

HISTORY BEYOND THE PAST: SCOPE AND MODERN RELEVANCE

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“History is essentially the record of the life of men in societies in their geographical and their physical environment.”

-A.L. Rowse

ABSTRACT

History is often perceived as the study of past events; however, its scope extends far beyond mere narration of bygone eras. In the modern world, history plays a crucial role in shaping identities, informing public policy, and guiding future decisions. This paper explores the expanded scope of history and examines its relevance in contemporary society. It highlights how historical knowledge contributes to interdisciplinary studies, global understanding, and critical thinking in an increasingly complex world.

History which is a record of unique events in the life of mankind is the stir and vibration of life. It is not only the conserving and understanding of what has happened, but also the completion of what has been going on at present. History in this sense is philosophy in motion. History is the barometer to record this progress of mankind. Man looked at the wilderness of the past when he was brute and savage, and even as he looked, he beheld a garden which could be created out of a jungle. He has an eye not merely on the dizzy heights of the past but on the ditches and uneven surfaces as well, with the intention of building a glorious monument for the future. The nature of history is too complex and its scope too vast touching almost every domain of human activity.

Keywords: History, Crucial Role, Future, Decisions, Relevance, Critical, Mankind, Glorious and human activity etc.

Introduction:

History has traditionally been understood as a chronological record of human activities. However, in recent decades, the discipline has evolved significantly. Modern historians view history not only as a record of the past but also as a tool for interpreting the present and

anticipating the future.¹ In the field of knowledge, history is the only subject whose scope is very vast. History is related to human beings, and it studies the origin, development, activities, and problems of humans. Within its wide scope, history includes all aspects such as social, economic, political, and religious life of humans.

From a regional perspective, local history, provincial history, national history, and world history are all part of the broader field of history. According to Maitland, “What man has done and said, and above all what he has thought—that is history.” From this statement, we can understand the vastness of history. In the words of K.S. Lal, “History may be defined as the study of mankind in the extraordinary business of life. It comprises the great and extraordinary achievements of mankind.”

The scope of history is wide because in every age, society asks questions to historians, and historians, in the light of new evidence, present answers about the past before society. Since human curiosity can relate to any field of knowledge, historians must include all such fields within history.

In the beginning, historical thinking developed with the aim of satisfying curiosity about the unknown. Inspired by this objective, the father of history, Herodotus, around 500 B.C., arranged the development of humans and their remarkable deeds in a narrative form. Even today, Herodotus is considered the father of narrative history and an ideal historian.²

After Herodotus, Thucydides emphasized the educational aspect of history and strengthened the idea that “accurate representation of facts would provide lessons for future generations.” Later, Ranke gave history a scientific form. As the concept of history developed gradually, its scope also expanded continuously according to the needs of society.

From 500 B.C., from the time of Herodotus to twentieth-century historians like Toynbee, not only has the form of historical writing changed, but the scope of history has also expanded according to the needs of society.³

Concept and Nature of History

History is a systematic study of past events based on evidence, interpretation, and analysis. It is both a science and an art. As a science, it involves critical examination of sources, while as an art, it requires narrative skills to present findings meaningfully.⁴

Modern historiography emphasizes multiple perspectives, including social, cultural, economic, and political dimensions.⁵ History is not simply a record of past events but is careful interpretation of the past based on the evidence. Historians collect and examine sources select important facts and then interpreted them to give meaning to events. History is not fixed because different historians may have different viewpoints and their understanding is often influenced by present day ideas.

History today interacts with various disciplines such as sociology, anthropology, economics, and political science. This integration broadens its scope and enhances its analytical depth.⁶

Branches and Fields of History:

R.G Collingwood's View considered history as a question-and-answer discipline because it helps solve all human curiosities. All questions related to society are important. Considering the vast scope of history, the modern historian is expected to specialize in a particular field so that the questions related to that subject can be satisfactorily answered. For this reason, the scope of history has now been classified. Under this classification, we study different types of history.⁷

The Classification of the Scope of History

For the convenience of studying the vast field of history, its classification has become a necessity of time and society. According to Dr. Davy, the classification of history is useful and natural. Its main objective is to gain knowledge of specific and changing events.

The present age is the age of specialization. Today, even an ordinary person prefers to go to a specialist doctor for the treatment of specific diseases. Similarly, society also prefers to study that particular branch of history which can answer its specific questions. Therefore, historians also specialize in particular fields and write history related to that field.⁸

The classification of the scope of history is as follows:

1. Political History

The branch of history that studies human political activities is called political history. It includes all political actions of human beings. Aristotle gave special importance to political activities in history.

