

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY (HISTORY: THEORY & METHODS)

Unit I: Interrogating 19th-Century Frameworks

[a] Introduction to Philosophy of History, Scientificity, Objectivity and the Factual Basis of History or Source Utilisation

A. Learning Objectives

- Understand the meaning, scope and significance of the philosophy of history.
- Distinguish between history as a record of the past and history as a disciplined interpretation of the past.
- Examine major 19th-century approaches to historical knowledge, especially positivism, scientific history and empiricism.
- Understand the concepts of scientificity and objectivity in historical research.
- Explain why historical facts are important but are not identical with the whole of history.
- Understand the nature, classification, criticism and utilisation of historical sources.
- Recognise the limitations of 19th-century claims of complete objectivity and value-neutrality.
- Develop a critical and methodical approach to evidence, interpretation and historical argument.

B. Introduction to the Philosophy of History

1. Meaning of Philosophy of History

- Philosophy of history is the systematic reflection on the nature, meaning, purpose, pattern and knowledge of history.
- It asks not merely 'What happened?' but also 'How do we know what happened?', 'Why did it happen?' and 'Does history have any meaning or direction?'
- It examines the relationship between historical events, human agency, causation, change, continuity, interpretation and historical knowledge.
- The term may refer both to philosophical reflection on the historical process and to philosophical reflection on the methods and limits of historical knowledge.

2. Two Broad Meanings

- **Speculative philosophy of history**
 - Searches for large-scale patterns, direction or meaning in human history.
 - Often asks whether history follows a discernible pattern, development or purpose.
 - Important thinkers include Hegel, Marx and other philosophers who proposed broad interpretations of historical development.

- **Analytical or critical philosophy of history**

- Examines the concepts and methods used by historians.
- Studies evidence, explanation, causation, interpretation, objectivity, narrative and historical language.
- It asks how valid historical knowledge is constructed rather than assuming that the past can simply be reproduced.

3. Central Questions of the Philosophy of History

- What is history?
- What is the relationship between the past and historical knowledge?
- Can the past be known objectively?
- What counts as historical evidence?
- How should historians establish facts?
- Can historical events be explained by causes, laws, structures or human intentions?
- What is the role of interpretation in history?
- Does history show progress, decline, cycles or no predetermined direction?
- How do language, culture, ideology and the historian's own standpoint influence historical writing?

4. History and the Past: An Essential Distinction

- The past consists of all events, experiences, actions and conditions that have already occurred.
- History is the disciplined reconstruction and interpretation of selected aspects of the past using surviving evidence.
- The past is therefore not identical with the historian's account of the past.
- Only a small portion of past human activity leaves recoverable evidence; historians must therefore work with incomplete remains.
- Selection is unavoidable because no historian can narrate every event, person or experience.

5. Major 19th-Century Frameworks

- The 19th century witnessed strong confidence in reason, science, classification, empirical evidence and progress.
- Positivist approaches encouraged historians to collect, verify and organise documentary evidence and to minimise unsupported speculation.
- Ranke's historical scholarship became associated with rigorous use of primary sources and archival research.
- Hegel interpreted history through the development of freedom and the unfolding of Geist (Spirit).

- Marx explained historical change through material conditions, modes of production, class relations and conflict.
- These approaches differed greatly, but all contributed to debates about causation, evidence, historical laws, objectivity and the meaning of historical change.

C. Scientificity of History

1. Meaning of Scientificity

- Scientificity means the extent to which a field of inquiry employs systematic procedures for producing, testing and justifying knowledge.
- In history, scientificity does not mean that historians can conduct controlled laboratory experiments on past events.
- Rather, it refers to disciplined evidence-gathering, source criticism, logical reasoning, transparency of method and careful justification of conclusions.

2. Why 19th-Century Historians Sought Scientific Status

- The growing prestige of the natural sciences encouraged historians to make historical study more systematic.
- Professional historical scholarship expanded through universities, archives, learned societies and specialist training.
- Historians increasingly emphasised primary documents, chronology, verification and documentary criticism.
- There was a desire to distinguish professional history from legend, myth, patriotic glorification and purely speculative philosophy.
- Positivism encouraged confidence that reliable knowledge could be established through observable evidence and method.

3. Ranke and the Ideal of Empirical History

- Leopold von Ranke (1795–1886) is closely associated with the professionalisation of modern historical scholarship.
- He emphasised the careful study of primary sources, especially archival documents and contemporary records.
- His approach stressed reconstruction of the past on the basis of critically examined evidence rather than imaginative invention.
- The familiar phrase 'wie es eigentlich gewesen' is commonly associated with Ranke's historical ideal; it is often rendered as understanding the past as it actually happened.
- Rankean scholarship nevertheless did not eliminate selection or interpretation; historians still decide which questions to ask and which evidence is significant.

