



Preliminary Operations in Historical Research Methodology

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Abstract: Preliminary operation is a course of brief overview about the research design that is intended to cover the basics implementing and designing an objective cum scientific research. Historical research methodology is the step-by-step structure of the procedures that a historical researcher must follow to produce a worthy research outcome. This article explains in detail various steps to be taken by a researcher in its proper sequential order.

Keywords: Research, Sources, Outline, Methodology, Data

Forms of historical research

Historical research is seeking or finding out the truth of the past. It is systematic inquiry with a view to reconstructing the past – or a fragment of it – as nearly ‘as it really happened’. This research may take mainly on of three forms:

- 1) Addition of new data
- 2) New interpretation of known data
- 3) Subordination of the data to unifying principles

1. Addition of New Data

Bringing to light some new information or new fact about the past may be said to be the simplest form of research. Ancient Indian history offered a rich field for research of this kind, for little of that history had been known before the nineteenth century, before the scholar-administrators of the East India Company began a grand effort in that direction.

2. New Interpretation of Known Data

A higher level of research is reached when the scholar tries to look at already known facts from a new angle and tries to interpret and evaluate those facts in a new light.

3. Subordination of the Data to Unifying Principles

Seeking unities behind historical events must be regarded as the highest form of historical endeavour. Here the search is not for new facts about the past, nor for fresh interpretations of known facts, but for universal hypotheses, underlying unities and principles. Not ordinary minds, but thinkers and philosophers of history

attempt such intellectual exercises and press all historical data to yield syntheses, over-arching theories and laws.

PRELIMINARY OPERATIONS

Historical research methodology, developed by Niebuhr and Ranke and followed ever since, may be divided into four main parts. They are Preliminary Operations, Analytical Operations, Synthetic Operations, and Concluding Operations.

The Selection of a Subject

Once the aspiring scholar is taken on the rolls of a faculty, he faces his first task, namely, the election of a subject, a topic, for research. “*No scholar*”, says Professor Kitson Clark, “*holds monopoly rights in any historical subjects whatsoever*”. Yet the matter is important and crucial. A topic once selected involves the scholar’s whole self, capabilities and judgement. The punishment for a hasty and unwise choice can be years of anguished drudgery, years poisoned by the growing uncongeniality of the subject. The responsibility for this choice is the historians.

Some criteria of choosing a subject/topic for research may be outlined. The first is the *suitability* of the topic to the researcher’s taste and aptitudes. The scholar must find the topic interesting and he must feel that something worthwhile and original could be said about it and see that not much has been said about it by others. Then he must decide the specific aspect of history he is particularly interested in.

Another criterion is the *manageability* of the topic. The scholar should have a rough idea of the nature and scope of the topic. It is to be precisely delimited in area, period, and the particular aspect so that the thesis could be completed in three or four years. The size of the topic is crucially important. A subject like the ‘Indian National Movement’ or ‘Christianity in India’ is far too vast and vague to handle.

Another important consideration in selecting a topic for research is the *accessibility to and availability of, source material*. Work would be well-nigh impossible if the sources are scattered over a wide area transcending national boundaries or when they are in a language or languages which the scholar does not know. The following is an example of a well-chosen subject ‘Social Effects of Agrarian Changes in Travancore 1912-36’.

Bibliography

Once the topic is selected, it is important for the scholar to know the range and types of sources available and to learn what has been written in and around the topic with which he is concerned. This is done by preparing a full but tentative bibliography of both the primary and secondary sources of the subject chosen. Bibliography work is a continuous work requiring periodical addition. On the importance of an initial bibliography, Professor Elton writes, “...knowing one’s fellow workers at first hand are not only a sensible precaution to prevent needless duplication or the duplication of exploded error; it also assists in covering the range of the sources, suggests questions, and opens lines of fruitful discussion”.

Sources (Evidence) and their Categorization

(a) Sources

History in its modern sense is as Professor Barraclough defines it, the attempt to re-create the significant features of the past on the basis of imperfect and fragmentary evidence which the past has left behind. The historian’s ability, dedication and will and his technical skill in using his evidence can surmount the two usual difficulties of historical research, namely, (i) the immense range and variety of sources that he has to make use of, and (ii) the complicated ethical techniques which he has to bring to bear on these sources. But Professor Arthur Marwick reminds us that the problem of the imperfect and

fragmentary nature of the evidence that the historian is called upon to use is not one which he can so easily solve with the best, of efforts. This is because we find much of our archaeological and other physical evidence in very bad condition. As Marwick tells us, an archaeological dig seldom uncovers complete undamaged relics of past ages. Even when such relics are in perfect condition, they only provide a few tiny clues to the total picture of what life was like, and what events were taking place, in that bygone age. Such descriptions must attempt at reconstruction derived from very imperfect sources. Not only archaeological sources but written documents have also suffered from the depredations of time, surviving in a form which renders them practically unreadable. Even complete documents or those nearly so may present problems of archaic languages or strange scripts which even knowledge of palaeography cannot solve. How can a historian be sure that the meaning he has given to certain words is the same meaning understood by people of the time?

