

Historical research: Tools and Methods

Aafid Gulam

Physical Training Instructor (PTI), Govt Degree College Budgam, J&K, India

Abstract

This paper aims to equip historical researchers with the skills they will need to find and gain access to all the primary source materials they need for their projects. Over the course of a week participants will learn, through an intensive programme of lectures and visits to repositories in and around, how to combine online tools and traditional archival search techniques to locate and obtain evidence. Institutions visited will include the Library, the national archives and a number of other major national repositories in addition to a wide range of smaller and more specialized archives. This paper is primarily aimed at those engaged in research degrees in history disciplines, but is open to all researchers wishing to expand their skills and knowledge in original source materials.

Keywords: historical, traditional, tools, methods

1. Introduction

History is a meaningful record of human achievements. It is not merely a list of chronological events, but a truthful and integrated account of the relationships between persons, events, items and places. History is used or very much essential to understand the past, try to understand the present in light of past events and developments and to predict the future.

Historical research should be encouraged because it relates to the heritage of any field. This heritage should be recorded and preserved for future generations. Study of history may be considered as an art but writing history is a science. The historical research study are unique in nature. Historical research is the application of the scientific method of inquiry to historical problems. It demands standards of careful methodology. Historical method comprises the techniques and guidelines by which historians use primary sources and other evidence, including the evidence of archaeology, to research and then to write histories in the form of accounts of the past. The question of the nature, and even the possibility, of a sound historical method is raised in the philosophy of history as a question of epistemology. The study of historical method and of different ways of writing history is known as historiography.

Historical research is a peep and probe into the past events institutions and characters that are no more on the scene now but that have been instrumental in shaping the destiny of the people in a region or country and the fate of humanity through the ages. It is different from other methods of research because the historical research scholar does not obtain data by direct observation of phenomenon nor does he engage in experimentation but analyzes evidence contained in the sources that more often are nonliving or inanimate. The evidence is sought from the works of the archeologists, writers, poets, builders, and scores of others and is analyzed in the light of facts that are derived from various sources. No experimentation is involved in this process. The historical researcher depends upon the observations made by other individuals. He also looks towards the objects (things,

monuments, artifacts, household articles, etc.) which don't "talk" but stand as "mute" testimony silently revealing a lot about men, minds, materials and matters that have mattered much in contemporary context and shaped history as we see it today. He draws inferences to fill the gaps in knowledge by weighing and considering every aspect of the situation in details. The historical research scholar exerts little controls over the conditions of observation; he first establishes, and then goes to interpret relationships as they exist without manipulating independent variables.

The historical truth is dug out not by observing the externals alone as in science or psychology; it is intuitively apprehended by analyzing what the externals - the remnants and residues of the past- reveal and what others have perceived them to be as evidence of historical drama. Both men (dead or alive) and materials are sources of historical data; they play an equally important role in revealing the historical truth. For instance, writing history of the ancient Olympic Games will be impossible without study of the ruins of the temples and monuments in the Valley of Olympia, artifacts and writings connected with this great Pan-Hellenic event of cultural and historical value to the mankind.

2. Sources of Historical data

No historical research is complete without data and sources of historical data are quite varied - ranging from a bronze icon found at Mohanjodaro (the site of Indus Valley Civilization) to a magnificent monument like the Taj Mahal, or an edict etched in rock to the celestial Vedas. An ancient copper coin, a manuscript, a terra-cotta cup, a queen's costume, a king's crown, a ruin, a hammer, a household article or an empress's walking stick and hundreds of the kind are sources of information on historical events and individuals.

Historical sources are categorized into deliberate and inadvertent sources. Deliberate Sources are linked to conscious efforts to record some event or document or information for the sake of preserving it for future. They may range from brief biographic notes etched or carved on the

tomb stones to the extended diaries and written biographies. They may be in the form of written or orally transmitted testimonial materials like myths, folklores, tales, customs, rites & rituals etc. Passed on from one generation to the other either by word of mouth (unwritten directives) or in the form of written documents. Ingredients of history are present in the edicts, war accounts, and life- sketches of important persons drawn by writers. Travel records of Magasthenes, Hsuan Tsang, Fieyan and others are an excellent first hand deliberate account of the socio-cultural and political scenario of contemporary India.

Inadvertent sources, as such, hardly contain any documented facts of historical value, the research himself has to dig out information from them by using his keen sense of observation, test and examination. Coins, artifacts, costumes, monuments, weapons, tools, household objects etc, are all indirect evidence sources. They talk but their composition, structure, form, shape, colour, style, etc., speak out volumes about the individuals who created, used, wielded, or handled them. Sculpture, architecture and seals and stones; classics like Iliad and Odyssey or the Sanskrit epics Ramayana and Mahabharata are a great source of data on recreation, sport and physical activity of the ancient people, besides their routines, lifestyles, socio-cultural ethics and interactions

2.1 Primary Sources

Historical evidence is obtained from primary or secondary sources - Whether written or unwritten. A primary source is one that contains first-hand information such as direct recording or direct reporting of experience by a person about the event in the shape of a book. Written or oral testimony to a historical event, individual or object may come from a courtier, soldier, politician, prince, leader or even a common man who had been an actual participant in or an eye witness to the event under consideration. Clarke & Clarke (1970) have put up a categorized comprehensive list of primary sources of historical data as given below:

- Official records: papers, minutes, budgets, record files, war memoirs, awards, attendance records, published materials, laws, court proceedings, decisions etc.
- Personal records: speeches, articles, books, diaries, degrees, autobiographies, oral statements, family histories, superstitions, rites, rituals etc.
- Pictorial records: photographs, movies (videos), paintings, sketches, sculpture etc.
- Published material: Newspaper accounts, year books, pamphlets, books, journals, articles, text books, records, certificates, report cards, advertisements, etc.
- Mechanical records: Electronic equipment (tapes).

