



Why Study History?

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Abstract

The rich and famous have looked down upon history for most of the 20th century. In 1916, the pioneer car manufacturer, Henry Ford, declared 'History is bunk' because it's an unwanted vestige of tradition. On the other hand, in 2005, Thomas Friedman, thought the past was overloaded with memories, these remembrances were the assassins of dreams and any society with more memories than dreams was destined to decay. Contrary to this, we argue here that history has four distinct uses, it is an aesthetic guide and moral teacher like biographies, it has a utilitarian value as a rear view mirror, it is a political device to legitimise nations and it is one epistemological tool to understand society.

Keywords: History; Historiography; Historical thinking

Introduction

Students in schools have three common complaints regarding history. They feel the maze-like character of history is scary, that its contents are boring and that there is too much politics in its writing. The syllabus of history is too vast, one topic is piled up on another, the details of each topic are like a maze and this makes the subject scary. Secondly, history is boring because it is about the past which is like a dull, unliveable foreign country.

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Sometimes when history is limited to monarchs and their wars, the subject becomes dreary. Thirdly, while the past remains the same, the history of it changes frequently. The critics feel this is because history writing is a hostage to contesting ideologies and the politics of the day. In order to retain their credibility, historians should address these (and other) complaints of their readers.

Some of the smarter people think that history is a useless grindstone around the neck of humanity. The grindstone theory grows in the context of post-nationalism wherein fratricidal Europe moves from nations at war to a European Common Market and thence, to a European Union. History serves as the legitimizing medium of national identity. But when nations show scant respect to national institutions and seek to build multi-national politics/economy, history loses importance. It is, therefore, possible in the post-nationalist times of Globalization for more and more people to think that History is like a grindstone around the neck of humanity.

The 20th century was also a bad time for history. In an interview with Charles N Wheeler of *Chicago Tribune* on May 25, 1916, Henry Ford (1863-1947) made the churlish remark that 'history is bunk' because it was a vestige of tradition. Ford said, 'History is more or less bunk. It's tradition. We don't want tradition. We want to live in the present and the only history that is worth a tinker's damn is the history we make today.'¹ Ford, the famous American pioneer in car making, probably thought that tradition has to be avoided like the plague.

Not long ago, we had some popular writers posturing to be uninformed philosophers. They run down History because they feel that it is over-loaded with memory and memories are the assassins of dreams. Thomas Friedman (born 1953), the Pulitzer Prize winning journalist, is one such writer. He said that he measures development in a society not by the deficit-to-GDP ratio or the rate of literacy among adult women. Instead, he advocates measuring development by the ratio of dreams to memories in a society. Friedman says:

In societies that have more memories than dreams, too many people are spending too many days looking backwards. They see dignity, affirmation, and self-worth

not by mining the present but by chewing on the past. And even that is usually not a real past but an imagined and adorned past. Indeed, such societies focus all their imagination on making that imagined past even more beautiful than it ever was, and then cling to it like a rosary or a strand of worry beads, rather than imagining a better future and acting on that. It is dangerous enough if other countries go down that route; it would be disastrous for America to lose its bearing and move in that direction.ⁱⁱ

For me, this method of measuring development raises a problem. I also have dreams but I do not want to lose my memories while following my dreams. It is due to my equally intense love for my memories and my dreams that I like Bertrand Russell's admiration for history.

Bertrand Russell (1870-1972), the English philosopher who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1950, said that the study of History is a must for any modern being. Russell thought history cures short-sightedness by exposing us beyond our times and it cures cock-sureness by showing that there is no finality in human affairs. Bertrand Russell wanted history not to be read only by the historians. As a self-professed connoisseur of history, Russell wrote:

. . . I am not thinking about what history does for historians; I am thinking of history as an essential part of the furniture of an educated mind. We do not think poetry should only be read by poets, or that music should only be heard by composers. And, in like manner, history should not be known only to historians. . .ⁱⁱⁱ

This is a very robust endorsement about the need for the popularisation of history. But the reverse seems to be happening. History is facing the worst recession in its disciplinary career. Have we, historians, also contributed to the way history has become a bore for the common readers? Have we made history a scare for the student conscripts who have to read it for passing examinations? I suspect the answer to both these questions is 'yes'. We have done so by inflicting intellectual esotericism on history in the name of specialization. As we shall argue in the conclusion, Historians have

also embraced cultural isolation by turning their backs on writing for laypersons.

