Chapter 2

RATIONALE AND PROBLEM
The preceding chapter illustrated that the earlier research on Historical Understanding (HU) of children and adults are very scanty. They do not provide explanations for the developmental pattern and mental process involved in the same. The gap in our understanding about HU and limitations of earlier studies are major grounds for the present study. There are various aspects of studying HU; developmental pattern of HU, theoretical propositions regarding HU, aids to enhance HU, cultural differences regarding HU and assessment of HU, already discussed in the previous chapter. The following section illustrates the specific issues that have led to the formulation of the present study.

The analysis in Chapter 1 reveals that the lack of studies in the area of HU makes it difficult to gain a comprehensive explanation of HU. There are contradiction in findings of are available studies regarding the developmental pattern of HU; with some studies suggesting late developments and others suggesting early development of the same. The analyses of these studies show that the disagreement in their findings is due to their conceptualization of History. Studies suggesting development of HU at a later age have portrayed history as an abstract subject. Such an abstract conceptualization of history has led them to formulate according questions making it difficult for younger children respond on such questions. The other researchers who have shown HU appearing in younger children have not taken a wider approach to conceptualize the various
dimensions of historical understanding. They have dealt with only one or the other aspect of historical understanding, such as time; chronology or causality etc., ignoring a wider conceptualization of HU. Furthermore, psychological processes and development of HU can not be fully understood without considering its broader setting in which it situated. The societal representation of history and cultural factors can be considered as crucial factors in shaping HU of a person. Hence, the inadequate conceptualization and assessment of HU ha led to lack of extensive research and theoretical propounding in this area. Following the discussion in the previous chapter the major issues in the area of HU can be summarized along the following lines:

2.1. Contradictory Findings Regarding Developmental Pattern of HU:

Studies dealing with the development of HU have demonstrated contradictory findings about its developmental pattern. The earliest research in this area suggested that HU develops at later adolescence age in children (Booth, 1966; Hallam, 1966, 1967, 1970, 1997; Jahoda 1963; Stuart & Oakden, 1922). These studies were based on the assumption that appreciation of history requires higher order mental processes; therefore it is not easy for a child below the age of 15-16 to appreciate such concepts. Most of these studies equate historical thinking with formal operation level of Piaget's theory of cognitive development. One of the widely known works in the area of the development of children's thinking in history is that of Hallam (1966, 1967 & 1970). In his study Hallam, (1970) assessed HU on the basis of the kind of thinking children reflected in their answers regarding the historical passages. Hallam's results
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substantiated that children's thinking about history reach concrete operation level in their 12th year, and formal operational level at the age of 16 years. The conclusions of Hallam were further substantiated by other investigators (Booth, 1978; Jurd, 1973; Medley, 1980). On the other hand the relatively recent studies regarding HU have shown that even young children can understand many aspects of History (Barton & Levstik, 1996; Blyth, 1978; Hall, 1988). These studies have proposed that young children can exhibit some understanding of history if they are enriched by concrete historical information. Theses studies propose that if the historical information is accompanied by concrete experiences, such as excursions pictures, movies and dramas, children show an improved understanding of history (Barton & Levstik, 1996; Blyth, 1978; Culpin, 1984; Hall, 1980; VanSledgright & Brophy, 1992). Such contradictory findings about the development of HU makes it is difficult to draw any conclusion about its nature and course of its development.

