel, an historian of medieval period, critically puts Derrida's position in slightly simpler language as follows:

'Behind the language of the text stands only more language, more texts, in an infinite regress in which the presence of the real and the material is always deferred, never attainable. According to deconstruction, we are confined within a "prison house of language" (to use the fashionable Nietzschean phrase) from which there is no exit....'

If the words in the language cannot refer to any external reality, if the language has no fixed meaning and if the text contains infinite meanings, how it is possible to write history objectively. It is precisely this that the deconstructionists are trying to attack. As Richard Evans points out:

'They imply that authors can no longer be regarded as having control over the meaning of what they write. In the infinite play of signification that constitutes language. The meaning of a text changes every time it is read. Meaning is put into it by the reader, and all meanings are in principle equally valid. In history, meaning cannot be found in the past; it is merely put there, each time differently, and with equal validity, by different historians. There is no necessary or consistent relation between the text of history and the texts of historians. The texts which survive from the past are as arbitrary in their signification as any other texts, and so too are texts which use them.'

Other historians have also expressed their apprehensions regarding dissolution of meaning. Thus Lawrence Stone remarked that 'If there is nothing outside the text, then history as we have known it collapses altogether, and fact and fiction become indistinguishable from one another'. Gabrielle Spiegel also expressed her concern that 'if texts – documents, literary works, whatever – do not transparently reflect reality, but only other texts, then historical study can scarcely be distinguished from literary study, and the "past" dissolves into literature'.

These apprehensions were not wide of the mark as was proved by the works of Louis Mink, a philosopher of history, and Hayden White, an American historian and theorist. Mink spoke about an internal contradiction in history-writing ;

'So we have a ... dilemma about the historical narrative: as historical it claims to represent, through its form, part of the real complexity of the past, but as narrative it is a product of imaginative construction, which cannot defend its claim to truth by any accepted procedure of argumentation or authentication.'

Hayden White is more extreme in considering that the historical narrative cannot lay any claim to truth and it should be considered as a form of fiction. In many books and articles, White argues that there is no difference between history and fiction. In his view, historical writings are 'verbal fictions, the contents of which are as much invented as found and the forms of which have more in common with their counterparts in literature than they have with those in sciences'.

Closely allied with this is the postmodernist position which considers that modern historiography is too closely related to western imperialist expansion to be impartial. It has all along justified the notion of the superiority of modern Europe over other peoples and cultures. Therefore, its claims to objectivity and impartiality are suspect.

31.5 HISTORIAN'S CONCERN

In the recent past many historians have started expressing concern about this total denial of the possibility of achieving objectivity. Lawrence Stone, a British-American historian, stated it clearly as follows :

‘During the last twenty-five years, the subject-matter of history – that is events and behaviour – and the problem – that is explanation of change over time – have all been brought seriously into question, thus throwing the profession, more especially in France and America, into a crisis of self-confidence about what it is doing and how it is doing it.’

According to Stone, these threats to historical profession came from three different sources which were related – the theory of deconstruction developed by Jacques Derrida, cultural anthropology enunciated by Clifford Geertz and the New Historicism.

Another historian, Gabrielle Spiegel, is equally concerned about this development. She outlines the process thus :

‘... the paradigms that have governed historical and literary study since the nineteenth century no longer hold unquestioned sway. The confident, humanist belief that a rational, “objective” investigation of the past permits us to recover “authentic” meanings in the historical texts has come under severe attack in postmodernist critical debate. At stake in this debate are a number of concepts traditionally deployed by historians in their attempts to understand the past : causality, change, authorial intent, stability of meaning, human agency and social determination.’

Based on this observation, she concludes that ‘Looking at the current critical climate from the vantage point of a historian, the dominant impression one takes away is that of the dissolution of history, of a flight from “reality” to language as the constitutive agent of human consciousness and the social production of meaning.’

These are not misplaced concerns. The postmodernists also think the same way that their theories would lead to the withering of history. Keith Jenkins, a postmodern thinker, proclaims the demise of both the ‘upper and lower case histories’. He says that ‘history now appears to be just one more foundationless, positioned expression in a world of foundationless, positioned expressions’.

Even before that, Peter Novick, concluded his famous book by stating that ‘As a broad community of discourse, as a community of scholars united by common aims, common standards and common purposes, the discipline of history had ceased to exist’.