There are broadly four opinions on why history is worth studying,

- it is an aesthetic guide and moral teacher like biographies,
- it has a utilitarian value as a rear view mirror,
- it is a political device to legitimise nations and
- it is an epistemological tool to understand society.

I propose to take up these issues one by one in this essay. But I start with different meanings of the word history, estimate the time when history writing came into existence and the way it was different from historical thinking.

History and History Writing

History is derived from a Greek word '*istoria*', meaning an investigation or enquiry. History has two connotations in our times. Firstly, history is the data and existing traces from the past. Secondly, 'history is what historians do,' i.e., write narratives about the past. This makes history a compilation of what was/ is written about the events, processes and people of the past.

Historiography is derived from the word history and it also means two things simultaneously. In the English language, there is a difference between 'graphys' and 'logys' as illustrated by the following examples. 'Biology' is the science of life and 'biography' is the description of a life. Similarly, 'geology' is the science of the earth and 'geography' is the description of it. For some reason, the term 'historology' has not become popular and hence, 'historiography' stands for the science of history and also the narration/ description of it.^{iv} Both history and historiography are about human beings. Marc Bloch said, 'The good historian is like the giant of the fairy tale ... wherever he catches the scent of human flesh, there his quarry lies.'^v Hence, let us start with the beginning of the human story.

Homo sapiens, according to DNA calculations, left Africa approximately 100,000 years ago. Domestication of animals and agriculture began to be practiced after hunting and gathering. Cities were established about 10,000 years ago when an inchoate

state emerged with some tentative class formation. It is since then that civilizations began to dot the face of the earth. The beginning of human history is, therefore, traced back to just 400 generations or so. (This calculation about generations is based on the assumption that the average age of people in the past generations was 25 years.)

History writing is an activity that is just about one hundred generations old. Annals and chronicles began to be written very long after the making of human civilizations. The best-recorded annals and chronicles of the Greek civilization began to emerge around 1125 Before Common Era (BCE). Its language in the Phoenician alphabet evolved up to 750 BCE but its history began to be written around 450 BCE, i.e. six hundred years later.^{vi} Similarly, Rome had been in existence for 500 years before Quintus Fabius Pictor wrote its first history.^{vii}

This makes one thing very clear. People had been living for many generations before their languages evolved and chroniclers emerged to record how their life. But if history writing came much after human civilization, historical thinking is a much newer invention. Historical thinking came just ten generations back.

Historical Thinking Came Much after History Writing

In the West, Herodotus (probably 484-425 BCE) is believed to be the first historian. In India, we are told that Kalhana's *Rajtarangani* was the first history. It was written in the mid-12th century and is about Kashmir. Since India was non-existent then, *Rajtarangani* was the first book of history on any part of the territory that was to become India. This shows that history has been written for long. Historical thinking, however, began in the 19th century.

What is historical thinking? Historical thinking is a chronological long-term view about the inter-play of actors and social structures. It helps build a balanced perspective about people, issues and things. Consequently, the part played by human actors in the past is not exaggerated and the influence on them of the politics, society, environment and even the culture of their times is recorded. The upshot is that Adolph Hitler (1889-1945) or Joseph Stalin (1878-1953) are condemned by scholars but not in a black and white fashion. Similarly, Clement Atlee (1883-1967), who headed the

British Labour government during the time of Indian Independence and Gandhiji (1869-1948) are praised by historians but not without reservations and never to the skies.

The discipline of history, like the other disciplines or subjects of study, grew up in the 19th century. These disciplines were born in the womb of the modern University, they depended on the patronage of the state and their progress was the explicit duty of professional academics. The division of academic knowledge into disciplines, incidentally, was not new. What changed in the 19th and the 20th century was the specialisation of knowledge leading to the professionalization of disciplines. Disciplines aspired to excellence. However, errors also crept into studies due to the inabilities of researchers, manipulation by patrons and ideological prejudices among both.

