History's Long Journey

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This introduction traces the evolving discipline of history, from its nineteenth century transformation under the influence of science, nationalism, and Eurocentrism to the critical interventions of the twentieth century that challenged its foundational assumptions. It examines how the rise of new perspectives—such as subaltern studies, narrative history, and critiques of the colonial archive—reshaped historical enquiry. The essay also highlights the impact of digital technology and democratisation on archival practices, opening new avenues for research while posing fresh challenges. It calls for a balanced approach that values both objectivity and narrative in the pursuit of historical knowledge.

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The online journal *Reading the Archives* (*RTA*) is an endeavour to represent the discipline of history in its large temporal and spatial expanse. This claim implies a recognition of history as a dynamic discipline that has grown very rapidly in the last two centuries and undergone seminal changes. It has also faced many challenges both from within and outside. Some of the challenges have created virtually an existential crisis for the discipline of history. Some other challenges have brought about opportunities by creating new directions for it. It is best to understand history as an old tradition of knowledge which metamorphosed into an integral component of the social sciences in the nineteenth century. In the twentieth century, the trajectory of its growth was very similar to that of the social sciences. But it also faced challenges specific to history. The story of history is an interesting story in which it acquired different meanings and also very different orientations.

Ernest Gellner wrote on a general profile of the nineteenth century:

> The nineteenth century was the age of nationalism. It was also the age in which the great secular ideologies emerged, and it was the period during which the social sciences came into being. The three events are not unrelated. The turbulence and instability that were undermining the old order naturally led some men to try to understand what was happening, to investigate the very foundations of society, to grasp the principles of the new social forms which were emerging. It led others to try to change the world, or specify the directions in which it should change.[1]

Social sciences were born in nineteenth-century Europe. The nineteenth century was the period, and Europe the zone, that experienced the greatest transformation in human life. This was also the period when the entire world came under comprehensive European domination. Thus it was perhaps inevitable that a certain Eurocentrism was virtually the DNA of the new knowledge about human life that had begun developing in the nineteenth century. Interestingly, a certain notion/vision of universalism and historicism also went along with the Eurocentric orientation of the social sciences. Again, to quote Gellner:

> From the late eighteenth century onwards, the central, crucial fact facing the European mind, both perturbing and exhilarating, was the uniqueness of the newly emerging social and intellectual order of Western Europe. Europeans were struck primarily by the veritable chasm which was opening up between themselves and their own past. They also became aware of the similar gulf between themselves and the rest of the world. The two oppositions seemed linked, and it was only natural that, in due course, Europeans should come to think of their non-European contemporaries as *backward*, that is as resembling their own past.[2]

Thus, Eurocentrism, universalism, historicism and colonialism were all connected to one another and part of the new knowledge about human societies. At the same time, the scientific revolution and the Cartesian

[1] Ernest Gellner, *Culture, Identity and Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), vii.

[2] Gellner, *Culture, Identity and Politics*, 47.

intervention had created a new divide between science and philosophy: science was empirical, objective, and based on experiment. Philosophy, on the other hand, was speculative and metaphysical. The social sciences were inspired by both and were virtually rooted in this new epistemological separation. It was in this temporal and spatial matrix that history emerged in a new incarnation.

At one level, history obviously predated the social sciences. At another level, it was structurally linked to the social sciences. In pre-modern times, in different literate traditions, history carried multiple meanings and connotations. It could mean story, enquiry, philosophy, repository of truth, utilitarian resource, rhetoric, or literature.[3] In a remarkable passage on history writing, Lucian of Samosata wrote in the second century CE that history should be:

> …fearless, incorruptible, free, a friend of free expression and the truth, intent … on calling a fig a fig and a trough a trough, giving nothing to hatred and to friendship, sparing no one, showing neither pity nor shame nor obsequiousness, an impartial judge, well disposed to all men up to the point of not giving one side more than its due, in his books a stranger and a man without a country, independent, subject to no sovereign, not reckoning what this or that man will think, but stating the facts.[4]