It is this imperfect and fragmentary evidence which the historian uses as his sources or survivals from the events to be studied. These survivals or sources are the most important element in historical research, in the reconstruction of the past. Sources not only give the historian knowledge of history as events or facts of the past, but also serve him as evidence of those facts. Changes in attitude or approaches to history and change in the nature of the sources themselves have not reduced the importance of sources — this basic material — because no history is possible without them. No sources, no history.

Since in the modern day all aspects of past human life have become legitimate subjects of historical inquiry the range of subjects available to the historian is immense. The broadening of the scope of history and the increased number of practitioners of the discipline have led to concentration of attention on smaller and more fragmentary pieces of the past. Again, written history, far from being accepted as perfect or ultimate, is re-interpreted. Today, the subject is demarcated by all kinds of divisions and cross-currents. Every division of human society of whatever kind down to the minutest one is now a legitimate area of historical inquiry in which different types of methodology are employed and all kinds of sources tapped.

(b) Categorization of Sources

Historical sources, understood as those giving information on past events and activities or parts thereof, are of a rich variety. They may be broadly distinguished as *primary* and *secondary*. A third category may also be identified, viz, *hybrid* sources.

Primary Sources

The modern discipline of history turns on the right use of Primary sources/When Descartes cast doubts on the validity and usefulness of historical knowledge, Mabillon and the Bollandists had in answer founded the science of the criticism of the sources. Vico directly met Descartes's skepticism by validating historical knowledge on the epistemological and philosophical level and by developing historical criticism to a stage hitherto unattained. It was the great achievement of Niebuhr and Ranke to have introduced a new critical spirit into the theory and practice of history by establishing '*scientific*' study of the primary sources and insisting on a precision of documentation. The new elevated position of history rested on (i) the necessity of historical reconstruction on strictly contemporary, i.e., primary sources; (ii) a science of evidence by the analysis of the authorities and by comparison by the testimony of other writers; and (iii) divorcing the study of the past from the passions of the present. This methodological revolution gave history the right to regard itself as an independent form of inquiry, seeking its own answers to its own problems, and following its own methods of proof and purpose. Historians could now answer the common charge that much of their reconstruction of the past must be invention and that such reconstruction lacked any rigour, certainty or standard of truth. Niebuhr and Ranke had raised history from a subordinate position to the dignity of an independent science of the first rank.

Primary sources are those closest or contemporary to the event or period under study. They are the raw material of history. Of great variety, they broadly include *archaeological* and *written* material. Written sources may be *published* or *unpublished*. A historical work is deemed scholarly and reliable to the extent to which it is based on primary sources.

Archaeological

Of great variety, the first of such primary sources are the archaeological, epigraphic and numismatic material: old settlement sites and ruins, whole towns and cities, tombs, old buildings and monuments, artifacts of all kinds — indeed, whatever that helps to illustrate the life, manners and customs of ancient times — and inscriptions, coins and the like. For the reconstruction of the history of ancient India, the importance of the archaeological, epigraphical and numismatic material cannot be exaggerated. To make Proper %icy use of such material the historian needs to depend on the set of the archaeologist, the epigraphist and the numismatist.

Literary (written)

But the most commonly used type of historical material includes the stock of written sources. They are of a rich variety and chronicles, chronicles, decrees, edicts, treaties, charters, rent-rolls, official correspondence, memoirs, private letters and diaries, and so forth. They may be printed or in manuscript form, published or not. Proper use of many kinds of written material calls for knowledge of historical techniques like palaeography, linguistics and philology. The above kinds of sources are primary in the sense that they constitute the raw, imperfect evidence from which the historian reconstructs the past, and also because they constitute his ultimate, unimpeachable authority and serve him as evidence of the facts that he establishes.

Written sources that are primary may be organized in a kind of hierarchy. One which is handwritten and of which there may be only one copy is deemed more primary than one which is printed, and of which there may well be many copies. This is because the first kind of document is one to gain access to which more time and energy has to be expended than one which is printed in much larger numbers. Hand-written documents have invariably enjoyed greater sanctity.

Arthur Marwick arranges the written primary sources in the following hierarchy.

- (i) The first kind, known as *Documents of Record* consist in decisions taken by government or by a committee, council or parliament. They include central government sources, local government sources, records of various committees and non-government institutions and records of private companies.
- (ii) Another kind of primary sources for historians are *Surveys and Reports* commissioned by governments, private institutions or individuals. Nowadays, reports of government commissions and parliamentary committees of inquiry, ambassadors' reports, reports of private organizations, enquiries of individual social scientists and social survey organizations form a basic source for much historical study.
- (iii) *Chronicles and Histories*, another kind of primary sources, include monastic and town chronicles, civic histories and other histories and memoirs compiled within the period that the historian is studying Such sources are very valuable for medieval European history.
- (iv) *Family and Personal Sources*, such as letters and diaries, can give crucial information about individuals and their readily obtained elsewhere. perceptions not readily obtained elsewhere.
- (v) *Polemical Documents and Media of Communication*, such as pamphlets, treatises and polemical writings, sermons, newspapers, periodicals, cartoons, etchings and other illustrative material, films, radio and television programmes, and posters and advertisements are invaluable for all kinds of information on both events and attitudes.