Professionalization implied the division of each discipline into several sub-disciplines and the splitting up of these sub-disciplines into fields and sub-fields. It meant that we were happy 'knowing more and more about less and less' because this enhanced our claim to being specialists. On the other hand, like other professionals, academics have to cultivate peers for plum appointments, timely promotions and general goodwill. Recommendations from senior academics are tirelessly sought and they are the passports to academic climbing. Belonging to the genial middle class, we are trained to mix around with all but mess around with none. Critics point out that we take no positions. Hence, very few of us get burnt at the stakes for spreading Reformation ideas like William Tyndale in 1536 CE or are ordered to drink poison for corrupting the youth like Socrates was in 399 BCE.

Universities had existed in Europe since the 11th century but their concerns were limited to theology and the philosophy, law and language needed to study it. Beginning with the Humboldt-inspired Berlin University in Germany in 1800, the modern University was interested in all forms of knowledge. It had a vast coverage of subjects in science, social science and humanities, much like the Indian universities, till the 1980s.

The specific context of the growth of modern history was two-fold, the rising nation-states led by bourgeois nationalists and the positivist methodology in the social sciences. Positivism helped historical thinking to grow by insisting that only what is observable is real. Auguste Comte (1798-1857) founded positivism on the belief of progress and the evolution of human thought from the religious to the metaphysical to the scientific state.

In the discipline of modern history, Leopold von Ranke (1795-1886) best epitomised historical thinking among the pioneers of the 19th century. He said forthrightly (though a trifle naively as we now knows) that his aspiration was to 'show things as they actually were.' The predecessors of Ranke thought that history was applied politics, fluid law, religion exemplified, or a school for patriotism. For Ranke, the job of the historian was to be aware about divisions between nations or religions but not to be a party to them. S/he had to explain the divisions, neither justifies nor heals them.^{viii} In the 19th century, Government archives became the Mecca for evidence of history and Seminar the place for developing the historical method for historians.

The evidence, subject matter and perspective of a historian are not museum pieces. Neither are they an antique collector's delight that is considered valuable only if you preserve it the way it was once made or found. The evidence, subject matter and perspective of historians are all very much living in the present.^{ix} They may not be as momentary as designer clothes that stay in vogue only for some weeks but they do alter with time and vary with age. For instance, the *History of the world* has been written for very long but women, Blacks and lower castes have begun surfacing in it only in the past century or so.

Some historians are fond of saying that every generation must interpret the past to answer its own questions and to satisfy its own needs. Peter Burke, for instance, says the function of the historian is to mediate, like a translator, between the past and the present. This function involves rethinking and rewriting history in every generation.^x Consequently, history of the same events or processes has to be re-written every now and then.

Opinions about the Use of History

History as Teacher

The value of History as an aesthetic guide and moral teacher was high in a society where in-door entertainments were few. Hand-copied manuscript books were circulated among the small legendary in the ancient and medieval times. Autobiographies, as a genre, came in the modern period with the culture that respected individuality and encouraged people to make their choices, opinions, lives etc. Biographies, on the other hand, were the reconstruction of a historical person's life. Biographies occupied an important place among books since ancient times. They had a wide readership because biographies were supposed to teach moral lessons by example. Starting with Greek historian Xenophon's *Cyropaedia* which was like a historical novel, we had Einhard's *Life of Charlemagne* in the medieval period and James Boswell's *Life of Samuel Johnson* (1791) in modern times.^{xi}

The 'great men' theory of history, best symbolized by Thomas Carlyle's work on Oliver Cromwell (1845), was a by-product of biographies. But some of the best analytical biographies, like Erik Erikson's work *Gandhi's Truth* (1969), were written after World War II. Such critical psycho-history was a far cry from when biographies began to be written as the following will illustrate. Porphyrius, a Bishop in Gaza, played a role in the spread of Christianity to the Middle East. Marcus the Deacon (375-425 AD) wrote *Life of Porphyrius, Bishop of Gaza* to commemorate his life. His panegyric Preface read as follows:

The struggles of holy men and their divine longing and enthusiasm are a sight that rewards the eyes of the beholder. They have only to be seen to inspire admiration. My object is to save the memory of so holy a man as Saint Porphyrius from being obliterated by the passage of time. I tremble to think what a crime I should be committing if I failed to enshrine in permanent literary form the career of a man so well-beloved of God I shall relate his wars and contests not only against the leaders and champions of idolatry, but against an entire population possessed by madness in all its forms There will be

nothing pretentious in the language with which I will clothe his beautiful story. *Fine writing can add no ornament to the careers of men of his character. On the contrary, the perfection of their conduct ennobles the very words in which it is recorded . . .*

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The world is disenchanted with magical powers since the Enlightenment. Unless hysteria is built by pernicious planning and crafty organisations, not many walk starry-eyed after heroes anymore. Biographies, therefore, do not have the glamour they once had. But let us return to the role played by the books of history in our times.