In political history, we study the rise and fall of different dynasties, along with the lives and activities of great historical personalities who gave direction and meaning to political history. In the world context, personalities like Machiavelli, Rousseau, Voltaire, Napoleon, Hitler, and Alexander; and in the Indian context, Ashoka, Akbar, Chanakya, and Mahatma Gandhi are some important political figures.

Political institutions are the backbone of society where great individuals display their work. They are very important in social life. Therefore, A.L. Rowse called them the “bones of history.” Early historians gave special emphasis to political history. Historians like Thucydides, Gibbon, and Macaulay mainly wrote political history.⁹

At present, political history has become less dominant. Now, the history of kings, queens, nobles, and courtiers is no longer considered as important as before. Today, more emphasis is given to social and economic history. The role of the common people in the rise and fall of empires, revolutions, and the emergence of great individuals is now considered significant. The time has come to include the contributions of common people within the scope of history.

During the Civil Disobedience Movement, the success of Mahatma Gandhi’s Dandi March cannot be understood without considering the role of his 78 followers. Similarly, the contribution of soldiers and common people in the Revolt of 1857 cannot be ignored. In the Chinese Revolution of 1911, along with Dr. Sun Yat-sen, the support of the people was equally important. Rahul Sankrityayan also played an important role in spreading socialist ideas and participated in movements.¹⁰

2. Cultural History

Culture emerges from the combination of religion, economy, and society. Cultural history studies religious and social customs, traditions, education, literature, architecture, music, means of entertainment, and economic systems.

In the Indian context, the book “The Wonder That Was India” (1951) by A. L. Basham marked an important shift from political history to non-political or cultural history. This shift is also reflected in D. D. Kosambi’s work “An Introduction to the Study of Indian History” (1957), later published as “The Culture and Civilization of Ancient India in Historical

Outline” (1965). Kosambi gave cultural history a new dimension and prominence in Indian historiography.

Today, most historians emphasize cultural history within the framework of social, religious, and economic aspects, and try to relate it to political developments. Considering the vastness of Indian cultural heritage, it has been divided into ancient, medieval, and modern periods.¹¹

Important works in this field include R. C. Dutt, Raychaudhuri, and Majumdar’s “An Advanced History of India” (Vol. 1, 2, and 3) and the work by Chandra, Mukherjee, and others titled “A Social and Economic History of India” (Vol. 1, 2, and 3). These works comprehensively cover cultural history across different periods.

Due to the wide scope of cultural history, many historians have focused on specific periods or rulers and highlighted various cultural aspects. Notable works include:

- Romila Thapar’s “Ashoka and the Decline of the Mauryas”
- Radhakumud Mookerji’s “Chandragupta Maurya and His Times”
- Rahul Sankrityayan’s works on ancient culture
- Studies on Akbar and the Mughal period by various historians
- Works on the Guptas and Harsha
- Ram Mohan Roy and modern India
- R. Desai’s “Social Background of Indian Nationalism”
- Kapil Kumar’s “Peasants in Revolt”
- R. C. Dutt’s “The Economic History of India”, etc.¹²

These works move beyond political history and present a broader perspective of cultural history. In this context, Ramdhari Singh Dinkar’s “Sanskriti ke Char Adhyay” (Four Chapters on Culture) is also an important contribution.

It is evident that in the modern era, historians are increasingly focusing on cultural history. It has further been divided into social history, economic history, and religious history due to its expanding scope.

3. Social History

Social history is the most important branch of history. Its scope is very wide. It includes human activities and behavior, family life, literature, customs and traditions, lifestyle, means

of entertainment, music, architecture, painting, etc. In fact, social history provides the real key to understanding social problems.

In the twentieth century, most historians turned their attention toward writing social history. According to Trevelyan, history is constructed from social elements. The credit for making social history popular goes to G. M. Trevelyan. Through his works “Social History of England” and “Revolution of 1688”, he contributed significantly to the development of social history.¹³

According to Trevelyan, social history includes the daily life of people in the past, the mutual economic relations of different classes, family and household life, the condition of workers, human attitudes toward nature, cultural life, and the circumstances that gave rise to religion, literature, music, architecture, education, and other aspects of life.