The above statement is quite uncharacteristic for its times because of its insistence on objectivity, verging virtually on a cognitive exile. It was certainly not a part of the ways in which history was imagined in the pre-modern times. However, it was in the nineteenth century that objectivity became a central concern of history writing. Also, a great diversity of meanings regarding history began to be homogenised. A certain fixity was imparted to its meaning. History now meant an inquiry about the past, to understand the events of the past as they happened. This was more or less what was implied by the Sanskrit term "*Itihasa*". The past and its representation became indistinguishable from each other.

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[3] Shashi Bhushan Upadhyay, *Historiography in the Modern World: Western and Indian Perspectives* (New Delhi: Orient BlackSwan, 2016), 1–4.

[4] Upadhyay, *Historiography in the Modern World*, 6.

In this transition from diversity to standardisation, 'history' could sometimes be used in both its possible connotations – as past and as a representation of the past. So, when Gordon Childe wrote his famous book *What Happened in History* in 1942, he meant it in the former and older sense, history as past.[5] And when Winston Churchill made his equally famous statement – that history will be kind to him because he intended to write it[6] – he obviously meant it in the latter and the nineteenth-century sense of history as a view of the past. But it would be true to say that increasingly the latter meaning replaced the former meanings. It is history in this sense that the journal *RTA* is primarily concerned with.

History, in the sense of history writing or a particular representation of the past, may be seen and understood as a continuous tradition with many shifts and turns. The continuity of the tradition need not be mistaken to be static. Great shifts and 'turns' occurred within the tradition. The latter interventions were virtually in the form of a rebellion against the past. The first big rebellion against the past happened in the nineteenth century, when history acquired a great obsession with both accuracy and finality. The confidence regarding both accuracy and finality was obviously inspired by the natural sciences and a belief in the applicability of the scientific principles and procedures to history. History writing was professionalised.

In its earlier avatars, history had been part of literature or rhetoric. Now it was defined mainly in opposition to literature. The great concern now was to make clear what history was not. In the new imagination, certain binaries were created, and history's place was fixed in the binaries: History vs. Literature (fiction); Reality vs. Imagination; Narrative vs. Fact; Rhetoric (in which style matters) vs. Truth. History was de-rhetoricised. The imaginative dimension had to be purged out of history. History was to deal with the REAL, to capture the reality of the past as it really was. Subjectivity of any kind had no place in it and was to be kept out. Facts were to speak for themselves. The past was to be visible on its own, without the mediation of the historian. The identity of the historian was irrelevant to historical formulations. The historian was akin

[5] V. Gordon Childe, *What Happened in History* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1942).

[6] Winston S. Churchill, House of Commons, 23 January 1948, in Richard M. Langworth, ed., *Churchill by Himself* (New York: Rosetta Books, 2015), 64.

to a scientist and the past was the laboratory. This was what was meant by subject-object separation.

This great shift may be identified as the first big turn in history. The new confidence on accuracy came with a new focus on the archives as the repository of knowledge and truth. The archives had existed even earlier, but now they were consecrated in the new orientation towards history. With Leopold Ranke, the archives began to be seen not just as repositories of records but of genuine and objective historical knowledge. At the same time, there was a new emphasis on the nation-state as the legitimate carrier and building block of history. The Eurocentrism of this view was quite obvious. The non-nation-states—in other words, colonies of Asia and Africa—and societies which did not have their own written records and archives were placed outside history proper.