Patrick Joyce, another adherent to this idea, proclaims the ‘end of history’ because ‘social history is the child of modernity’ which does not engage in the process of ‘innocently naming the world but creating it in its own political and intellectual image’.

Even in the field of Indian history, this concern is now increasingly evident. Many historians have reacted against the postmodernist tilt of the later subaltern studies. Prominent among such historians are Sumit Sarkar, Rosalind O’Hanlon, C.A. Bayly, Ranajit Das Gupta and David Washbrook. They have questioned the shift towards

culturalism in theme and relativism in approach in Indian studies. We will discuss these issues in detail in Unit 25. Here we will conclude this section by reiterating that the postmodernist intervention in historiography has unsettled the long-lasting notions so far as the philosophy of history is concerned.

31.6 POSSIBILITY OF OBJECTIVITY

Faced with such radical attacks on the possibility of objectivity, one wonders whether it is at all possible to achieve any measure or kind of objectivity, whether it is possible to have any understanding of the past or of different societies and cultures. These critics have made us aware that a simple correspondence theory of truth is not quite reliable. Our knowledge of the world is mediated through our present concerns, ideological commitments, cultural environment, and intellectual atmosphere. The historians also accept that the sources are not unproblematic. They are suffused with levels of subjectivity which are sometimes quite alarming. And, despite our critical evaluation, it is not always possible to do away with the bias in our sources. Similarly, despite our conscious attempts, it is often difficult to annul all culturally induced biases in our own thinking as historians. Most historians now recognise that it is not possible to get a full picture of the past. Sources are varied and their interpretations are innumerable. In such situation any claim to fully represent the past may well be a hollow claim.

However, a total denial of the possibility of objectivity is to stretch the point to another extreme. The fact that total objectivity is not possible does not mean that no objectivity is possible, that any quest for objectivity is useless. Even though it may not be possible to tell the whole truth of the past does not mean that even partial truth cannot be reclaimed. As Noel Carroll, one of the critics of the relativist position, has pointed out :

‘In one sense, historical narratives are inventions, viz., in the sense that they are made by historians; but it is not clear that it follows from this that they are made-up (and are, therefore, fictional).’

He further emphasises this point by stating that :

‘... narratives are a form of representation, and, in that sense, they are invented, but that does not preclude their capacity to provide accurate information. Narratives can provide accurate knowledge about the past in terms of the kinds of features they track, namely, the ingredients of *courses of events*, which include : background conditions, causes and effects, as well as social context, the logic of situations, practical deliberations, and ensuing actions.’

Carroll criticises Hayden White and others for believing that only a mirror-image of the past can satisfy the truth condition for a historical narrative. If it fails to provide a picture image of the past, it will remain at the level of fiction. So, either it is a mirror-image or it is a fiction; there is nothing in between. Many historians have reacted against this view and have appealed for what Brian Fay has called a ‘dialectical middle ground which preserves the insights of each Attitude and prunes each of its excesses’.

31.7 SUMMARY

The principle of objectivity has provided the basis for the writing of history in the Western world since ancient times. That there is a past world beyond human subjectivity led to the attempt to recover it. This endeavour was given a solid foundation in the early nineteenth century by the German historian, Wilhelm Ranke. Several generations of historians followed Ranke and wrote objectivist and empiricist histories. This tradition is still broadly accepted within the historical profession. However, there have been many critiques of this tradition. The most common criticism focused on the inability of the historians to completely abandon their ideological and cultural biases. Moreover, it stressed that the reality of the past was impossible to recover due to bias in the sources. Another type of criticism emphasise that our knowledge of the world is entirely through the language which the historians or others speak and in which they write. Thus, there is no world beyond its linguistic representation. Any kind of objectivity is, therefore, impossible to achieve. These critiques sometimes question the very basis of historiography. Most practicing historians, however, tread a middle ground between the claims of total objectivity and its total denial by some critics.

31.8 EXERCISES

- 1) What is objectivity? Discuss the historiographical traditions which take the principle of objectivity as their basis.
- 2) Why are historians so concerned about the criticism levelled against the principle of objectivity? Do you think objectivity is possible to achieve in history-writing?
- 3) Who were the earliest critics of objectivity in history? What are their arguments? Do you agree with them?
- 4) Write notes on the following :
 - a) Cultural Realivism
 - b) Linguistic Turn.