The studies that have substantiated a late development of HU have conceptualized history as consisting of abstract phenomena and concepts, and consequently the tools and tests they have devised reflect that position. Most of them have used the test items from the actual historical situations (Hallam, 1966, 1967, 1970, 1997; Jahoda 1963; Jurd 1973; Medley, 1980), which can not be answered without knowledge of the historical stances. These researchers have confounded historical knowledge with historical understanding. For example, Medley (1988) has categorized four levels of responses to judge students' responses. Among these levels he declared that rarely any student was
able to answer at level 4, by the age of 17-18. This type of answer required to compare a
given situation with any actual historical situation, and to draw a conclusion on the basis
of comparing these two situations. Hence the student’s failing to give an answer might
be a result of not knowing any other situation, or inadequate teaching method or
possibly the student is not trained to think that way. Although Jurd (1973) has identified
the problems associated with using real historical episodes and have used hypothetical
historical events in his study. He formulated a test about the most abstract aspects of
HU, such as, reasoning evaluating causes and understanding the meaning of abstract
historical words. There are many other aspects of HU, other than causality, and they can
be seen developing early in children (Dixit & Mohanty 2009). Studies supporting late
development of HU have done isolated assessment of causal analysis and evaluative
ability. Guided by their belief about nature of history, these researchers have used only
abstract aspects of HU, which have led them to draw similar conclusions. They have
overlooked more concrete aspects of HU, such as, the time aspects in history and
imagination. Thus, the basic assertion of these studies that history constitutes only
abstract concepts and can not be understood by younger children is questionable.
Apparently, studies supporting early development of HU have used methods, which are
approachable for children and makes them actively participate in the assessment of HU.
However, its usefulness is also limited by methodological constrains. They have dealt
with only one or two components of historical understanding at a time; for example,
Barton and Levstik (1996) have dealt with ‘time’; Hall (1988) with ‘object exploration’
and Blyth (1978) with the 'oldness of the objects'. All of these abilities actually relate to understanding the time aspect in History. They have not investigated history as encompassing multiple abilities. The relative development of different abilities involved in historical understanding can be known only when one sees them together.

Taken all together, the studies related to the development of HU do not provide satisfactory explanation to the development of HU in children. There has not been any comprehensive effort to conceptualize HU and to find out the relative development of the various dimensions of HU (Dixit & Mohanty 2009). Studies suggesting late development of HU give a pessimistic picture of HU in young children. However, the studies suggesting early development of HU do give a hope to history teachers and curriculum designers, but they are again limited by their methodology and their conceptualization of HU. They have tried to assess very few dimensions of HU in isolation. Assessing one or two aspects of HU in separately gives no scope to understand the relative development of various aspects of HU.

In our previous study (Dixit & Mohanty, 2009), we tried to deal with some of the above discussed problems in the area of historical understanding. In this study history was conceptualizes as having various dimensions and their sub dimensions. All these dimensions were assessed using a performance based test of HU. The findings revealed that understanding history requires various skills and abilities, which exhibit different patterns of development. Most of the important skills required in appreciating history such as difference of past and history, chronology, imagination have been found in
children by the age of 9 – 10 (grade 4) and becoming refined with age and grade. The results of this study have larger implications for designing curriculum and teaching history, but the same is limited by number of its participants. Therefore, it was desirable to ascertain the results of this study by taking a broader sample and to find out the normal course of development in historical understanding.

Hence, it can be concluded that the studies that have demonstrated early development of historical understanding, have used methods, which are approachable for children. This approach contributes to better understanding of history at an early age. But these studies have studied the dimensions of HU in isolation. Our study (Dixit & Mohanty, 2009) did overcome this limitation by deriving various dimensions of HU; however, the study was limited by the number of participants. Thus, the limitations of the earlier studies about the developmental pattern of HU and our own earlier study stimulated to work up a study, with a larger number of participants that can be helpful in explaining the developmental pattern of HU in children.

2.2. Socio-Cultural Factors in Shaping HU Not Adequately Taken Up:

Historical information, when it reaches us, it is already selected, interpreted and then transferred. Children learn about history through various agencies in societies apart from their classrooms. In this way apart from being determined by the course and teaching strategies, understanding of history is mediated by cultural factors also. Therefore, it is imperative to assess how far the notion of history is affected by such forces.
Barton (2001) has observed that very little research has been conducted on the notions of history of different cultural group, which leaves our understanding of this area at a very initial stage. Guided by this reflection he conducted an enquiry into children’s notion of past, in two cultural groups; Netherland and USA. In the results, Barton (2001) found that although the explanations of students from Northern Ireland and USA overlapped sometimes, they also differed considerably. He concluded that cultural effects on historical thinking can both facilitate and hinder HU. The role of educationists and teachers however, is to make up for these limitations by equipping students with various tools to understand/coceptualize history. Wineburg (1991) argued that different origins foster different cognitive activities and exercise for engaging with history. They are not two stages on the same continuum. In other words the two samples are not from the same population. He suggested that such kind of inhibitions should be overcome by teaching students to deal with contra-factual and complex historical situations. The historical representation in particular exerts a great influence on children’s historical thinking. The cultural tools and cultural setting facilitate some, and hinder other aspects of HU (Barton, 2001).