History in the nineteenth century was part of the new knowledge/social sciences. The new knowledge consisted of a fairly compact, comprehensive and closed circle of interlocking ideas. Eurocentrism was only one part of the new edifice of knowledge. Nationalism, colonialism, scientism, ethnocentrism, evolutionism—all played their part and reinforced one another. The remarkable success of natural science conferred a certain prestige upon it, and it was only natural that this prestige would carry to the scientific method also. This enabled all the disciplines of social sciences to make claims that were very ambitious. At least four different claims emanated from within the social sciences. These was, to begin with a cognitive claim, associated with positivism. It grafted the natural world and its principles on the human world. Just as the natural world follows certain natural laws and one only needed to unearth those laws to make the natural world intelligible, so is the case with the human world. There are certain social laws of development, and a clue to those laws would unlock all the mysteries of human life. This indeed was a tall claim and came to be questioned later in the twentieth century.

There was also a transformative claim which argued that the purpose of social enquiry was to bring about a transformative change in the human condition. This was the essence of Karl Marx's famous claim: "Philosophers have so far

interpreted the world. The point is to change it."[7] This Marxian assertion, equally ambitious, did have the merit of reimagining a philosopher from a seer into an activist. There was also a predictive claim emanating from the same quarters. If all the social laws of development can be understood, they would indeed enable us to foresee and predict the direction in which human society would unfold. And finally, there was a therapeutic claim too, emanating from psychoanalysis. Sigmund Freud asserted that all the major distortions in human behaviour were related to the working of certain psychic forces residing within humans.[8] An understanding of the mechanism of these forces could cure these distortions. All these claims – cognitive, transformative, predictive and therapeutic – were rooted in the same matrix and belonged to the same compact circle of interlocking and mutually reinforcing ideas. They were all questioned in the twentieth century.

If colonialism was an important factor in the structuring of the social sciences in the nineteenth century, it was decolonisation that fed into the twentieth-century ideas on the social sciences in general and history in particular. An overall democratisation also played its part. These democratic pressures began to show up in almost all the disciplines. In philosophy, ethnocentrism was seriously challenged by relativism. Just as the nineteenth-century social sciences were inspired by universalism, it was relativism that fed into twentieth-century social sciences. In Sociology ethno-methodology developed as a new analytical tool according to which ordinary people were to be seen as reflexive agents fully aware of the actions they were undertaking and of the implications of those actions. Anthropology began to depend much more on the observer-participant method rather than on ethnographic accounts. The ethnographic accounts began to be seen as unreliable. In history, the new focus was on 'history from below'.[9]

The effect of these interventions was particularly devastating for history. The entire range of ideas associated with nineteenth century history and very

[7] Karl Marx, *Theses on Feuerbach* (1845), in *Marx/Engels Selected Works*, vol. 1 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1969), 13.

[8] Sigmund Freud, *Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis*, trans. James Strachey (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1966), 15–16.

[9] For more on this see Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, "History from Below," *Social Scientist* 11, no. 4 (April 1983): 3–20.

central to it began to be swept aside. There was a plea for a return to the narrative form of history writing. There was virtually a narrative turn. It was argued that the events of the past do not have an innate meaning or form. These meanings are imparted in the process of narrative making. In that sense history shares something with literature. Imagination should play an important role in history writing. Moreover, narratives do not exist in an a priori manner. The act of making a narrative is inevitably a subjective one. Hence, the mirage of objectivity needs to be abandoned and subjectivity recognised as an important tool of history writing. All these were fundamental critiques of the ways in which history was conceptualised in the nineteenth-century.

Perhaps the most important critique was that of the archives as the repository of valid historical knowledge. In the new critique, the archives were seen as not a neutral unproblematic space. So many a priori assumptions went into the organisation of the archives. The nature of records, the selection of themes, the organisation of data created large blinkers which determined the very nature of the historical enquiry that was undertaken. Certain crucial dimensions of the past were excluded in an a priori manner in the archives-engendered history writing. As far as the colonies—now independent—were concerned, it was argued that these archives, being the creation of colonialism, contained at best the European knowledge about the non-European countries.

