

# Historiography and Social Change: An Analysis of History Writing and Social Change through Reading and Writing Practices

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**Abstract – Change has been the constant phenomena since time immemorial. It has political, economic and social dimensions whose convergence has created the history of human civilisation. This article offers a conceptual note on historiography. This article scatters some light on description of the relationship between “history and writing”, “history and politics”, and “history and society”. The aim is for a comprehensive understanding of the role of reading, writing, politics and society in historiography. In a particular manner, this article endeavored at explaining historiography with the attempt to establish correlation between historiography and social change. This article adopts analytical method. Doing so, it focuses on “how social change has impacted on historiography”. In this context, the article justifies that historiography is being affected and also affects social change.**

**Key Words: History, Historiography, Social Change**

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Old order changeth yielding place to new.

--Tennyson

We cannot get all our needs without the help of others. That had forced human to live in society, which became interdependent and collaborative. Due to dynamism of thought, human – after forming the society – had started to think for the betterment of society. This led to human as efficient communicator. Communication has made human different from other animals existed on this planet earth. With the course of time, human tries to record the communications of his/her predecessor and developed recording technique like writing in the form of books. Books play a significant role in understanding our history. One can trace the shift in human behavior and society with simply studying the history of books. A single book has its own style of writing, symptoms of contemporary social, economic, political system and others attributes of the era. It has a vital role in spreading information and knowledge. This helps in strengthening of relationships among society, which makes human species to prosper and survive (Tucker, n.d.).

Knowingly or unknowingly, the history writing became integral part of human society. With development of civilization, human had formed institution like state; and politics became the visible part of society. Power is being worshiped and ideas were developed to get power, to sustain in power and to change the power

structure. To some extent, those are in power controlled the historiography of society (Leibfried et al., 2015). This also pioneered in social changes in structural manner. To understand and evaluate the importance of this paradigm shift, we should inquire about: What is the role played by time, place, social, economic, political, and environmental system on writing history and on reading it? How do readers make sense of the accounts given in historical writings? What are the social effects of that experience? And how has it varied? In the next three section the relationship between “history and writing”, “history and politics”, “history and society” has been shown for a better understanding of role of writing, politics and society in historiography.

## HISTORY AND WRITING

Reading and writing has evolved with the evolution of human society. The advent of book writing presented a revolutionary change in human society. Now here the question arises that how exposure to the printed words affected the thought and behavior of human and how it is related to our society. For this we must have to go through the social context of reading. Reading is closely related to the culture. We can see in our history there are very less books written on the science fictions, (though there are some examples of fairy tales, magic story books, etc. but they are not totally fit in the category of science fiction). Is this because of our culture? Culture plays

a crucial role in building reading habits. It determines who reads what, in what condition, at what time, and with what effect. Culture determines our choice what to read and what not to. But the important point is that at the same time our readings have a lot to influence our culture and change the dynamism and dimensions of culture. Cultural change should not be seen as linear but it is multi layered and multi-dimensional concept. Even in a homogenous society we can find difference in elite culture and popular culture. It remains in different layers and its change also occurs on different layers, in different direction and at different pace. The current of cultural change flows up as well as down merging and blending as they went (Darton, 2002, pp. 9–26; Tucker, n.d.).

The art of theory making is conceived as the subsequent result of the reading and writing practices. It has also been observed throughout the history that reading and writing practices has been influenced by the different theories at the different time of history. Particular forms of knowledge, what we recognize as disciplines, are founded on a particular kind of reading and writing practices. The practice of history writing has been one of the major discipline in which this dynamism is apparent. The magnitude of influence of theories, ideas and ideologies on the practice of history writing has always been debatable, because history writing also depends on other variables like geographical space, time, sociopolitical system etc. At the same time, it cannot be denied that history writing is a dynamic process and changes takes place with the change in the above mentioned variables.