With the rise of Satellite TV and the Internet in the 1990s, entertainment comes in many forms. There are around 200 channels telecasting sundry stuff and there are websites on practically everything. History itself is packaged as *Fox's History Channel*. In India, there is one program on books called *Just Books* on NDTV. Eric Hobsbawm, therefore, is right when he says that commoners at the end of the 20th century had access to more information and entertainment than Emperors in 1914.^{xiii} Infotainment is the new word coined to designate the mixing of information with entertainment. In these times of 'infotained' audiences, however, literacy is on the increase but serious readership is on the decline. These days, actually, book reading is just one of the many means for the infotainment of people, including the intelligentsia.

Utility of history as a rear-view mirror

How often have we heard that this or that is a lesson from history? In Social Science faculties, questions are often asked why you are studying history? Sometimes the frank answer is, 'Because I could not get admission in more remunerative disciplines like Economics.' Most often, the answer is that we want to learn from the past. Or that history will help us understand the present better. Or that preparation to face the future is better if we know history. This means that history is just as important in life as a rear-view mirror is for the driver on the road.

This utilitarian theory about history being as useful as a rear-view mirror is far-fetched. We know that the purpose of history and the

rear-view mirror is different. The rear-view mirror is to guard against some rash over-taking from behind. Can the past overtake the present, rashly or otherwise? No, it cannot. If the past cannot surpass the present, then, the utility of history to guard against rash overtaking from behind is not much. Consequently, the rear-view mirror theory loses value.

Moreover, it is a fact that historians have no interest in drawing lessons from their work for the present or the future. Hence, their work normally ends three decades before the present because technically government archives follow the practice of opening only those records that are thirty years old. John Kenneth Galbraith, a scholar-diplomat, thinks that this professional practice is a matter of convenience, not principle. Galbraith claimed that historians end their work before the present because they are risk-averse, conservative escapists. Galbraith wrote:

The circumspect historian ends his work well before the present: then he takes his seat with the others for the day's parade. A solemn reason is offered for this: History cannot be written too soon, perspective must be gained. The tactical advantage of this restraint is even greater. Of current happenings people are often informed. They will question the historian's interpretation, even perhaps his facts. His professional advantage is thus lost. Better then to safely stay with the past.^{xiv}

History legitimates nations

There rose nation-states from the jumble of collapsing empires like the Austro-Hungarian Empire headquartered in Vienna and the empire of Turkey headquartered at Istanbul. Our nation(s) in the colonies had a state but it was a colonial state. We could not call it our own because it worked to promote the interests of the powerful in the imperial country. We, in India, built a nation-state after Independence in 1947.

All the nationalities, in Europe or in the colonies, had to embellish their history with long memories of territorial belonging. These nationalities did so, in partnership with the rising bourgeoisie, by creating 'imagined communities'. The nation-states, on their part, had to glamorise their existence with elaborate rituals of statehood

and for this traditions were invented.^{xv} For helping both these processes of creating imagined communities and inventing traditions, politics was put in the driver's seat in the 19th century. Hence, to begin with, much of the modern history writing was political. It was, therefore, also called the 'drums and trumpets' history.

From the third decade of the twentieth century, there began a movement to write history by keeping politics out. Democracy was on the upswing, women were getting the vote and so were the working classes. The new History was about people, their beliefs, their *mentalities*, their food, marriage, family, health, education etc. Various forms of social history were written in different countries about the life, love and learning of people. Annales, Marxists and new social historians have dealt with issues in the everyday life of common people. Hence, this history even got nicknamed the history of 'people' and of 'pots and pans'.

From material and social existence, historians have moved on to a study of culture, gender, community, sexuality, environment, language and identity. Not just the economy, even history is moving from public issues to private domains. Historians are at work; the exploratory journey is still on and who knows what the next turn will be?