4. Positivism and History

- Positivism generally stresses empirical observation, verifiable evidence and systematic knowledge.

- Applied to history, a positivist tendency gives high importance to facts established through reliable sources.
- It encourages historians to distinguish evidence from conjecture and to avoid unsupported speculation.
- A strong positivist version may aspire to discover regularities or laws of historical development, although history differs fundamentally from the experimental sciences.
- The contribution of positivism lies particularly in its insistence on evidence and methodological discipline; its limitation lies in treating facts as if they speak entirely for themselves.

5. Scientific History: Strengths and Limitations

• Strengths

- Encourages systematic research.
- Promotes source criticism and verification.
- Reduces dependence on legend and unsupported assertion.
- Makes historical arguments more transparent and open to criticism.
- Encourages professional standards of scholarship.

• Limitations

- Historical evidence is incomplete and unevenly preserved.
- Historians cannot normally repeat past events under controlled conditions.
- Historical meanings cannot always be reduced to universal laws.
- Selection and interpretation are unavoidable.
- Human actions involve intentions, beliefs, values and contexts that may resist purely mechanical explanation.

D. Objectivity in History

1. Meaning of Objectivity

- Objectivity in history refers to the attempt to base historical claims on evidence and reason rather than personal preference, prejudice or deliberate distortion.
- It does not necessarily mean that a historian can become completely detached from all values, assumptions and cultural contexts.
- A practical form of objectivity requires fairness to evidence, acknowledgement of uncertainty, openness to counter-evidence and willingness to revise conclusions.

2. Elements of Historical Objectivity

- Evidence-based argument rather than unsupported opinion.
- Clear distinction between established evidence and interpretation.
- Critical examination of sources, including sources that contradict the preferred argument.

- Disclosure of limitations and gaps in the evidence.
- Avoidance of anachronism—judging the past solely by concepts and standards of the present.
- Accurate citation and representation of other historians' arguments.
- Openness to peer criticism and revision.

3. The 19th-Century Ideal of Objectivity

- Many 19th-century historians believed that rigorous documentary research could allow the historian to present the past with a high degree of impartiality.
- This ideal was strengthened by archival scholarship and professional historical training.
- The aspiration to objectivity remains important, but later historians questioned the possibility of completely eliminating selection, perspective and interpretation.

4. Challenges to Absolute Objectivity

- The historian chooses the topic, period, questions and categories of analysis.
- Sources are themselves products of particular social, political and cultural contexts.
- Many historical experiences—especially those of ordinary people, women, marginalised groups and non-literate communities—may be underrepresented in surviving records.
- Language influences how events are described and interpreted.
- Historians work within intellectual traditions and contemporary social contexts.
- Two historians may use substantially the same evidence but construct different explanations because they ask different questions.

5. Objectivity vs. Subjectivity

- Subjectivity refers to the influence of personal perspective, values, experiences or assumptions.
- Objectivity does not require the impossible removal of every human perspective.
- The methodological goal is controlled subjectivity: historians should identify assumptions, test interpretations against evidence and make reasoning open to scrutiny.
- Thus, objectivity is better understood as a scholarly discipline and aspiration than as a claim of perfect neutrality.

E. The Factual Basis of History

1. Meaning of Historical Fact

- A historical fact is a claim about the past that is supported by sufficient and credible evidence.
- Examples include dates, inscriptions, treaties, administrative decisions, demographic information, battles and documented social practices.

- A fact is not simply whatever appears in a source; it must be evaluated through source criticism and corroboration.
- Historical facts provide the evidentiary foundation of historical arguments, but facts alone do not constitute a complete historical explanation.

2. Fact and Interpretation

- Facts concern what the evidence can reasonably establish.
- Interpretation concerns the meaning, significance, relationship or explanation assigned to those facts.
- Example: the occurrence of a war may be a factual claim; explaining why the war occurred and what it meant involves interpretation.
- Good history maintains a clear relationship between factual evidence and interpretive argument.

3. Are Facts 'Given' or 'Constructed'?

- Evidence exists independently of the historian's interpretation, but what counts as a historically significant 'fact' depends partly on the questions historians ask.
- Historians select, classify, contextualise and connect evidence.
- Therefore, facts are neither arbitrary inventions nor completely self-interpreting objects.
- Historical knowledge is constructed through a disciplined interaction between surviving evidence and historical questions.