The development of history has not been shaped only by rulers and empires, but by societies of different ages. Therefore, society forms the fundamental base of history. Trevelyan rightly said that in the absence of social history, economic and political history remains incomplete, because economic history deals with the economic condition of society, and political institutions are also established for society.¹⁴

Writing social history is both important and challenging. Indian society consists of various castes and tribes, each with its own problems and distinct history. James Mill divided Indian history into Hindu, Muslim, and British periods and attempted to give social history a communal interpretation. This communal approach has become a problem in writing social history today.

Sumit Sarkar, in his work “Challenges of Writing Social History”, highlighted the problems in writing social history. Rahul Sankrityayan, in his work “Manav Samaj” (Human Society), examined the origin and development of human society in a broad perspective. He traced the journey of early human society from primitive communism to modern socialism.

Krishna Kumar Mishra wrote “History of Socialist Thought” in three parts, in which the ideas of major modern socialist thinkers have been analyzed in a broad perspective.¹⁵

4. Religious History

Religion plays an important role in morally guiding and regulating human society. In fact, religion is like the life-breath of a society rooted in traditions. To fulfill the religious curiosity of human society, and recognizing the importance of history, a group of historians turned toward writing religious history. From ancient times to the present, all religious activities are included within religious history. From the very beginning, India has guided the entire world in the direction of religion and spiritual thought.¹⁶

Ancient Indian religious literature—such as the Vedas, Puranas, Brahmanas, and the Shrimad Bhagavad Gita—has played a significant role in religious history. The most important feature of the Bhagavad Gita is that even today, solutions to human problems can be found in it. During the decline of Vedic religion, Adi Shankaracharya wrote a commentary on the Gita and clearly explained its philosophical teachings.

Mahatma Gandhi emphasized its importance and wrote:

“Whenever I am overcome by despair and see no ray of hope anywhere, I turn to the Bhagavad Gita. Even a few verses bring a ray of joy to me in the midst of darkness.”

According to Swami Vivekananda, “the Gita is a beautiful bouquet of spiritual truths gathered from the Upanishads.”¹⁷

5. Diplomatic History

Diplomatic history is a part of political history. In recent times, historians have increasingly focused on writing diplomatic history. In 1815, at the Congress of Vienna (Metternich Congress), diplomatic efforts attempted to reshape the political structure of the entire world. Because of these diplomatic activities, the period from 1815 to 1848 is known as the “Age of Metternich” in European history. After Metternich, many significant events took place in Europe. Efforts were made to establish a new balance of power. Metternich tried to create such a system through his diplomacy that the whole world would remain under its influence. Thus, diplomatic history studies the foreign policies of different states and analyzes their political relations. It includes the study of treaties, agreements, and documents prepared by various diplomats for maintaining national and international relations. The detailed study and analysis of international relations is an essential part of diplomatic history. In European history, works such as Alison’s “Europe” and Malletson’s “The First Two Napoleons” are notable in this field.

In modern Indian history, the study of documents collected by Curzon is considered important. In the Western world, notable works include:

- C. K. Webster's "The Foreign Policy of Castlereagh"
- B. Keith's "The Age of Metternich"
- J. P. Taylor's works on European diplomacy and "The Struggle for Mastery in Europe (1848–1918)"
- Eichholtz's works on German diplomacy
- H. L. Langer's "The Diplomacy of Imperialism (1890–1902)"
- R. H. Welker's "British Diplomatic Relations (1908–14)"

All these works are extremely important from the point of the view of diplomatic history.¹⁸

6. Military History

Military history, like constitutional history, is closely linked to political history. Military factors have been decisive behind the rise and fall of all empires in the world, including India. Military activities played a pivotal role in the rise and fall of figures like Alexander, Samudragupta, Napoleon, Hitler, Mussolini, and Franco. In the Indian context, many historians consider military reasons to be primarily responsible for the Revolution of 1857 AD. From time to time, dictatorial powers in various states have also made military education mandatory.

Under military history, we study the tactical formations of armies, the air force, army, navy, and the manufacture and use of weapons. Some wars in the world were won through efficient tactical formations despite having a smaller number of soldiers. From the perspective of military formation, the First Battle of Panipat (1526 AD) is extremely important in the Indian context.