UNIT 32 ETHICS IN HISTORY-WRITING*

Structure

- 32.1 Introduction
- 32.2 Truthfulness
- 32.3 Respecting Differences
- 32.4 Curiosity and Accuracy
- 32.5 Empathy and Moral Evaluation
- 32.6 Acknowledging the Intellectual Debts
- 32.7 Freedom of Research and Expression
- 32.8 Summary
- 32.9 Exercises

32.1 INTRODUCTION

Ethics decides about what is right and what is wrong about any action and behaviour. In history-writing also, it is important to underline the duty, obligation, responsibility, and accountability of historians. Ethics emphasizes the moral aspects of human behaviour, and history focus on presenting the truth of the past. But the historians should also be aware about what is important and in conformity with human values. They should also not discriminate against the marginalized sections of the population by critically evaluating and judiciously using the sources whose language is often tilted against the common masses. Ethical turn is an important feature of history-writing in the late twentieth century which emphasize the ethical responsibility of historians towards the people of the past, particularly those groups such as women, workers, blacks, Dalits, and tribal people who have be ignored, marginalized, or denigrated in most of the historical sources created by influential and powerful persons.

32.2 TRUTHFULNESS

Teaching and research are the two most important work of a historian. One of the most crucial elements of these is the truthful representation of the past. Since history is the product of interaction between the historians and their sources, a most crucial responsibility of the historians is to present truth of the past according to the available evidences. Knowledge of the truth of the past is the democratic right of every citizen. The historical processes need to be brought to light through the sources left by the past eras. Although the knowledge about the past as contained in the available sources will always be imperfect and fallible, it should be the intention of the historians to maintain their integrity and honestly search for the truth. The historians have a moral duty not to distort the historical facts or to substitute the known facts with fictional accounts. They should also oppose the unethical and irresponsible use of historical sources and abuse of history with a conscious attempt to deceive the people.

The historians should be transparent about their use of sources and provide accurate and traceable references to the main as well as contentious points they would be making. They should also make clear if they are relying on any particular perspective or ideology for making relevant use of the evidences. The association with or dependence on an institution for financial support or sponsorship should also be mentioned.

Every society and every epoch must be explored on the basis of factual knowledge which is currently available. Any general theory of progress or decline should not be presented as the truth without verifying its validity in each situation. For example, the Whig idea of progress based on parliamentary democracy showed the non-Western societies, which did not have these institutions, in poor light. Similarly, the ideas of linear progress, based on economic and European-style institutional development, as promoted by August Comte and others in Europe also relegated the non-Western countries as backward justifying colonial domination supposedly to civilize the uncivilized societies. Catering to these general theories of progress based on European experiences, the historians have explicitly or implicitly accepted the moral, economic, and political superiority of the West. This has also made them complicit in the imperialist project of dominating and colonizing the non-Western societies.

Therefore, the objectivity consists not only in presenting the facts but also being aware of the framework within which these facts were judged. It is a fact that most non-Western countries during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries lacked European-style industrial and institutional developments. But this does not necessarily push them down as backward, uncivilized and barbaric. And it did not justify the colonization of these countries by European imperialists.

The adherence to objectivity and scrupulous presentation of facts, even when some of them may contradict each other, are the basic responsibility of historians. This saves historical writings not only from false and imaginary construction of the past but also from some forms of revisionist historiography. For example, unsubstantiated denial of the holocaust negates the numerous testimonies of the victims and the contemporary witnesses and ignores the Nazi atrocities. In order to avoid negative forms of revisionism without substantial evidences, many historians advocate value-based studies seeking support for a just, peaceful and moral society. They also strongly advise that the testimonies of the victims should not be ignored or lightly taken.

On the other hand, the historians should also avoid the pitfalls of ‘presentism’ in which everything in the past is judged from the standards of the present. While it is important to address the concerns of the present for inclusion of marginalized sections, such as women, peasants, and workers into history-writing, it may not be quite conducive for historical investigation to impose the ideas of democracy, secularism, and constitutional rights to judge the events and individuals of the remote past. So, on the one hand, the historians should try to understand the past in its own terms and try to avoid anachronism. But, on the other hand, they cannot completely absolve it by ignoring the moral concerns of the present.

