CHAPTER – 1

THE CONSTRUCTION OF HISTORY

The object of History is obviously to gather accurate and authentic knowledge about Man’s past. In a more realistic and down-to-earth formulation, history is the proper arrangement of facts, which govern the telling of a story in sequential and chronological order. Since "the telling of the story" in history is the responsibility of the historian, the arrangement of the details of factual knowledge about the past depends entirely on him. How he construes the facts under his command is dependent upon various co-ordinates.

Although I am primarily interested in the historian as a writer, the oral historian can also come within the fold of this conceptual struggle to place history and the historian. The concerns of the oral historian are similar to the concerns of the writer-historian. The articulation of facts, modes of behaviour and thought, which are relevant to the historian’s own cultural space, shows that history is not a genuine and unsullied sphere of work.

The contamination which is brought about by the intervention of the historian’s self, the self-conscious awareness of an audience whose concerns are similar to his own, or an audience whom he wishes to convert; gives rise to an invented tale. The work that is ultimately produced is not an unadulterated version of the truth, but a past, which is blemished and stained by the self of the historian.
The object of this chapter, therefore, is to see from within a theoretical and conceptual framework, the engineering that goes into the writing and the making of history. The “constructedness” of the final text will be looked into and dealt with with all its attendant complexities and problems.

**The Facts of History**

What is an historical fact? This is a question, which has been posed by several eminent historical thinkers. If a fact is defined as “a thing known to be true”, its place in the field of historical knowledge is crucial. Events, incidents, occurrences, traces, vestiges - all these words have been used by various historians to talk about the historical fact. A fact is solid entity. One cannot ignore it or be indifferent towards it. Historical imagination can begin only at the point when the historical fact ends, when it has been clearly pin-pointed and stated. An historical fact is also clearly different from a scientific fact. Gordon Leff in his *History and Social Theory* states this is no uncertain terms.

“Unlike a physical law, for example, that of the boiling point of water which refers to no water in particular, historical complexes such as revolution or authority take on meaning only as actual occurrences at a particular time and place. This marks them off from scientific propositions; to become intelligible, historical and social categories must refer to specific sets of actors and values and the circumstances in which they occurred. The historian has to go beyond the
simple fact that event $x$ occurred at time $y$ to its historical meaning: the complex of assumptions, interests, ideals and implications which went into ‘its making’.¹

Therefore, an historical fact is clearly vastly different from a scientific fact. Not only from the point of verifiability but also in the actual act of going “beyond the simple fact.” This “going beyond” is what demarcates history from science, because it is at this juncture that the historian’s individual perception enters into the writing “about” the fact, which is an entirely different matter from just stating the fact.

G.J. Renier writes, “Like the finished story which the historian hopes one day to produce, accepted history consists of two elements: “a hard core of facts” and the expression of personal views ... With this second element the new historian will do what he likes. He will take it, reject it, or adopt it in part. It is the factual core that matters. The historian accepts it, adds to it, and may modify some of its detail.

So a historian “must collect a number of occurrences, and determine afterwards which of them rank as events from the point of view of the story he wishes to tell. Or we can say that, ignoring mere occurrences, the historian will collect events likely to interest him from the point of view of history, and will

determine at a later stage which of these events will be retained finally in the
telling of the story."²

The long passage which I have just quoted is significant for various reasons
– (a) The status that Renier ascribes to the historian – that of a story-teller, (b) The
process of choosing which occurrences to select and which to eliminate and (c)
The fact that the historian can actually "modify" the "details" of the occurrences.
This makes the role of the historian, while perceiving a historical fact very
interesting. The understanding of the fact, then, becomes a very loaded
epistemological event. Lester D. Stephens explains further the act of selection in
the writing of history.