Describing Babur's efficient warfare system as a "scientific coordination," Dr. Ashirvadi Lal Srivastava wrote:

"Babur learned the use of 'Tulughma' from the Uzbeks. Tulughma was that part of the army which stood on the right and left flanks of the main force and, by circling around, would launch a devastating attack on the enemy from behind. From the Mongols and Afghans, he learned the tactic of keeping one part of the army hidden and luring the enemy toward a pre-planned, well-equipped, and formidable formation to launch sudden attacks from different

directions. From the Iranians, he learned the use of firearms (muskets). From his fellow Turks, he learned the successful command of mobile cavalry. Thus, as a result of contact and cooperation with different races, Babur gave a highly developed form to his art of war, which was actually a scientific coordination of various warfare systems."¹⁹

7. Economic History

According to G.M. Clark, economic history has attained a high status in the modern era. It encompasses all aspects of society's economic needs. Marxists were the first to recognize economic needs as the root of all social conduct. Economic conditions influence all human behavior, playing a vital role in the rise and fall of states, societies, and cultures.

The 19th century is known as the era of development for economic history. Adam Smith's 'The Wealth of Nations' influenced French economists like Turgot and Necker.

Key Figures: Rogers, Ashley, Comte, Buckle, and Karl Marx played significant roles in making economic history a vital subject. Karl Marx's interpretation of economic history drew global attention to the field. The German, historical school of economists highlighted the relationship between economic development and social transformation.²⁰

8. Constitutional History

Just as religious history is important for spiritual progress, constitutional history is vital for the moral and legal regulation of society. While Political History is often subjective, Constitutional History tends to be more objective.

Texts like the Manusmriti and Mitakshara established social rules in ancient India.

Elements like the Code of Hammurabi, Justinian Code, Napoleonic Code, and the Indian Penal Code (IPC) are of great significance. Today as people have become aware of their rights, their interest is now increasing towards constitutional history in order to understand their rights and duties. Observing this growing interest in society, a group of historians has been inspired to write constitutional history. Thus, constitutional history has today become an important branch of history.²¹

9. History of Ideas

This is perhaps the most important field today. It is not enough to know what leaders like Samudragupta, Bismarck, Napoleon, or Hitler did; it is essential to understand the ideas that inspired those actions.

A wise person considers both positive and negative consequences before acting. For instance, Napoleon's failure was attributed to his "short-sighted thinking," whereas Bismarck was a visionary who understood the geopolitical balance between "sea power" (England) and "land power" (Germany).

10. Regional or Provincial History

Regional history and provincial history are related but not identical. Regional history focuses on a geographical or cultural area, such as a region defined by common language, traditions, or physical features, and it is not limited by administrative boundaries. In contrast, provincial history deals with the history of a specific administrative unit, such as a state or province, defined by political boundaries. While both study the past of a particular area, regional history is broader and culturally oriented, whereas provincial history is more formal and based on government-defined regions.

Modern history writing places great emphasis on regional history. India is a land of "unity in diversity," and one cannot do justice to national history without understanding the unique culture, attire, language, and traditions of its various provinces.

Examples: The history of the Cholas and Chalukyas in the South, the Marathas in Maharashtra, and the revolutionaries of Bengal and Punjab are all essential threads of the national fabric.

James Tod's 'Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan' and Grant Duff's 'History of the Marathas'.²²

11. World History

To fulfil the idea of "Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam" (the world is one family), the writing and study of world history has become the most important need of the present time. Today, as rapid means of transport like airplanes have conquered time and distance, the whole world appears like a single home. In this age of globalization, we cannot remain narrow-minded by

focusing only on national history. Now we must view our regional and national history in the context of world history. According to Prof. Acton, “All great historical works are world history, because while studying any part, it reminds us of the whole.”²³

First of all, Sir Walter Raleigh wrote on “World History.” Later, H. G. Wells wrote *Outlines of History*, and Arnold Toynbee created *A Study of History* in 12 volumes. Many historians such as Herder, Hegel, and Spengler also wrote their works on world history. In fact, writing world history is as difficult as trying to contain the ocean in a pot. Considering the vastness of the subject, under UNESCO’s guidance, the cultural history of the world was written with the help of 37 scholars, but this project of UNESCO remained surrounded by many controversies. Dr. H. Fisher described it as “on a large scale, misleading and perhaps even untrue.”²⁴

Conclusion

Obviously, the scope of history is incredibly vast. While we categorize history into political, economic, social, or religious for convenience, a true historian must view them as interconnected. As Renier suggested, a historian must have expertise in a specific area but maintain a firm grip on general and universal history to present a complete picture of society.

The scope of history is vast and ever-expanding, covering not only political events but also social, economic, cultural, and intellectual developments of human life. It helps us understand the past in order to interpret the present and shape a better future. By studying different aspects of human experiences across time and regions, history promotes critical thinking, awareness, and a sense of continuity. Thus, the scope of history is not limited but dynamic, making it an essential field of knowledge for understanding human society.

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