The search for historical truth involves going deeper beyond the upper crust of historical sources. The most visible and available sources do not tell us much about the marginalized groups in the society. For example, women, workers, peasants,

Blacks and Dalits, despite their large number, had been largely neglected in earlier historical writings because most of the sources do not record them directly. So, it is historians' duty to look within the surface to locate the presence of these groups in the conventional sources or try to find different sources which may tell us more about the majority of the population rather than concentrating on the powerful minority which had mostly generated the visible documents and monuments.

Another major problem with a lot of history-writing in the pre-modern times has been almost blindly praising their own kings and rulers and criticizing and denigrating their opponents. This was the prevailing historical practice during the ancient and medieval periods. Thus, we find historians who indulge in wild exaggerations and hyperboles in praise of the rulers whom they wanted to please. In modern times, when the kings have largely disappeared, the nation has taken hold of the imagination of the historians in a most powerful manner. Most of the histories now are not only national histories but also nationalist history. This means that nationalist bias in history-writing is very clear at all levels, but mostly at the level of history textbooks in schools. Even many scholarly historical writings are not immune to nationalist bias which means that at conscious and unconscious levels most of our historiography is restricted by nationalist agenda. In the time of crisis, particularly during wars with other countries, the nationalist bias is starkly evident. For example, during the First and Second World Wars, all the countries, particularly European countries, produced histories which supported their own specific nationalist versions of events. Even later during the Cold War, Gulf War, and in many other conflicts, the historians either willingly or unwillingly pushed forward the defence of their own nations and critiques of the opposing nations. National foreign policies are also quite frequently interpreted in the defence of national interests. Moreover, nationalism, including the anti-imperialist nationalism, brings out past and heritage in an attempt to form a homogeneous community and bolster the nationalist spirit. Similarly, identitarian politics is also quite often supported by false narratives which glorify their heroes while undermining those of others. In the age of internet and social media, such fake narratives have proliferated. Much of such efforts present an imaginary or fictional past which had not much to do with reality. It is the duty of the historians to unmask such pseudo-histories with the help of truthful evidences.

The ethical responsibility of the historians, therefore, is to challenge such nationalist bias and point to the pitfalls, hypocrisy and dangers involved in aggressive nationalist mobilizations and foreign policies. Such objective stance would work to mitigate the dangers of wars, at least in the long run, when people become aware of the motivated nationalist propaganda by the rulers and politicians in all countries.

32.3 RESPECTING DIFFERENCES

There are various kinds of differences existing in the world. Nations, cultures, ethnicities, religions, classes, castes, and genders are many such instances. In the past, particularly in the pre-modern world, the varieties of differences were even greater. The historians, who are mostly concerned with the past, have to pay close attention to the sensitivities involved in such situations. It is mentioned in the previous section that most of the histories written during the modern period has been circumscribed by the idea of nation. Moreover, the praise of one's own country also involved denigration of some other countries. Historians should be cautious

against such tendencies and avoid it as much as possible. It is true that some nations are bigger, more prosperous, and more powerful than other. But this does not give the historians of such countries any right to look down upon the less powerful and poor countries.

Religious differences also constitute another area of caution for the historians in which they should not take sides but present all views in a balanced manner. Moreover, even in the process of research they should be sensitive towards religious convictions of the people. It is an important element of the research ethic. Even otherwise, unlike in many modern secular societies, where religion does not have much bearing on cultural behaviour or economic outcomes, in most societies of the past religions had a major role in determining the attitudes, behaviour and actions. In pre-modern societies, religions not only shaped cultural contours but also affected economic working of societies. For example, in Islam usury was considered as an abominable practice prompting many Muslim countries to prohibit usurious practices at least for the Muslims. Similarly, in the medieval period, the prevalent Hinduism banned the crossing of seas for the Hindus thereby severely restricting shipbuilding and seafaring activities by the Hindus with long-term economic and political consequences.

Historians should also be sensitive about gender differences. In most societies, particularly in the past, women's role in various spheres of life was relegated to the background. The historians should try to bring out women's voice through the mass of male-generated texts. They should show even more sensitivities towards genders beyond man and woman because most past societies, and many present ones, have severely repressed any manifestation of genders which have been different from male and female. The historians have a duty to respect differences between genders of all kinds and should represent them in their texts with due care.