History as epistemic tool

The two ways social scientists study phenomena and make their arguments is to study beneath the surface and beyond the visible. For this they go into the past vertically and compare phenomena horizontally. Other disciplines may quarry the past for evidence and frame their arguments on it. Other social scientists are visitors to history. But historians are natives of that territory called the past. Their job is to mind the quarry from which others are mining their evidence.

The study of the times gone by has been assigned to History. Its subject matter, viz. events, processes, symbols of progress and civilization, is derived from the past. Yet, it is impossible to equate history with the actual past. Hence, we could say that history is an 'invented' fragment of the past. But this surely does not imply that there is no difference between the work of a historian and that of a

novelist. The aspiration of the historian is to make her narratives as close to reality as possible. On the other hand, fiction writers preface their work with a disclaimer that any resemblance to any living person or incident is a coincidence. In the light of this difference we should be sensitive (and not dismissive) about the culture, feelings and aspirations of historians who think they are representing the actual past, truthfully.

In the past four centuries, it looks as if the human mind has been on a journey from theological metaphysics to critical rationality. On this journey, some philosophers think History is an important hub and guide. One all-weather road to liberation, from the bumpy terrain of fanaticism and obscurantism, lies through History. Orthodox Semitic theologians, for instance, hold up the sacred 'book view' of Islam or Christianity to condemn the various deviations from it in popular practice. We note that in such situations, often the 'historical view' of Islam or Christianity is showed back to them as evidence that religious practice has seldom followed the written word like a dumb slave. Religious practice in Semitic religions emanates from the Holy book but is not a prisoner of it say reformers with historical hindsight.

Similarly, among Hindus, the book view of four Varnas is different from the innumerable castes in society. To boot, history shows that the social pecking order has been changing and sometimes the high castes are not dominant and vice-versa. For instance, Jats are dominant in the Northwest but are they a high caste? How did this low caste of Jats become the dominant section in Northwest India? The same question could be asked about Okkaligas in Karnataka or Marathas in Western India. Would any discipline, other than History, narrate this fascinating story as convincingly?

To avoid isolation and esotericism

The cost of institutionalisation or bureaucratization of history has been cultural isolation and intellectual esotericism. By intellectual esotericism, I mean that history became specialized and fragmented. The scholarly journal and specialised monograph broke the relation between study and life, theoretical investigation and practical experience. The exclusive academic elite looked down on amateurs who kept ploughing their own fields in history. The

amateurs were happy with their great book sales and soaring royalties. The exclusive academic elite, in turn, kept itself busy working and clamouring for favours of endowed chairs and appointments through academic politics.

By cultural isolation, I mean that history written by Edward Gibbon (1737-94), Thomas Babington Macaulay (1800-59), Voltaire (1694-1778) and Alexis de Tocqueville (1805-59) may have not been as scholarly but it was written with insight into everyday practical affairs. Their history was close to the community, society and life. On the other hand, the Ranke-inspired modern history was written by historians for their peers; all Ph.D. holders. The profession, not market, decided the worth of a historian. Peers awarded fellowships, made appointments and promotions to her/ him and even decided what will be published in journals. Therefore, there developed an estrangement between the wide educated public and the world of history scholarship.^{xvi}

To conclude, History is a bit of an innuendo, a double-meaning word. This innuendo is bereft of any naughty temptation or subversive intent. History is an innuendo because it means two things simultaneously; history is what happened in the past and the writings on the past. On the one hand, history means 'events of the past' like the coming of Indian Independence. On the other hand, history means writings on the past by historians as in the title of books, *The history of modern India*. A good way to overcome the ambivalence built in the world History is as follows. Let's start calling only the events of the past History. On the other hand, writings on the past should be called Historiography even at the popular level. We have started teaching the vagaries of history writing in our MA courses these days. And these courses/ papers are called Historiography.

ⁱ Augarde, T. (Ed.). (1991). *The Oxford dictionary of modern quotations*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. p 82.

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- vi Toynbee, A. J. (1952). *Greek historical thought: From homer to the age of Heraclius*. New York: Mentor Books, *Introduction*; M.I. Finley (1954, 1965 rev. edn.). *The world of odysseus* (New York: The Viking Press). Pp. 8-9.
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