

Understanding Historiography:

History is defined as the study of an event in a particular time and space. According to this definition, the basic unit of analysis or frame of reference for historians or students of history is an historical event, whereas the two dimensions of time and space (also called temporal and spatial dimensions provide the context in which an event is studied. The particularity or specificity of time and space makes an historical event unique in itself. For instance, the war of independence broke out at Meerut on May 10, 1857. The two dimensions of time (i.e. May 10, 1857) and space (Meerut in UP, India) make the War of Independence a unique historical event. The writing of history of the past events is called historiography. However, it is a historian's job to decide which event is an 'historical event' i.e. an event of historical significance, which merits or deserves to be studied and researched within the discipline of history.

Historiography an Art or Science:

Historiography is as much an art as a science of writing history. A historian uses his imagination and creativity for history-writing, which makes historiography an art. A historian may also employ scientific for historical research, notwithstanding the fact that the application of scientific method in social sciences, including the discipline of history, has its own limitations. The application of scientific method in history, which raises the status of history to a science, or more precisely a social science (the science of society), also allows the use of multi-disciplinary approach in historical research, whereby a historian borrows the methodologies, concepts, theories and models from other disciplines, particularly social sciences, for undertaking historical research. For instance while writing economic history a historian may use the

concepts and theories of economics. Similarly, for writing social history and political history, a historian may employ the concepts and theories of sociology and political science respectively.

Historiography is an essential and integral part of the discipline of history that explores what kind of history has been written so far by the historians of the past and the present. Historians have written the history of various ages/periods (e.g. history of ancient India or medieval Europe), continents (e.g. history of Africa or Europe), Regions (e.g. history of South Asia or Indo- Pakistan Sub-continent), countries (e.g. history of Pakistan, Egypt or France), movements (e.g. Khilafat Movement of 1919 in India, or the Mu'tazilite Movement), personalities (e.g. Quaid-i-Azam Mohammad Ali Jinnah or Martin Luther King Jr.), Institutions (e.g. feudalism or social stratification) , themes and issues (e.g. ethnicity or Muslim identity in South Asia), as well as particular events (e.g. French Revolution of 1789, migration of prophet Muhammad(peace be upon him [PBUH]) to Madinah in 622, or the first battle of Panipat in 1526), etc. In addition, historians may focus on one or more of the following spheres: political, military, social, economic, religious, cultural, scientific and intellectual. Moreover, while writing history, historians may also employ various perspectives and approaches such as elite, subaltern, Marxist, feminist or nationalist approaches, etc.

A student of history may raise a number of questions: When and where did historical thought first develop? When did history-writing begin? How did historical thought develop through the ages? How did various schools of historiography emerge? And what kind of history has been written by historians so far? Historiography as a sub-discipline of history addresses all these questions.

Objectives of Historiography:

History has been written for a number of reasons. What follows is a brief discussion on the objectives of history-writing, which may encourage a historian or a group of historians to undertake historical research. However, at times there can be more than one motive behind the writing of history.

1. Commemorative Purpose

History is generally written in order to commemorate and preserve the memory of past events, especially the deeds and achievements of ancestors, heroes, leaders and kings. Such a history gives the people a sense of their past as well as sense of pride and identity. For instance, the stone inscriptions of ancient Egyptian Civilization present a record of the past. In particular, the Palermo Stone, which dates back to about 2350 BC, contains the annals or records of the pharaohs, the ancient Kings of Egypt.

2. Moralistic Motive

History is also written with the motive of recording the past events so that the future generations could draw or learn lessons from them, and thus avoid repeating the past errors. This is also called moralistic interpretation of history. For instance, the Jewish-Hebrew historiography of fourth century BC was written with an explicit moralistic purpose

3. Propagation of Views

History may also be written by a historian or a group of historians in order to propagate and disseminate particular views, beliefs and doctrines in which they believe. These views may include, among others religious/ideological or political ideas. For instance, in South Asian historiographical tradition, the Hindu and'

Muslim nationalist histories have been written in India and Pakistan respectively in order to propagate Hindu and Muslim nationalism.

4. Propaganda

Sometimes history may be distorted, and based on falsehood and/or exaggeration. History may also be written with the purpose of propaganda among the intended readers such as glorifying the Successes and achievements of kings or rulers while minimizing their failures. The official history-writing in Nazi Germany, which misrepresented historical facts, is an example in point.

5. Explanatory Purpose

History is also written for offering an explanation for a particular historical phenomenon, whereby a complex historical event or development is explained and understood. Much of the contemporary historical research is undertaken with an explanatory purpose.

Subject-matter and Scope of Historiography:

Regarding the subject-matter of history, renowned philosopher, Eric Fromm (d. 1980) rightly observed that human being is the most important creation and achievement of the continuous human effort, the record of which we call history. In other words, human beings and their activities, is the subject-matter or the focus of history. According to Gordon Leff, a British historian, history is the study of human past, which particularly studies human beings as social beings, rather than as specie. This view-point suggests that human beings as social beings live in society (a collectivity of human beings), and the subject-matter of history is the social dimension of human life. History does not and cannot study human beings as biological beings, which is the task of a biologist. History studies the ideas, actions and activities of human beings, which are the result of human interaction, which is only possible when human beings live together.

Another important point is that history, in particular, studies the actions of human beings that bring about change. For instance, it is not the task of a historian to study the causes of an earthquake or volcanic eruption (which is, in fact, the task of a geologist), but a historian may study how an earth quake or volcanic eruption effects human life in terms of casualties and migration, etc. A historian does not directly study nature, but he may study the impact of nature on human life. In fact, a historian studies society, which is composed of human beings, who are 'active agents and are endowed with considerable freewill. Seen from another perspective, change which is the result of some human activity is-a subject-matter of history. Since the factor of change goes hand in hand with continuity, therefore, both the change and continuity are studied Side by Side. To put it simply, it is necessary to study continuity in order to study change and Vice versa. In a nutshell, a historian writes the history of human ideas and actions that bring about some significant change in society, making the human 1deas and actions the cause of historical events.