Cultural differences are another field about which the researchers should be aware. All people in any country do not constitute a single cultural group. People in the past also belonged to different cultures, and they were definitely different from the cultural formations existing in our contemporary times. So, the cultural differences between the groups, countries, and people existing in the past as well as the cultural differences between the historians and the subjects of their studies must be considered. These differences consist of a variety of aspects such as religious beliefs, lifecycle rituals, marriage patterns, social customs, languages, educational accomplishments, etc. The ethical imperative, therefore, demands that the historians should be attentive to these details in their research process.

The historians should also be sensitive to ethnic differences, particularly related to migrants, in any society. Since assimilation takes a long time and in some cases it is never fully achieved, the researchers should pay attention to its multiple dimensions. They should also be careful about using the increasingly outdated terms, such as 'race' in biological terms, to denote differences in ethnicities, because ethnic differences also involve differences in cultures, languages, lifestyles, food habits, and many other socio-cultural features, and they do not necessarily connote skin colour or facial features. Moreover, ethnicities go through a process of change over a period of time even if the physical features may remain more or less the same.

Finally, the historians should also be sensitive with respect to the information contained in their sources. The historians deal with the dead people in most cases, but that does not diminish their responsibilities towards the persons about whom some of

the sources may reveal the most intimate or damaging details. We should respect the wishes of the demised persons and if they did not want certain information to be revealed to the posterity, we must not do so. The privacy of even the people who no longer exist should not be infringed upon.

32.4 CURIOSITY AND ACCURACY

The researchers must ask questions and be prepared for changing their path if their hypothesis is invalidated by the facts of the past. They must approach their source materials with an open mind and should not reach a conclusion before beginning the proper research. This means that they should avoid ‘confirmation bias’ which is the tendency to accept only those evidences which support their prior conclusion and reject the evidences which contradict their hypothesis. The researchers should begin their projects with questions and not answers. They should constantly question their sources as well as their findings and even analyses. They should not only choose the facts which support their beliefs because it would be propaganda and not real history. Professional integrity with respect to the sources is a must for the historians who should be accurate and balanced in presenting the facts and should not ignore evidences which are contrary to their thinking.

Paying scrupulous attention to the relevant sources and presenting accurate facts are as important as choosing right raw material for producing a commodity or preparing proper materials for construction of a building. Using trustworthy source materials for their historical researches is extremely important for the historians. Sometimes when there are contradictory versions of events, the discerning historians apply the method of replicability, that is repetitions of the same statements in several documents. Thus, cross-checking of evidences become necessary for establishing accuracy. In such cases, the readers must be informed, through footnotes, about conflicting versions about an event. In some cases, it is also necessary to admit about the doubtful nature of sources in the interest of proper historical investigation. Thus, accuracy consists not only of certainties of the researchers but also of their doubts so that the readers are truthfully informed. In such cases, the historians should be suggestive not judgemental about their choices of the relatively more accurate version and leave it to the readers to form their own opinions.

32.5 EMPATHY AND MORAL EVALUATION

Empathy forms the bedrock of good history. Through empathy the researchers try to approach the real people of the past and understand their actions and thoughts. Sometimes the historians automatically empathize with persons or groups whom they praise or identify with. But the real test for the historians is to be empathetic even with those whom they do not like. They should try to understand even those whose actions and ideas they consider as irrational, delusional, or superstitious. In this way, the historians may be able to understand people and societies from remote past better because their ideas were completely different from the modern ideas. Similarly, even in the modern times, there are people and societies which sharply differ from each other, and the task of the historians is to closely understand the minds of the subjects of their researches even if they do not agree with their ideas. Dictators, war criminals, mass murderers, and enslavers are the kinds of people whom any sensitive historian would detest. However, when they become the subjects

of historical research, the historians have a duty not only to denounce them but also to understand their actions and ideas. They should not justify their actions but at least the historians should attempt to bring forward the innermost thinking of even the villainous actors. Since the historians mostly deal with people who have long been dead, there may be a tendency not to pay attention to their ideas and ways of life. It is this tendency which the sincere historians have to overcome and try to treat the past people as human whether they were considered as good or bad. This will lead the researchers to investigate the historically generated circumstances, conditions, and institutions which shaped the behaviour and thinking of both the good and bad persons. Empathy promotes an ethical framework which works towards peaceful, collective and socially responsible resolution of conflicts and promotion of justice. Empathetic understanding can work not only between individuals but also between countries and may be able to form the basis of international conduct.

