

INTRODUCTION

History as a study of Man

Alexandar Pope's adage 'The Proper study of mankind is man' is exemplified no less by history than other branches of knowledge. Herodotus is looked upon as the father of history. But long before he wrote his account of the invasion of Greece by the Persians, the Greeks regarded history as a matter of proper study. This is evidenced by the fact that they accorded Clio as the Muse of history. She is represented in a sitting or standing attitude with an open roll of paper, or chest of books. Clio has been of no mean origin. She is one of the daughters of Zeus and Mnemosyne, and born in Pieria, at the foot of Mt. Olympus. We are all familiar with the Ezyptian sculpture of the scribe, who is depicted sitting cross legged and writing on a tablet. In my part of the world, the Sanskrit term for 'history' has been itihasa. The particle iti means reporting of events. In the tradition it is coupled with Purana or traditional or legendary lore. The Chandogya Upanisad mentions itihasa, purana as a branch of knowledge. Aristotle contrasted history with poetry in point of philosophical import. According to him, poetry is more philosophical than history inasmuch as poetry deals with universal possibilities while history confines itself to the realm of the particulars. Nonetheless epic poetry (it was Aristotle had in his mind in the context of his discussion) and history conveys upon focussing on a study of human character and

destiny. History has remained one of the major studies of men in time. The temporality of men and its manifestation in his actions has been a curiosity through the ages. David Hume's History of England had been a best seller for over a hundred years before Macaulay's. And as a philosopher also it is noticeable that Hume illustrates his observations and conclusions with reference to historical examples. Since the force of habit is a moving power in human endeavours and undertakings, and it is also the case that the categorical framework at the back of the workings of the human mind remains the same, the lessons from history are illuminative enough, for an understanding of human nature. Hume's insightful use of history in philosophy is a pointer to the fact that history is a study of man.

History provides us with the social context within which man has his setting. We understand the word in human terms, for no man is an island, man is always man in relation to other human beings. That is history teaches us to look for the social dimensions of human existence. Two points need to be noted. First, man or human existence is temporal through and through. This is an insight from the existentialist philosophers like Heidegger or Sartre, Secondly, the temporal character of human existence implies the radically historical character of men. He is historical through and through. By 'history' we shall understand a wider stream of time and becoming one in which all men are caught up together. The

radically historical character of human life and character was stressed in the later part of the 19th century by a group of thinkers. Best known among them was Wilhelm Dilthey (1833 - 1911) and his influence on contemporary thinking about history has been very great.

He claimed that history is a human phenomenon and that the study of history must therefore be regarded a human science. In saying that history is a human phenomenon, one is suggesting to the difference between 'history' properly so called, and 'process' or mere 'occurrence'. Process and occurrences are natural events, describable in terms of natural causality. But historical events are different. They are 'caused' by human agency - it may be ambition, aggression, hunger, fear, deliberate decision, and so on. Of course, sometimes natural events enter into the course of history too. A sudden storm could affect the outcome of a naval engagement as much as the skill and courage of the seamen. An event of this sort, however, is made historical precisely because it intermingles with events originating from human agency. And here we may notice the mixed character of history. It is on the one hand human creation, arising from freedom, i.e. free choice and decision; and it is on the other hand the product of circumstances, which provide the factual situations in which human decisions are made. We all know the long processes of evolution, which were natural processes, yet it is undeniable that with

the emergence of man a new factor enters, the historical factor, by virtue of which man's inner life is now externalizing itself in action and taking a part in shaping the world. This is what is called 'hominization' of the world. History is a record of it.

Since history is distinguished from natural occurrences or processes of nature, the method of studying the phenomena of history must also be different. Dilthey insisted that the study of history must be included among the Geisteswissenschaften or 'human studies'. He claimed that the human sciences cannot just have the methods appropriate to the natural sciences. The kind of observation from outside appropriate to the natural sciences has to be replaced by a kind of knowledge by participation in the case of the human sciences. Mankind, if apprehended only by perception and perceptual knowledge, would be reduced to a physical fact. Human states are consciously lived. Dilthey's point is that history must be studied existentially.

There have been writers who also made a similar point. Among such writers may be mentioned Erust Troeltsch (1865-1923) Benedetto Croce (1866-1953), the leader of historical idealism in Italy, and the British philosopher, R.G. Collingwood (1889-1943) whose Idea of History continues to be influential.

As a consequence of recognizing the radically historical character of human existence, philosophy itself takes place in history. The idea of timeless truth and of any all-embracing system of thought claiming to express such truth is renounced. The shape of the real is proposed to be seen in particular historical contexts. It is also admitted that criticism of historical perspectives and cultural presuppositions can never attain to that degree of objectivity and universality as might be mainly supposed. Historicism and relativism are the orders of the day in recent philosophy of history.