4. E. H. Carr and the Fact-Interpretation Debate

- E. H. Carr argued that historical facts do not simply speak for themselves; historians select facts and give them significance through interpretation.
- His argument challenged a simplistic view in which history is merely the accumulation of isolated facts.
- Carr did not imply that evidence is irrelevant; rather, he emphasised the interaction between historian and evidence.
- This perspective is useful for understanding why historical writing involves both empirical evidence and interpretation.

F. Historical Sources and Source Utilisation

1. Meaning of a Historical Source

- A historical source is any surviving trace, record or testimony that can provide evidence about the past.
- Sources may be written, material, visual, oral, archaeological, environmental or digital.
- A source becomes historical evidence only after the historian asks questions of it and evaluates its reliability, context and relevance.

2. Primary and Secondary Sources

- **Primary sources**
 - Produced during or close to the period/event being studied.
 - Examples: inscriptions, coins, manuscripts, official records, letters, diaries, newspapers, photographs, oral testimonies, archaeological remains and contemporary literary works.
 - A primary source is not automatically truthful; it must be critically examined.
- **Secondary sources**
 - Produced later by historians or other scholars who analyse primary and/or other secondary evidence.
 - Examples: scholarly books, research articles, monographs, historiographical essays and academic biographies.
 - Secondary works help historians understand existing interpretations, debates and research gaps.

3. Major Categories of Historical Sources

- **Written sources**
 - Inscriptions
 - Manuscripts and chronicles
 - Administrative records
 - Letters and private papers
 - Travel accounts
 - Newspapers and periodicals
 - Literary texts
- **Material sources**
 - Buildings and monuments
 - Pottery and tools
 - Weapons and other artefacts
 - Burial remains
 - Settlement remains
- **Numismatic sources**
 - Coins
 - Medals and tokens where historically relevant
 - Coin hoards
- **Archaeological sources**
 - Excavated sites
 - Stratigraphy

- Structures
- Artefact assemblages
- Ecofacts and biological remains
- **Visual sources**
 - Paintings
 - Sculptures
 - Photographs
 - Maps
 - Posters
 - Cartoons and other visual representations
- **Oral sources**
 - Oral traditions
 - Interviews
 - Memoirs and recollections
 - Folklore and community narratives
- **Digital sources**
 - Digitised archives
 - Websites and online repositories
 - Born-digital records
 - Digital photographs, audio and video

G. Source Criticism

1. Meaning

- Source criticism is the systematic examination of a source to determine its authenticity, provenance, reliability, meaning and usefulness.
- It prevents historians from accepting evidence uncritically.
- Source criticism is broadly divided into external criticism and internal criticism.

2. External Criticism

- Determines whether a source is genuine or authentic.
- Questions include: Who produced it? When? Where? Is the document original? Has it been altered? Is the attribution credible?
- For manuscripts, handwriting, material, script, provenance, dating and physical characteristics may be examined.
- For inscriptions and coins, script, palaeography, iconography, material, archaeological context and comparison with other evidence may be relevant.

3. Internal Criticism

- Examines the meaning, credibility and reliability of the information contained in an authentic source.
- Questions include: What did the author intend? What did the author know? Could the author have observed the event? Was the author biased or dependent on another account?
- The historian must distinguish deliberate falsehood, misunderstanding, exaggeration, selective reporting and genuine observation.
- Internal criticism also considers the intended audience, genre, language and historical context.

4. Source Evaluation Checklist

- Authorship – Who created the source?
- Date – When was it produced?
- Place – Where was it produced?
- Provenance – What is its chain of custody or origin?
- Purpose – Why was it produced?
- Audience – For whom was it intended?
- Context – What political, social, economic or cultural circumstances shaped it?
- Perspective/Bias – What interests or assumptions may influence it?
- Content – What does it actually say or show?
- Corroboration – Can the information be compared with independent evidence?
- Silences – What important things does the source not mention?
- Usefulness – What historical question can this source help answer?

H. Corroboration and Triangulation

- Corroboration means checking a claim against other evidence.
- Historians should avoid relying on a single source when independent evidence is available.
- Triangulation involves comparing different types of evidence—for example, a literary text with inscriptions, coins, archaeological remains or administrative records.
- Agreement between independent sources can strengthen a claim, while disagreement can reveal competing perspectives or require further investigation.
- Contradictory sources should not simply be discarded; they may provide evidence about different interests, memories or contexts.

I. Bias, Silence and Perspective in Sources

- Every source has a context and perspective; bias does not automatically make a source useless.
- A biased source can reveal the beliefs, interests and priorities of its creator.