"Selection in the writing of history is ... unavoidable. Thus, we must
remain constantly aware that some facts have been omitted, certain ones have been
emphasized, and the historian has of necessity ordered the facts into some kind of
pattern. Contrary to popular opinion, the historian does not merely uncover
existing facts which of themselves tell the story of history. Facts, then, are next to
worthless until someone does something with them – and the job of the historian is
to make them tell the truth as fully as possible."³

This takes us to a very fertile and controversial space in the domain of
history. What exactly is the status of "truth" in history? Does the truth exist in the
fact itself or is it an entity of the historian's making? Can the historian's attitudes,

² Renier, pp.95-6.
psychological states, prejudices affect and mar the truth of the historical fact or is the truth inherent in the fact itself? Can the truth of the fact be distorted and changed beyond recognition?

Most historians seem to agree that the issue of the truth of the fact and its interpretation is indeterminate and flexible. However, the fact itself is at most times, fixed. The fact is actually the raw material for the historian and it remains the same for all historians. The truth or falsehood resides not in the reality of the fact per se, but in its interpretation. E.H. Carr writes, "It used to be said that facts speak for themselves. This is, of course, untrue. The facts speak only when the historian calls on them: it is he who decides to which facts to give the floor, and in what order or context."4

So a fact is meaningless unless a historian enters into the scene, so to speak, interprets it, and therefore, allows it entry into the domain of meaningfulness, but how he interprets it is the crux of the matter. Carr was critical of the empirical school of history, which looked at facts as mere external sense impressions, independent of the historian's consciousness. He quotes Acton, who belonged to this school to show how ludicrous the whole idea was – "our Waterloo must be one that satisfies French and English and German and Dutch alike; that nobody can tell, without examining the list of authors, where the Bishop of Oxford put

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down his pen, and whether Fairbairn or Gasquet, Liebermann or Harrison took it up.5

The substance of this statement is that the historian has to forget or ignore his own narrow identities and somehow transcend his self in order to write a pure and unadulterated version of history. He has to write in the idealistic and unreal mode, a history that is all fact and nothing else. The impossibility of such a style of writing has been talked about by various historians for quite sometime now. The process of selection and elimination is a very complex ideological involvement, which I will look at later on in my study. Suffice to say now that no historian can escape from the shackles of his historical positioning. The ideological space that he occupies will ultimately re-create the fact into a mould of his own making.

For instance, the first historical fact of this present study is the annexation of the Āhôm Kingdom (which then comprised most of what is now North-Eastern India) by the British in 1826. The Āhôms, "an offshoot of the great Tai or Shan race,"6 ruled Assam for almost six centuries. In the first half of the nineteenth century, the Burmese made repeated attacks on the Āhôm Kingdom. King Sôndrôkântô Xiôhô tried to oust the Burmese but remained only a nominal ruler from 1819 to 1824. King Purôndôr Xiôhô had to invite "British troops to try and

5 Ibid., p.9.
defeat the Burmese. The first British operations were started in January 1824 and ended with the Treaty of Yandaboo on 24 February, 1826, by which the Ahom Kingdom became a part of British India. Sir Edward A. Gait, who wrote one of the first histories of Assam, looks upon the annexation of Assam as a means by which the sufferings of the Assamese could be ameliorated. The fact of Burmese aggression and British intervention gets written about in the following manner—

"It is impossible to say what would have been the ultimate fate of the unhappy Assamese, had they been left unaided to the tender mercies of the Burmese. The latter, however soon embroiled themselves with the British, for whom they had conceived the greatest contempt. This feeling seems to have been engendered, partly by their own easy victories in other directions, partly by the paucity of British troops along the frontier and partly by the inefficiency of the Ahom standing army ... But, whatever the cause, they began to behave with the greatest insolence, and to commit various wanton acts of aggression, not only along the northern frontier of Bengal, but also on the borders of Chittagong and Sylhet. Remonstrances were made by the Governor-General without effect, and it was at last decided to resort to arms."^7

This passage is noteworthy for several reasons. The fact is, of course, the act of Burmese aggression in the eastern frontier. But along with this "hard core" comes an interesting interpretation. The arrogant British historian sees the

^7 Ibid., p.266.
Burmese as “insolent” and the Assamese as “unhappy”. The situation can be saved only by the entry of the British. Renier has pointed out that events can be grouped together, not only in sequences, i.e. chronologically, but in series. “Series are logical: they are in any case, determined by the human mind.”8 Here too we can see, Sir E.A. Gait enumerating a series of links, which ultimately led to the wanton violence on the part of the perpetrators, i.e. the Burmese. Their easy victories elsewhere, the lack of British troops, the inefficient Ahom Army – all these can be seen as links determined by the mind of the historian.