In the words of Passmore (2003) “the meaning of the words are the product of linguistic structure”. No historical inquiry can interpret the actual meaning because the meaning itself a structured concept and never fixed throughout the history. Structuralist as well as post-structuralists view language as an unstable system in which meaning is being changed from time to time. This clearly signifies the existence of meta-narrative in any historical writing. Throughout history, ‘history’ has subjective and interpretative character. There always remains a possibility of conflict because each man sees history from his own point of view. That makes history as a debatable phenomenon (Blake, 1955; Carr, 1987).

Exhibiting the selectivity and biased nature of historians, Carr argues that historians selectively choose the facts from past and produce them as a historical fact. It is up to them to which fact they choose to become historical fact, and in this process historians are generally driven by their own biases and agendas (Carr, 1987, p. 11).

Although the practice of history writing is considered as dynamic, history as a body of knowledge is believed to be ‘static’ in nature. It’s because the thing which has already happened in past cannot be undone. This is not the whole truth as well. Because, one may not alter the events of the past but one can easily interpret the events in a different way, which

not only alter the perception of the people towards their past but also guide them to make specific type of future which they want and need to create (Andres, 2016). Stressing the dynamism character of history, Carr pointed that “it is a continuous process of interaction between the historian and his facts, an unending dialogue between the past and the present” (Carr, 1987, p. 30).

Salevouris and Furay has discussed extensively the way of historical writing in their work *The Methods and Skill of History: A Practical Guide*. For them historiography is a concept rather a word. They refers the modern usage of historiography as “the study of the way history has been and is written – the history of historical writing” (Salevouris & Furay, 2015, p. 255). While reading historiography one doesn’t study the events of the past directly, but the changing interpretation of those events in the works of individual history.

On this debate of subjectivity and objectivity in history writing, Friedman emphasized that history can never be truly objective. This is “because the politics of identity consists in anchoring the present in a viable past. The past is, thus, constructed according to the conditions and desires of those who produce historical textbooks in the present” (Friedman, 1992a, p. 207, 1992b).

## HISTORY AND POLITICS

Famous British novelist George Orwell has argues that “who controls the past controls the future: who controls the present controls the past” (Orwell, 2009). Basically, he pointed out the essence of history in future of politics and political discourse. History writing is a powerful tool for shaping the popular thinking of the citizens (Andersen, 1991; Armstrong, 1994; Smith, 1991). English historian Freeman highlights that “History is past politics and politics is present history”. For this reason it always plays a crucial role in nation as well as state building processes.

Often, politicians manipulate the historical facts, figures, events and myths; try to gain mass support. This is not limited to any particular area rather prevalent across the world. (Friedman, 1992b; Smith, 1991). Carr focuses on the same when he emphasizes that “the ideas of society are the ideas of its ruling class” (Carr, 1987, p. 5). If we observe on current trends of historical writing, we will find the localisation and nationalisation of history. In words of Lorenz (1999) “the Historiography tends to localize explanations of historiographical developments within nationalistic contexts and to neglect international dimensions”. He argues the cause of localisation historiography is due to the history writing and analysing occurs within one spatio-temporal setting. Hence, he suggested the comparative approach to historiography rather a

general and specific aspect of historiographical case study.

Most of characters, personalities and symbols of past are being interpreted now with contemporary historiography. They are immortals for a particular society and evil for another society. It is the interpreter who redefines the character of such controversial historical figures. The interpretative character of history offers leverage for interpretation which politicians across globe used as the means to sensitize people on their side. Say for example while writing history about Mangols or Uzbek ruler Tamur Lung in India, they are depicted as brutal and cruel who had killed lakhs of people every day. But for Mongol people or Uzbek people, they are national heroes.