- (vi) **Literary and Artistic Sources** like novels, poems, plays, paintings, sculpture and architecture are important primary sources as fundamental products of the age under study.
- (vii) **Oral Sources** mean the recording, whether on tape, by shorthand, or any other means, of personal recollections. Such oral testimony is invaluable in certain areas of inquiry. Professor Marwick writes: “*Primary sources do not have an autonomous value entirely apart from the questions which the historian wishes to ask and the context in which he wishes to set them*”.

Anthropological

One of the latest developments in historical investigation has been to use people as primary sources. Here, the skills of the sociologist and social anthropologist are pressed into the service of history. **Vico** in the eighteenth century had recommended the study of modern savages as a means of unlocking the ancient savage mind and thus learning to interpret the savage myths and legends that concealed remotest facts of ancient history. The rationale behind the suggestion was that savages, at all times and all places, are savages in mind. Similarly, **D.D. Kosambi** utilised studies of some of the more ‘primitive’ tribes of modern India to understand the culture and society of the most ancient times on the assumption that the tribes in question have changed very little over the centuries. Another way of using people as primary sources is by interviewing them about events in which they were participants or observers.

Secondary Sources

The ‘primary source’ is the basic, imperfect raw material out of which history is written and, therefore, of greater interest to the historian or research scholar than to the layman; the ‘secondary source’ is the coherent work of history in any form — article, dissertation or book — that the historian writes on the basis of the primary sources. Ordinary men and women depend upon such secondary works of history for their information — should they ever feel so — but historians and scholars treat them only as secondary sources. All Ph.D. theses, all scholarly articles and dissertations, are secondary sources. Historians make great use of secondary sources. Most textbooks are written entirely from secondary sources. It must be stressed that textbooks and popularizations on which many people depend are not secondary sources. “*It is a rule of good scholarship*”, says Professor **Marwick**, “*that when embarking upon some topic of research the historian should master all the existing secondary material*”.

Hybrid Sources

There is a kind of historical sources which are ‘primary’ from one point of view but ‘secondary’ from another. The **autobiography** which may be taken as the best example of this type, while being a secondary history of the times through which the author has lived, is a primary account of his own experiences and thoughts. Jawaharlal Nehru’s *The Discovery of India* and his *Autobiography* are examples. **AK Gopalan’s** *Autobiography*, a secondary source in respect of certain aspects, is pre-eminently a primary source for the author’s life and for the growth of the communist movement in Kerala. But, in using the autobiography as a historical source, Professor **Arthur Marwick** adds a note of caution: “*Usually composed after the events described, an autobiography will usually have to be treated with even greater circumspection than the more straightforward primary document*”.

Somewhat belonging to this genre is the **contemporary history**, that is, the history of events through which the historian has himself lived. Contemporary history falls into two types: those written in the normal detached fashion by any noted historian, and those written by actual participants in the events narrated.

Works of contemporary politics may likewise be treated as hybrid sources. Engels's *Condition of the English Working Class* is an example. Marwick says that though Engels's descriptive matter cannot be taken as it is, his eye-witness accounts stand primary sources. The work is primary source again from the point of the study of the development of socialist thought. Dr. Rajendra Prasad's *India Divided*, and V.P. Menon's *Integration of Indian States and The Transfer of Power* are again works of contemporary politics which are of the kind of hybrid sources.

In many cases a clear distinction between 'primary' and 'secondary' sources cannot be made. In fact, a rigid definition of sources or reliance on conventional material is slowly being abandoned. Today, besides conventional sources, the historian has to deal with many 'things' including landscape and architecture to elicit an understanding of past times.

The Preparation of an Outline

When the subject has been selected, a rough bibliography prepared, and the primary and secondary sources have been listed and categorized, the scholar should go on to prepare an outline of his projected work. It is to be a framework, a synopsis, a blue-print intended to give a rough idea of the work ahead. The outline covering the whole subject logically arranged is, however, *ad-hoc* and tentative, open to revision from time to time until the thesis, is completed.

As the scholar proceeds with the study of the sources, he jots down the many ideas that occur to him with the type of research in mind: whether exposition, argument, narration or description. The scholar intending to argue and establish that the great Indian Revolt of 1857 was essentially a popular movement, or that the *Moplah* rebellion of 1921 was not a communal but a peasant outbreak, his jottings and his notes would be so oriented.

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