Different societies foster different notions and tools to understand past. Understanding of history and past evolves from the social and cultural practices. The mechanism of HU can not be understood fairly without considering socio-cultural factors in which it has to be applied. It can be argued that children’s HU is influenced by the cultural practices, popular representations of history and modes of transferring historical knowledge to
them. However, the discussion in the previous chapter and in the above section shows that the existing studies in this area are not enough to guide our understanding about the same. Therefore, it was imperative to compare the historical understanding of the children in two cultural groups and to explore the differences and similarities in the same.

2.3. The Culture Specific Notions of History and Remain Unexplored:

It has been speculated in the foregoing discussions, that HU is shaped by societal presentations of history. Just the way historian’s interpretation of history is influenced by his/her predisposition, the students’ impressions about history is influenced by their sources of information about history. Different societies have different ways of preserving and passing knowledge to its members. Historical knowledge is also represented and transferred to its members in its culture specific ways. The ways of transferring historical knowledge and the representation of history in any socio-cultural group may give rise to culture specific notions of history. It can be argued that the culture specific notions of history are the results of many factors; the social practices, the cultural artifacts and the schooling experience. All these factors collaboratively shape our opinion and understanding about social issues. And, since history is primarily concerned with social events and its understanding, is shaped by its representation in the society. It can be thus, argued that the adults’ notion of history can have culture specific features which might also be intervene by their schooling. The historical understanding of unschooled adults may be different from schooled adults. However,
there is no formal validation of such a proposition. Such a study would be intellectually stimulating as well as informative. Therefore, it was proposed to investigate the notions of history in schooled and unschooled Santali adults.

**Problem:**

The present study was an attempt to trace the developmental pattern of historical understanding, in 9- to 14- year old children, by using a test of historical understanding (Dixit & Mohanty 2006). The problem was to trace the developmental pattern of historical understanding in children; to explore the psychological processes involved in appreciation of history. As mentioned above, it is speculated that notion of history is influenced by our social-cultural context. And, different cultures have different notions of history. Therefore, it was planned to compare the HU of two cultural groups. It was sought to find out in what ways and to what extent is the children’s understanding of history is influenced by the socio-cultural context. Hence, another important problem was to explore the difference between the developmental patterns of historical understanding among two cultural groups.

As mentioned above the socio-cultural perspective on cognition suggests that the understanding of history in a particular cultural group should have its own characteristic features. Hence, it was sought to explore the understanding of History in a particular cultural group.
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The Present Study

Keeping the above issues in mind two studies were proposed; one was to study the developmental pattern of HU in children across two cultural groups, and the second study was to explore the culture specific notions of history and past in a community.

For the first study an attempt was made to explore the development pattern of historical understanding in children between Grades 4\textsuperscript{th} to 8\textsuperscript{th} i.e. 9-to-14-years of age. At the same time the interest was to explore the cultural difference regarding HU of children. Two groups of children were taken; rural Santali school children and urban non-tribal school children. These two cultural groups were taken because the children in the two communities are exposed to different set of values and socio-cultural setting. Santali children were taken from a tribal school where most of the children and staff are tribal only. Thus, their traditional cultural values remain more or less same in their school. The urban non-tribal children were from the mainstream society of the same SES as the Santali children. The children of both cultural groups were administered a Test of Historical Understanding (Dixit & Mohanty 2006). This test was a modified version of the same test made by us in 2005. Since the earlier test was used on urban children this test had to be made ecologically valid, so that the tribal children should not have any problem with the test items. There were 30 children in each group; over all 60 children. The children were given the test of HU, followed by an intensive interview about HU. The scores on HU were quantitatively analyzed and the interview was qualitatively analyzed.
The second study was planned to explore the notions of history in Santali adults. Santali society is a closed society based on informal sanctions of myths and rituals. Despite some developmental changes the society has been a pre literate society where the education level is very low. The value system, cultural practices, and social system of the society is different from a mainstream society. The aim of taking the Santali adults was to explore their notions of HU and observe whether the children reflect the same notions or not. Twenty adults were contacted from the different villages of East Singhbhum district of Jharkhand state. They were asked questions related to life in past; how people used to live and think in past, how do people come to know about the past, what things have changed and so on. The answers of the participants were qualitatively analyzed in order to find out their culture specific features (if any) of HU.