Politics and history are interconnected and complimentary to each other. History provides base for political system and politics control and shape the historical research. As a fertilizer for the growth of identity in any society, history provides a fertile ground for cultivating political interest to political elites. Describing the nexus between political elites and historians Miller contends that "The government directly influences the politics of memory and historical research by regulating access to archives, setting standards of historical education (for example, the minimal set of topics and facts a student is supposed to know), and practicing priority funding of scientific research and publications on history problems" (A. Miller, 2010). He also argues that "As the feeling of nationalism are pre-requisite for the survival and solidarity of nation, historiographer play decisive role in the creation or evolution of such national sentiment by writing and re-writing and recording shared historical events, celebrations, ceremonies, days of joys and sorrows along with heroes, warriors, martyrs and liberators of the past".

Hobsbawm and Kertzer explained the role of historiographer and argued, "Historians are to nationalism what poppy-growers.....are to the heroin addict. We supply the essential raw material for market. Nation without a past is contradiction in term. What makes a nation is the past, what justifies one nation against other is past, historians are the people who produce it" (E. J. Hobsbawm & Kertzer, 1992, p. 3). Hobsbawm had said that "the nation was one of the many traditions invented by political elites in order to legitimize their power in a century of revolution and democratization" (Eric J. Hobsbawm, 2012; Livingstone & Lunt, 1994).

The reality produced by the historiography is itself a complex phenomenon. It is closely attached to the concept of power. While describing relationship between power and reality Foucault has philosophized that power produces reality, so reality is the outcome of power which is an agent and not the byproduct of agent. Our imaginations, ideas and thoughts passes through a process which has an institutional linkage.

Foucault has talked about the institutional base of power where power is non-coercive but all pervasive. The texts and contexts within influence the readership across the imagined boundaries of readership (Foucault, 2002). Literature and its different forms have been finding strong presence in all the societies at all the times. Societal context, issues related to humanity, social behavior, established norms of society and their applications, etc. all are intertwined and interrelated in literature.

## **HISTORY AND SOCIETY**

History is the most interesting, but complex field of study due to its nature. It is misunderstood as merely a dry chronicles of dates and facts. Some people believes that there is no need of knowing the things which has become past now, but the fact is that nobody can escape from his/her past. History provides the foundation to society as well as individual for building their basic idea about themselves (Andersen, 1991; Friedman, 1992a).

History is our outlook on society. A social constructivist believes that our thoughts and imaginations are social constructs, highly influenced and dependent on popular cultures, societal norms and practices. The way we get educated to think, read and write has socio-cultural influences which are also responsible for our educational psychology. Our whole psychological set up and tendencies since the beginning are somewhere reflections of society and hence socially constructed. These tendencies through socialization gradually become the part of our personality and influence our thoughts and imaginations. David McCullough – a famous British historian – has said "History is a guide to navigation in perilous times. History is who we are and why we are the way we are" and "History is who we are and why we are the way we are" (Historian Addresses Wesleyan, 1984).

History contains a lot of narratives about past, myths, commonly shared stories of joy and sorrow, defeat and victory which act as an adhesive force for society. Myth is one of the key elements of history which is used in national identity formation (D. Miller, 1995; Smith, 1999). It has been argued that "the formation of a new national identity that unites populations is impossible without recourse to some myth making" (Malinowski, 1971). Myths create consciousness about group's commonly shared experiences and tell how a group is different from another group.

Individual and society always remain in interaction with each other and influence each other. Historians, as an individual, are also a part of society and cannot protect themselves from the influence of societal factors. Carr explained this phenomenon as influence of 'social phenomenon' on historians and believed that, 'as individuals, historians are heavily influenced by the society that surrounds them (Carr,



1987). For this reason he suggested to study the historians and their society as well as time, which they represent before studying the interpretation and the facts which historians presents. He firmly believed “societal stimulus influences the interpretation of the past given by historians”.

Carr also remarked that historians frequently mold their facts to suit their interpretation and their interpretation to suit their facts and in this manner they take part in the dialogue between past and present. In this scenario the work of an historian become an important one. It can build peace or can destroy peace and create conflict in any society, region, or even throughout the world. Hence, Past is the key to understand not only for one's own identity but also how they are different from others (Connor, 1990).