At the same time, historians do judge the past in greater or lesser degrees depending on their ideological, cultural, political, and social understanding. Most of the times, historians try not to explicitly state their moral evaluation of the past. But they have the right to make their judgements of the past events or people clear if sufficient evidences are available for their conclusions. In cases involving large-scale atrocities, mass murders, war crimes, genocide, and other such crimes against humanity, taking a moral stand and evaluating the individuals and groups become a duty of the historians. However, their evaluations should be fair and balanced and should avoid prejudicial statements. Such evaluations should also be able to contribute to the public debate and be in conformity with the universal human rights standards.

32.6 ACKNOWLEDGING THE INTELLECTUAL DEBTS

One of the most important duties of the historians is to scrupulously acknowledge their borrowings from individuals and sources. Intellectual property rights should be respected but it should also be recognized that research and publication are the result of collective effort. Persons who help in research, in collection of source materials, in analysis of data, the staffs in the libraries and archives, copy editors, proof readers, editors, and many such other persons are instrumental in the process of research and even writing. So, in most cases, although the authorship of a book or an article belongs to a single person, the direct and indirect involvement of people and texts in the production of any finished writing is numerous. Historians had to rely on libraries, archives, records offices, and many other institutions which are public resources. Besides, in the course of their work, they receive various kinds of assistance from individuals, groups and communities. So, the historians are duty-bound to express explicit gratitude to all the persons, institutions, and texts from which they have benefited for the purpose of writing their dissertation, paper, article or book. Even the roles of the friends and family members should be acknowledged if they have been of help in the process of research and writing.

Most importantly, the historians must in all circumstances avoid plagiarism, which is quite a common problem and whose intricacies are not quite appreciated. Generally plagiarism means the copying of paragraphs from others' writings and presenting as their own. Although it is quite prevalent at the undergraduate and graduate levels, it exists even at higher levels of research, and sometimes it has been found even

among the professors. The historians should try hard not to reproduce the material from others' writings without proper acknowledgements. It is possible that sometimes, some portion of another book or article is reproduced unintentionally. The author's liability in such cases may be less. However, it would also constitute plagiarism and it would be better to remain alert for any such possibility.

On the other hand, the reproduction of a phrase, a common idea, well-known technical terms, or widely known facts is not plagiarism even if they form parts of another text. The reproduction of well-known dates, for example the date on which India became independent, does not require citation. While straightforward copying of material from another text is a clear case of plagiarism, there are more complex situations in which arguments and ideas of another writer is borrowed and expressed in different language and context. If the ideas are fairly common, using them in one's own language does not constitute plagiarism. For example, for saying that class struggle is important for the development of any society, one need not always cite Marx. Similarly, one need not necessarily refer to Gandhi to argue that non-violence is a *sine qua non* for any civilization to flourish. A well-known idea can be regarded as a common intellectual property. Moreover, it is not always possible nor is it necessary to always trace back the common ideas to its original sources. Such ideas have generally been refined and developed by several generations of thinkers over the centuries. So, there is certain freedom in the use of such common ideas without exact references. Besides, discussing, summarizing, paraphrasing, and quoting arguments and parts of text from other writers are also not plagiarism.

However, when some important idea is expressed for the first time or is quite recent and not commonly known, it would be plagiarism to copy it without referring to the original author. The use of statistics or other forms of data from another text without permission or clear acknowledgement is also a case of plagiarism. Even when such data is used for a completely different purpose and has been analysed differently, it is necessary to seek the permission of the original collector of the set of data or at least prominently acknowledge it. A frequent problem occurring at various levels of research and publication is self-plagiarism. In this, the concerned authors recycle their previous writings with minor or no alterations, that is republishing one's own writings without acknowledgement. Even though it is not considered as a serious offence, this practice is now been questioned.

32.7 FREEDOM OF RESEARCH AND EXPRESSION

To ensure academic autonomy and freedom is an important ethical responsibility of the academic community and institutions. Freedom to research on any topic of one's choice, to participate in any academic and professional historical organization, to be able to access research materials and sources in the libraries, archives, and internet are some of the important academic rights of the historians. Moreover, the historians should have freedom to participate in national and international conferences, to be able to exchange information, read papers and freely express their opinions on academic matters. They should also be able to hold any opinions they want without imposition by or interference from any institution or group.