On the role of archives in structuring colonial knowledge, Nicholas Dirks has argued how, 'the [colonial] state literally produces, adjudicates, organizes, and maintains the discourses that become available as the primary texts of history'.[10] Upon this view, the study of modern and contemporary Indian history was particularly limited due to the overwhelming influence of the colonial archive. A similar questioning or archival history developed in Indian history writing also. The history writing during the initial decades after independence continued to be very dependent on the archives. But disenchantment with the archives emerged with the questioning of the 'history from above'. The rise of Subaltern historiography gave a new thrust to intellectual thought, and with new themes like caste, gender, and peasant issues finding resonance in the spectrum of historical enquiry, new archives in

[10] Nicholas B. Dirks, *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 43

the form of oral testimonies, autobiographies, folk memory, etc. emerged. Partition studies also created a new imagination of the archives.

In the new imagination, the archives were not simply the repositories of official records and therefore official versions of history. But the archives could also belong to people, containing their records and testimonies. In a similar vein, medieval historians started to pay more attention to hagiographies. On the other hand, textual studies in history transited from its orientalist formulations and obsession for seminal texts, to popular print culture and tract literature. In the production of new historical knowledge, a disenchantment with the older ways has been accompanied by a great reliance on the new ways, sources, and methods. It was thus that the thesis of the nineteenth-century was encountered by a powerful anti-thesis of the twentieth century, particularly during its second half. It created a crisis and put history writing on very shaky ground. Founding ideas of history—validity of the past, of events and of historical data—were all under siege. However, there is some evidence that after the thesis of the nineteenth century and a powerful anti-thesis of the twentieth century, there is now some synthesis and reconciliation, making it possible to retrieve and retain some of the older ways in the new orientation of history writing.

The reconciliation has the following architecture. The importance of objectivity is being recognised, not as a fact of historical enquiry, but as an aspiration worth pursuing. There is also a recognition that history and narrative are not mutually incompatible and can share a lot in common. History depends a great deal on the narrative. History is based on data and documents. Documents are traces of the past. The past is never available in a pure or even in a coherent form. It does, however, leave its traces behind. A narrative approach helps to organise those traces together, without compromising some of the pre-conditions of historical method. It is in this sense that reality in history is different from reality in fiction. The historian is much more constrained in constructing reality but is always enriched by the narrative device.

Yet another reconciliation has happened vis-a-vis the archives. The great disenchantment with the official archives and the emergence of information technology (IT) have imparted a new imagination to the idea of the archives

and fundamentally transformed the profile of the archives. The IT revolution has not only given a push towards digitisation and access, but has also de-centered the notion of the archive. The archive of today is not only limited to the official repository of knowledge but also includes what is being produced and consumed at the micro level of social structure. These shifts have led to an explosion of digital content which has made access to archives democratic. Newer directions towards data-analytics models have also opened up new directions for the imagination of archives for contemporary historians, opening newer vistas in genetic and linguistic studies. This has made the task of historians even more challenging. More than ever, historians are both reckoned with the challenges of the AI revolution and also the opportunities these newer mediums offer in expanding the pursuit of historical knowledge.

History today is an extremely dynamic discipline. It has grown along three axes. To begin with, there is more past to deal with. The total volume of the past is constantly increasing: the distant past is not diminishing and the recent times are constantly being added to the collective memory bank. For Indian history, this has the implication that whereas the focus on pre-historic and ancient India remains, the period after 1947 can no longer be left to political scientists and sociologists. Histories of independent India have to be written by historians. Second, new themes are constantly being added to historical enquiry. The same temporal zone is being looked at and analysed very differently. For Indian history writing of the last few decades, this means the welcome addition of themes such as caste, gender, and the environment. These themes have broadened the horizons of historical enquiry. Third, not only themes, but new perspectives and ways of looking at the past are asserting themselves and creating new challenges for the older, more established ways of looking at the past.

It is hoped that the *RTA* will represent this fascinating world of history and history writing in all its temporal depth and thematic diversity. It would welcome new research without in any way discouraging the older ways and concerns. It would provide a vibrant platform to young scholars from where they would share their findings with the larger community of historians and those interested in history.

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