## **SOCIAL CHANGE AND HISTORIOGRAPHY**

Human is a social animal, and he remains connected to his society and culture. Sociology of thought is not only shaped but also control by reading/writing practices. Books are used like an instrument in the shape of printed words which carries social and cultural history of that era. It is a medium of communication through prints. It is the best mean of transmitting ideas from one generation to another generation. Books connect the author with its reader. The whole communication circuit from author to reader transmits the ideas through different stages, as from thought to written words, from written words to printed words, and from printed words to thoughts again. Authors are readers themselves, because generally while writing they always keep themselves in the position of reader and try to judge their writings from readers' perspective. On the other hand, readers not only make their ideas but also try to create their own writings with help of the work of writer. Texts shape the response of the reader. A reader influences author before as well as after the writing. Because a writer takes his ideas from the society, and before writing he generally keeps the whole social structure as well as expected psychological order of his reader in his mind (Iser, 1972).

Society and culture is deeply connected with reading/writing practices. It influences human thoughts and act as an agent of social and cultural change. Whole history of social change, system; concepts, ideology, culture and civilization are the result of change in thought process of human beings which is a subsequent result of the change in the reading/writing practices, style, materials etc.

Reading and writing practices have also been changed over the time and due to globalization, and technological development, it is further changing revolutionarily. History writing also varies according to time and space. Spinoza argued, “any historical inquiry, being a spatial-temporal phenomenon, always influenced by the demand of the time, ruling regime, process of modernity etc” (Spinoza, 2017).

Book reading or writing with the increase in educated people has been increased. Due to technological development, we have a flood of reading and writing materials around us. This shift has both, positive as well as negative factor inside it. Readers/writers are in the situation where every day they are getting new things to know. These excessive floods of reading/writing material may make readers sometimes ignorant of some very genuine, authentic and beautiful works. They may become less emotional about intensive reading. Sometimes political and market forces keep unpretentious and honest works outside the purview of readers and promotes some cheap and narrow writings through false publicity. Both reading and writing are losing their serious nature a little bit in this socio-political system and clutches of consumerist, market oriented system. This approach may cause severe harm particularly to historical writings (Iser, 1972).

History writing practices as well as the systemic process which is involved through it has different connotation when we talk about impact and changes from the prism of time and space. It also present the author considerations about right and wrong, good and bad, and what should we believe and what should not. Carr also believed “history is consciously or unconsciously, the reflection of our own understanding of a particular time and the view we have for the society of a time” (Carr, 1987, p. 8).

## **CONCLUSION**

In conclusion it can be said that historiography which involves blending of thoughts, imaginations, and myths based on the available historical resources, documents, archival records, facts etc., is dependent on socio-political system. This system controls reading and writing practices, and subsequently determines the course of past reality. Spinoza (2017) rightly argued that “one should not blindly follow the text while reading scriptures, but always remember the hidden reefs s/he might encounter in the text, one of those being demand of the time period, and goal of a ruling regime”. The relationship between historiography and social change contains a deep philosophical as well as intellectual debate within it. Both of them are deeply connected with the reading and writing practices. They not only influence the liberty and creativity of author but also regulate readers' approach towards history. They are interconnected to each other and influence each other.

Sometimes Social change shapes the thought process and imagination, and sometimes historiography provides scope for new social-psychological changes in thought process. What is truth or what is reality is a debatable question but it is also a fact that reality also changes with the change in space and time. Most of the time, change in thought process remain the reason behind these changes. Whatever we know as real in history may

be the data which we get and experienced while reading history. Reading/writing practices being a spatio-temporal phenomenon and subjected to socio-political system and forces of social change would not be confined to single narrative of history. It would also not make same effect across the different generations and spaces. Different generations pass through distinctive socialization that has a large role to play in development of reading and understanding a particular text. So when we talk about historiography we should scrutinize history writing through the lenses of Social change and reading/writing practices.

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