FACT AND INTERPRETATION

This above discussion has naturally turned towards a word, which I have used quite a few times already, the word, ‘Interpretation’. A fact by itself is nothing. It can radiate meaning only when the historian applies his own understanding of it and inscribes it in language. The fact can then enter the domain of meaning. This process is a very complex and tortuous one. It involves intense imaginary labour on the part of the historian. R.G. Collingwood writes:

“The interpretation of sources, ... is the formal element of history, counterbalancing the material element which is the source itself ... whereas the sources themselves have to be found, collected, assembled by the historian as data which limit the field of his activity, the work of interpreting them proceeds according to principles which he creates out of nothing for himself.”9

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8 G.J. Renier, p.96.
He continues to say that while sources are "ready-made", interpretation is not. The historian has to come to his interpretative conclusion through a methodology, which would include ratiocination as well as *a priori* imagination. The discovery of the fact is not an end in itself and is not to be treated as sovereign. The fact is what the historian makes it. This takes us back to the question of selection of the fact. What the historian selects is determined by the hypothesis that he has formulated for himself, which is influenced by his ideological stance. Therefore there are never any monolithic histories and there are usually contestations about variable interpretations about the same event. Gordon Leff writes, "The reason is that history is an intellectual process. If its subject-matter is the everyday world, its form is conceptual; it is not simply a representation of the world as it was but a reconstruction of certain aspects of it. Like all knowledge it abstracts and isolates from what would otherwise remain undifferentiated and incoherent. In that sense the prerequisite for historical knowledge as far all knowledge is selectivity."\footnote{Gordon Leff, p.17.}

Selection is, then, a conceptual problem and is connected to the space that each individual historian occupies. In effect, a fact exists as a mental construct in the mind of the historian and it changes its character with each historian. The subjective element in the writing of history is something that cannot be negated. "Historical facts ... are a little less solid than many people ordinarily suppose. We may take this step further by suggesting that historical facts are also to an extent
subjective in nature ... Subjectivity pervades the facts of history. For instance, we may ask “What are the facts of the Reformation?” A German historian may come forth with certain facts about the Reformation, an Italian historian may submit other facts, and an American historian may proffer still others. A Lutheran historian may speak of the facts of the Reformation, and a Catholic historian may muster facts of the Protestant Revolt.”

The above passage takes us back to what Acton had said about the Battle of Waterloo. It gives the lie to Acton’s statement about how facts should not speak differently to different historians. The obvious truth is that an historian’s nationality, religion, political affiliations etcetera are very important co-ordinates, which will ultimately play a vital role in the way his imagination will work. Detachment or elimination of the historical personality can only create interpretational problems. Georg Simmel in his *The Problems of the Philosophy of History*, talks about how the erasure of the historian’s personality is not only inadmissible, it is impossible. He gives the example of Leopold Ranke, who had experimented on the possibility of eliminating his personality from historical inquiry in order to see things as they really were. Simmel calls this whole procedure “self-defeating”. He elucidates not only on the problems of eliminating subjectivity, but also on “the elimination of its purest and most extreme form: individuality.” This would “destroy the possibility of historical knowledge. In other words, the elimination of his most extreme form of subjectivity would be

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11 Stephens, pp.24-5.
self-defeating."\textsuperscript{12} It is not sufficient to recognize that mind is the object of historical knowledge. "It is necessary to see that the object of historical knowledge is individuality."\textsuperscript{13}