The academic freedom also consists of being able to express oneself in public sphere, to be able to participate in public debates and exchange of ideas. Proper historical scholarship cannot flourish without discussion at a larger level. The historians should

be able to disseminate their findings through discussion or writing at a broader level. Impartial peer review forms a crucial part of scholarly enrichment. There should also be a tolerance about divergent and contrary opinions and information. Moreover, the historians should be open to a broader, even international, verification of their work.

32.8 SUMMARY

Ethics has now become an important part of research in any field of study. Even in history-writing, it has an important role to play. It makes historians aware of their moral and professional responsibilities. The foremost duty of the historians is to be truthful towards their sources. They should not alter the meaning of the facts found in the sources, and should not tamper with the sources and put them across their readers as accurately as possible. If the evidences are contradictory, the historians should search for more reliable sources or at least convey to the readers the contradictory nature of their evidences. Transparency in the process of research and writing and presentation of their facts and conclusions should be maintained so that any reader could independently verify the evidences presented in the historical texts. Proper referencing should be given to make it easy for the readers to trace the sources and facts used by the historians to argue their points. The historians should verify the accuracy and authenticity of their sources as much as possible through the method of source criticism, which we have discussed in Unit 27.

Although the historians should be as impartial as possible, they should also be transparent about their own ideological, political, and cultural background. They should be sensitive towards cultural, religious, ethnic, national, linguistic, and other kinds of differences to be able to really appreciate the ideas and behaviour of the people of the past. Finally, the researchers should not plagiarize and try to acknowledge their intellectual borrowings in the best possible ways by referencing the sources in the notes, in the prefaces, or in extended comments.

32.9 EXERCISES

- 1) Discuss the connection between truthfulness and historians' ethics.
- 2) Why are the respect for differences and empathy important for historians' work?
- 3) Discuss the relationship between acknowledgement of intellectual debts and historians' ethics.

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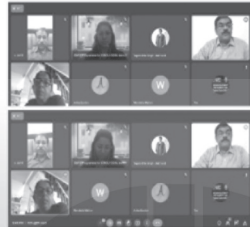


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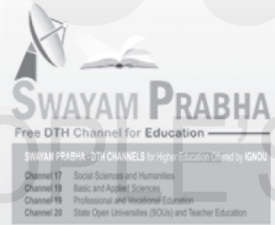
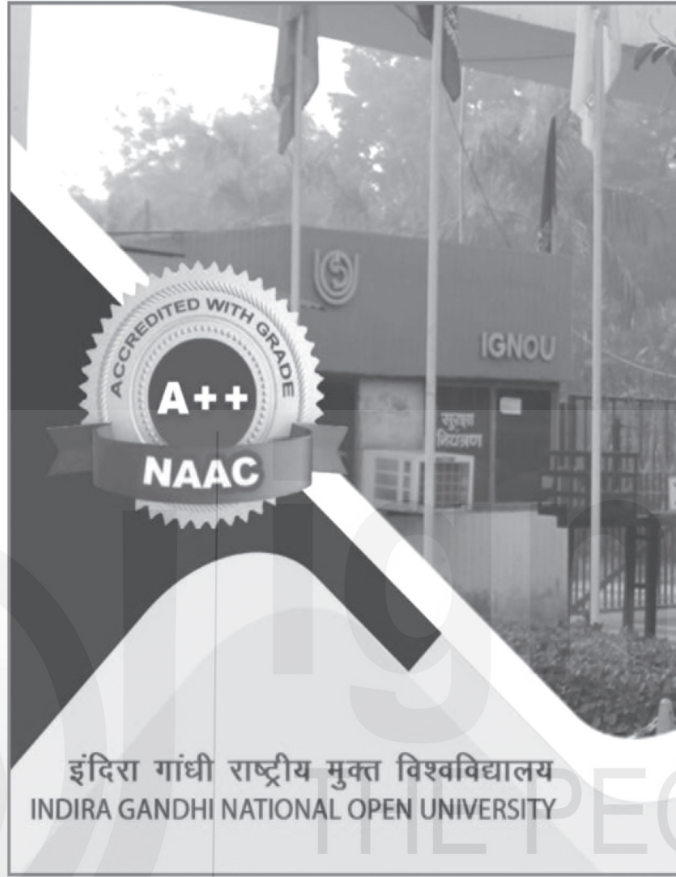
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