- Official records may reflect the viewpoint of ruling institutions.
- Travel accounts may contain cultural assumptions or stereotypes.
- Court chronicles may praise rulers and minimise failures.
- Newspapers may reflect political or commercial interests.
- Oral memories may change over time, but they can preserve experiences absent from official records.
- Silences are also significant: what is omitted may indicate power relations, censorship, social hierarchy or the limits of the source.

J. From Source to Historical Argument

- Step 1: Frame a clear historical question.
- Step 2: Identify the kinds of evidence required to answer the question.
- Step 3: Locate relevant primary and secondary sources.
- Step 4: Establish provenance and authenticity.
- Step 5: Evaluate reliability, perspective, purpose and limitations.
- Step 6: Compare and corroborate evidence.
- Step 7: Organise evidence around an argument rather than merely listing information.
- Step 8: Distinguish evidence, inference and interpretation.
- Step 9: Cite sources accurately and consistently.
- Step 10: State the conclusion together with appropriate qualifications where evidence is uncertain.

K. 19th-Century Frameworks: A Critical Assessment

- 19th-century scholarship made major contributions to professional historical research by strengthening archival work, documentary criticism and empirical standards.
- The ideal of scientific history encouraged historians to establish claims through evidence rather than legend or speculation.
- The ideal of objectivity remains fundamental because historians should not deliberately distort evidence.
- However, the belief that historians could reproduce the past exactly or eliminate interpretation completely has been widely questioned.
- Historical research is selective because the past is vast and surviving evidence is incomplete.
- The historian's questions influence which evidence becomes significant.
- Sources themselves are constructed within particular social and political contexts.
- Modern historical methodology therefore combines empirical discipline with critical awareness of interpretation, perspective and power.

L. Key Concepts for Examination

- Philosophy of History – systematic reflection on the nature, meaning and knowledge of history.
- Scientificity – systematic, evidence-based and logically justified inquiry; in history it does not imply laboratory experimentation.
- Positivism – an approach emphasising empirical evidence and verifiable knowledge.
- Objectivity – disciplined effort to base claims on evidence while recognising the limits of complete neutrality.
- Historical Fact – a claim about the past sufficiently supported by credible evidence.
- Primary Source – evidence originating in or close to the period under study.
- Secondary Source – later scholarly analysis or interpretation.
- External Criticism – testing the authenticity and provenance of a source.
- Internal Criticism – testing the meaning, credibility and reliability of information in a source.
- Corroboration – checking a claim against other evidence.
- Interpretation – explaining the significance, relationships or meanings of historical evidence.
- Anachronism – projecting later ideas, institutions or values onto an earlier historical context.

M. Important Distinctions

- **Past** – The totality of events and experiences that have already occurred.
- **History** – A disciplined reconstruction and interpretation of selected aspects of the past.
- **Fact** – A claim supported by sufficient evidence.
- **Interpretation** – An explanation or attribution of significance to evidence.
- **Primary Source** – Evidence originating in or close to the period studied.
- **Secondary Source** – Later scholarly analysis of historical evidence.
- **External Criticism** – Tests authenticity/provenance.
- **Internal Criticism** – Tests credibility/meaning.
- **Objectivity** – Evidence-based and self-critical historical inquiry.
- **Subjectivity** – Influence of perspective, values and assumptions on inquiry.

N. Suggested Long-Answer Questions

1. What is the philosophy of history? Discuss its scope and major questions.
2. Explain the scientificity of history. To what extent can history be regarded as a science?
3. Discuss the 19th-century ideal of objectivity in historical writing and examine its limitations.

4. What is the relationship between historical facts and interpretation?
5. Discuss the contribution and limitations of positivism to historical research.
6. Explain Ranke's contribution to the development of modern historical scholarship.
7. What is a historical source? Discuss the major types of sources used by historians.
8. Differentiate between external and internal criticism of historical sources.
9. Why is corroboration necessary in historical research?
10. Discuss the role of source criticism in establishing the factual basis of history.
11. How do bias, perspective and silence affect the use of historical sources?
12. Explain how a historian moves from source utilisation to the construction of a historical argument.

O. Short Revision Summary

- History is not the past itself; it is a reasoned reconstruction of the past based on evidence.
- 19th-century historians significantly strengthened professional, empirical and archival methods.
- Scientificity in history means methodological discipline rather than experimental replication.
- Objectivity is an important scholarly ideal, but complete neutrality is difficult because selection and interpretation are unavoidable.
- Facts require evidence and critical verification.
- Sources must be evaluated for authenticity, context, purpose, perspective and reliability.
- No single source should automatically be treated as completely true or completely false.
- Corroboration and triangulation strengthen historical arguments.
- A strong historical argument connects evidence with interpretation through transparent reasoning.
- The best historical method combines respect for evidence with awareness of the limits of evidence and interpretation.