From here on we move to the "tainted" aesthetics of historical knowledge. Every time the historian looks at an historical fact, his biases, prejudices, predispositions all come together to form an interpretation, which is entirely personal. His knowledge of the object is not a natural consequence, which arises out of it, but is actually a construct of his own making. His narration of the fact makes him an artist in own right. It makes his writing very close to fiction, in so far as "fiction" means something "invented" and related to the imagination. His work becomes creative, almost literary in its fictive reverberations. Anatole France had written:

"Is there such a thing as impartial history? And what is history? The written reproduction of past events. And what is an event? Is it any kind of occurrence? Certainly not! It is a noteworthy occurrence. Now how is the historian to judge whether an occurrence is noteworthy or not? Arbitrarily, according to taste and whim, in his own way, in short, as an artist ... One can be successful (in history) only through the use of the imagination.\textsuperscript{14}

\textsuperscript{13} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{14} Quoted in G.J. Renier, pp.136-7.
This 'artistic' quality of historical interpretation has been said to be too extreme by several thinkers. But the truth regarding the whimsical nature of interpretation cannot be denied. The whimsicality arises from the selection and erasure of facts and is defined by the societal and historical position of the historian and the historiographer. The hypothesis that has to be satisfied is usually the "suitability to some present purpose." So what actually happens is that our knowledge of the past is not true knowledge but only a "reconstruction in the interests of knowing the present". This makes it all too clear that historical knowledge is actually a false consciousness. So fabricated that Collingwood was led to compare the historian to a novelist. He says that the resemblance between the two is remarkable. "Each of them makes it his business to construct a picture which is partly a narrative of events, partly a description of situations, exhibition of motives, analysis of characters ... The novel and the history must both of them make sense; nothing is admissible in either except what is necessary, and the judge of this necessity is in both cases the imagination."

The history has to make sense, but the deciding factor is the imaginative truth of the version put forward. The truth is a subjective one and changes with each historian. This statement is very significant and relevant to the purposes of this present study. Since I will be looking initially at histories, monographs, 

17 Ibid., pp.245-6.
ethnographies, written by the British colonizer-historian, the interpretative, fictional, ideological aspect of history-writing will be brought to the fore. According to Marx and Engels, ideology has as its source not only the material life but also the outlook of the dominant class. So the writings are obviously partial and self-interested or as Engels called it, evidence of "false consciousness", because "the real motives impelling him (the thinker) remain unknown to him ... He works with mere thought-material which he accepts without examination."\(^{18}\)

Even though the thinker may be consciously unaware of his own motives or the reasons behind the trajectories of his imagination, it is quite clear that in the context of an historical truth like colonization, the colonizer-historian writes with the subterranean realization that he is writing from a position of dominance. False consciousness may be seen as distorted, self-justificatory knowledge as opposed to objective knowledge. It rests upon the assumption that an outlook must always express, the interests of the class to which its adherents belong. When the colonizer writes about the colonized, his position is within that of the "ruling class". Therefore whatever fact he selects, modifies, interprets will be conditioned by his interests and intentions. In the introduction to *Social Construction of the Past*, George Clement Bond and Angela Gilliam write, "Representing the past and the way of life of populations is an expression and a source of power. These representations may frame relationships of social inequality, and can be intimately

related to structures of power and wealth. They contain ideological and hegemonic properties that represent historical and sectional interests."

The impulse on the part of the colonizers to represent the “past and way of life of (‘inferior’) populations” happened at various levels. The difference or the separateness between the writers and the people written about was based primarily on social, political and economic inequalities. Since the colonizer wrote from a position of dominance, his ideological affiliation was to those belonging to his own class. Even in the most meticulously researched gazettes, reports, monographs, histories or anthropological notes, the imaginative interpretation of the facts was more often than not based on the certitude of the colonized people’s inferiority. True representation was then impossible since the material fact became subservient to the needs of the present moment- the moment of colonial contact.

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