We may now mention a couple of important ideas on the nature of history. First, comes Kierkegaard, the Danish philosopher. For him, history is a neutralizing process, in which everything that is great and distinctive gets watered down and rendered harmless. This idea of history may be seen as a revulsion against the Hegelian idea that history is the unfolding and progressive enrichment of spirit. Further, Kierkegaard says that history is not something that is past, but it is always a contemporary truth. Christianity, he says, has suffered from turning Jesus as a 'historical' figure. He has ceased to be a saving reality.

From Kierkegaard we may pass to Nietzsche. He sees history as a sort of decadence (Sri Aurobindo also sees history as a gradual falling away from the truth of the Vedic

times), a fall from the great into the trivial and finally into nihilism. According to Nietzsche, Christianity has played a leading role in bringing about the debilitation of humanity. Yet on the other hand, the theory of evolution is also influential with Nietzsche (so it is with Sri Aurobindo). Beyond the flatness and triviality of conventional society, beyond even nihilism, lies the possibility of the superman and of a higher mode of being. Nietzsche's famous essay "The use and Abuse of History" has an interesting discussion of history. He says that we study history not for the sake of accumulating information about the past but because we need it for life and action.

Nietzsche then goes on to discuss three ways in which we may narrate history - the monumental, the antiquarian, and the critical.

In the case of the monumental understanding of history the relation to life and action is cleanest. The monumental moments of history have been those in which the conception of man has been extended. There has been a new glimpse of the possibilities of humanity. The monumental is the rare, the classic, the great, that which surpasses the average level. Men contemplate these rare moments of history not merely in order to admire the past but because such knowledge gives courage and illumination. 'It is the knowledge that the great thing existed and was therefore possible, and so may be possible again'.

The antiquarian attitude to history is that of the man who venerates the past. Assuredly, he finds in it a certain stability. But there is the danger that everything ancient will be venerated equally, just because it is ancient. In the antiquarian attitude, there is neither the perspective nor the interest in present possibility that we have noted in the monumental. At its best, 'it only understands how to preserve life, not to create it'. At its worst, 'the horrid spectacle is seen of the mad collector raking over all the dust heaps of the past'.

The critical way of looking at history serves as a corrective to both the monumental and the antiquarian ways, 'Man must have the strength to break up the past He must bring the past to the bar of judgment, interrogate it remorselessly and finally condemn it'.

Nietzsche does not identify himself with any one of these three approaches to history. All three can be put to service, and any one of them in isolation can degenerate. But there is another side of this problem. If the past can be illuminating for the present, it is equally true that the present must illuminate the past (as we notice in Engles) study of the primitive societies in the light of historical materialism). You can only explain the past by what is highest in the present? Only the man who experiences something great in himself can penetrate the great events of the past (For example, Tagore's understanding of Kalidasa's Meghaduta). But

here we return to Nietzsche's critique of his society. Though the 19th century assembled an unprecedented quantity of historical data, its mediocrity of spirit prevented a genuine understanding of history. It will be the gifted individual who will 'think himself back' to his true needs.

Martin Heidegger's treatment of history is also interesting. For him, man is himself the theme of history. Man, constituted by temporality is the primary historical, the world is the secondary historical. Man has the threefold temporal structure, facticity, the future possibility, and the present preoccupation. It is pulled together into a unity by a resolute projection upon man's fate. Man's historicizing is a co-historicizing and is determinative for him as destiny. Man as a being in the world does always exist as a being with others. The notion of destiny has played a considerable part in the history of German thought (for example, in Hitler's idea of an extended fatherland). Destiny stands in the same relation to a society or a group of people living at the same time as fate stands to the individual. The future of any social group lies in a historical context. A generation has its destiny, and every individual of that generation shares in its destiny.

Heidegger speaks of authentic and unauthentic history. Unauthentic history means drifting along at the mercy of events. Authentic history means laying hold on the factual situation and advancing into the destiny that it leaves open. What is significant is that Heidegger is insisting upon a formal

and structural similarity between history and the individual existence. It is this similarity that makes the study of history possible. Like Dilthey and Nietzsche before him, Heidegger claims that it is in virtue of our participation in, or even our constitution by, history (Geschichte) that we are able to develop a scientific interest in history (Historic) and to become historiographical and historiological.

Heidegger claims that history is concerned not with facts but with possibilities, i.e. not with reconstructing event or chain of events in the past but with exploring the possibilities of mankind that have been opened up in the course of history. Secondly history, he says, is not concerned with the past but essentially in the future. History fetches from the past the authentic repeatable possibilities in order to project them into the future. From Nietzsche to Heidegger we find it stressed that history is above all a human phenomenon.

S O U R C E S

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