From using primary sources, the scholars learn that all written history reflects an author's interpretation of past events. It is subjective in nature. The students are able to directly touch the lives of people from the past. No doubt, textbooks package information from primary sources, but it needs to be remembered that a textbook is only one historical interpretation, and the author is simply an interpreter of evidence not a purveyor of truth. Different authors will interpret the evidence in different ways, and will offer up different meanings and interpretations, and so each textbook has a point of view that renders it subject to question. It is important for the scholars of history to realize that any account of an event, no matter how impartially presented it

appears to be, is essentially subjective. Therefore, when students view primary sources such as letters or photographs, and summarize their conclusions, they become aware of the subjective nature of their own conclusions. When using primary sources, students are confronted with two essential facts of studying history:

- The record of historical events reflects the personal, social, political and/or economic points of view of the participants.
- Students bring to the sources their own biases, created by their own personal, social, political and economic situations.

It is important for the historical research scholars to realize that history exists through interpretation, and that interpretation is often a very small and select fragment of what could be part of the record. In the final analysis,

- Primary sources fascinate students because they are real and personal: history is humanized through them. Students experience human emotions, values and attitudes of the past.
- Primary sources also allow students to come in contact with the language and customs of the times, free of any tweaking, cleansing or interpretation by an author.
- Using and interpreting primary source materials trains the student in gathering, sifting and evaluating evidence, skills that are very important in this media drenched era in which we live.
- Students are expected to recognize,
 - How a point of view and bias affect evidence.
 - What contradictions and other limitations exist within a given source.
 - To what extent sources are reliable.
 - The need to understand and make appropriate use of many sources of information.
- Students participate in the process of history. They learn to debate about the interpretation of sources, challenge others, conclusions and seek out evidence to support their own.

2.2 Secondary Sources

Secondary sources constitute the supporting stuff meant chiefly to authenticate the primary sources and their contents. A primary source may be genuine, and yet contain material which is subjective, distorted, contradictory or controversial because no one can rule out the possibility of a court recorder, chronicler, biographer, or a diarist being partial, prejudiced, compulsive, one-sided and susceptible to social or environmental pulls and pressures. In simple words, a primary source directly deals with the event; the secondary source indirectly deals with the primary source and authenticates it. Both are equally important as they complement and supplement each other.

3. Scope of historical research

All great civilizations Greek, Roman, Indus, and Chinese have their traditional systems of physical education. Traditions play a very important role in shaping the character of individuals. The history of physical education must expose 'myths' and 'truths' about traditional ways of the past. It should attempt to reveal how physical education activity has developed into a scientific discipline.

Historical research in physical education and sports is to be

encouraged so that the present physical educationists learn something from the past. Studying history is an essential activity of professional training in physical education. Traditions have played an important role in the development of most of the games and sports in the world.

The history of physical education must reveal how functions of social institutions shift from time to time, how they are influenced by inter-continental practices. It is necessary for the student of physical education to understand how his profession has grown and developed through the centuries. This will help him to interpret the philosophy of physical education in a better way to those who really are ignorant of it and have misconceptions about it. The physical educators would be able to estimate the future development of physical education only by referring to its past.

4. Criticism of historical research

The actual existence of either primary or secondary historical sources does not guarantee their accuracy or validity. The historian must be constantly critical of the historical materials obtained and examined. A record may not be genuine, a photograph may be faked, or a speech may have been written by a ghost writer. Thus historical materials must be vigorously evaluated. Applying two types of criticism, external and internal makes such evaluations.

4.1 External criticism

External criticism determines the form of the material. This phase of the evaluation establishes the authenticity of the sources. In other words the investigator must save him from being the victim of fraud. So the purpose of external criticism is to establish the historical truth. The historical investigator must seek help from the auxiliary fields such as Chemistry, Anthropology, Archeology, Art, Literature, Pathology and various ancient and modern languages. To establish the authenticity, the scholar has to seek answers to a number of questions.

- Who is the author?
- What was the qualification of the author?
- Was the documents written by a ghost writer?

4.2 Internal criticism

After establishing the authenticity through the external criticism, we have to evaluate the accuracy and the trustworthiness of the sources and that can be done through internal criticism. The purpose of internal criticism is to ascertain truthfulness of the data. Internal criticism in brief seeks the truth meaning and value of the content of sources of data.

After internal criticism data is used for the presentation of facts. So the criticism of data both internal and external establishes the reliability and validity of the data (authenticity) and validity of contents i.e accuracy.

5. Conclusion

It enables educationists to find out solutions to contemporary problems which have their roots in the past. i.e. it serves the purpose of bringing about reforms in education. The work of a historical researcher sometimes sensitizes educators to unjust or misguided practices in the past which may have unknowingly continued into the present and require reform.

A historical researcher studies the past with a detached perspective and without any ego-involvement with the past practices. It could be easier for educationists to identify misguided practices thus enabling them to bring about reforms. It throws light on present trends and can help in predicting future trends. If we understand how an educationist or a group of educationists acted in the past, we can predict how they will act in future. Similarly, studying the past enables a researcher to understand the factors / causes affecting present trends. In order to make such future predictions reliable and trustworthy, the historical researcher needs to identify and clearly describe in which ways the past differs from the present context and how the present social, economic and political situations and policies could have an impact on the present and the future.

6. References

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