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## UNIT 2 HISTORICAL RESEARCH

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### 2.0 OBJECTIVES

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After reading this Unit, you will be able to:

- describe as to what is history and who is a historian;
- explain what is historical research and scope of its application in library and information science;
- understand its purposes and advantages;
- identify the research situations appropriate for application of historical research;
- explain the process of conducting historical research;
- describe the kinds of information sources available for research;
- follow the criteria for the evaluation of information sources and data; and
- identify the problems faced in conducting historical research.

## 2.1 INTRODUCTION

### What is History?

People constituting a society are the makers of history as well as the products that are the result of history. In a modern society, howsoever we may try we cannot escape history. It forms an integral part of life. It affects our day-to-day living at all times. In taking a decision in daily life, we often base it on our past experiences.

History, “as commonly understood, may refer to events themselves or the record of events” (Partner, 1997, vol 12, p.147). She further adds, “History may be interpreted very broadly, to include nature as well as man. There is a history of the process of evolution, as Darwin made clear, but in general usage history refers to the study of man and what happened to him” (p147).

History is “the past experience of mankind. More exactly, history is the memory of that past experience as it has been preserved, largely in written records” (Daniels, 1996, p.226). Thus, it is the product of historians’ work in reconstructing the flow of events derived from the sources of information putting it into a narrative account.

### Scope

Subject matter of history constitutes “the significant past, meaning the institutions and individual actions that affect the experience and development of whole communities” (Daniels, 1996, p. 226). Traditionally, it focused in the action of governments, their leaders, and the conflicts among them (named political and diplomatic history). However, during the past one hundred years or so, scope of history has widened to also include history of ideas, the patterns and trends in economic and social life, that influence our society as a whole as well as characterise it.

### Dimensions of History

History has two dimensions (Powell, 1991, p. 137-38) that are important for interpretation of historical data. One dimension is *historical time* or chronology. It takes into account the spacing of events and/ patterns. It is sometimes referred to as a time line. The second dimension is *historical space* or geographical location of where the events took place.

### Historians

Historians are researchers who focus on study of individuals and societies regarding their behaviours, motives, fears, hopes, aspirations, experiences etc. They carry out their study on the basis of the close examination of information sources. They record their observations and generate records that they pass on to future generations for further research and record. They try to update history on continuous basis. Historians provide systematic description and recording of events and trends, giving a narrative account in a flowing and interesting style.

Historians record their observations on the basis of a large variety of data available to them. From the large data, they select that data which is genuine and reliable. In spite of their best efforts to achieve objectivity, bias creeps in their selection as well as in his interpretation of data. This happens due to conditioning of their life and thinking being exposed to a variety of influences consciously or unconsciously, from their nationality, religion, beliefs, traditions, education, status (social, economic and political), environment etc. However, a good historian reveals his biases in his narrative to bring objectivity in his writings. This is always expected from an intellectually honest researcher.

## 2.2 HISTORICAL RESEARCH

### 2.2.1 Definitions

Historical research is “the systematic collection and objective evaluation of data related to past occurrences in order to test hypotheses concerning causes, effects, or trends of those events which may help to explain present events and anticipate future events” (Gay, 1981, p. 432).

According to Isaac and Michael, historical research involves reconstructing “the past systematically and objectively by collecting, evaluating, verifying, and synthesizing evidence to establish facts and reach defensible conclusions, often in relation to particular hypotheses” (1981, p.44).

“True historical research, or historiography, is concerned with analyzing and interpreting the meanings of historical events. It is the process by which a researcher is able to reach a conclusion as to probable truth of an event in the past by studying objects available for observation in the present” (Goldhor, 1972, p.98).

It may be considered, “as a scholarly attempt to discover what has happened” (Mouly, 1978, p.157).

Historical research is “the process of systematically examining past events to give an account of what has happened in the past” (Johnson, chapter 12, p.1).

The above definitions are certainly useful ones. Gay points out the role of hypotheses. Isaac and Michael emphasise the establishing of facts systematically and objectively. Goldhor uses the term ‘true historical research’ and refers to probable truth of an event in the past. Mouly gives a very simple definition, stressing on ‘a scholarly attempt’.

Thus, we may conclude from above that true historical research is a process of reconstructing the past through systematically and objectively collecting, evaluating, verifying and synthesising evidence relating to the past events to establish facts and defensible conclusions, often in relation to particular hypotheses (if appropriate), to arrive at a scholarly account of what happened in the past.

### 2.2.2 What is not Historical Research?

True historical research must be distinguished from chronology. Chronology is defined as “simply the setting down of events in the order of their occurrence, a process similar to the older concept of historical research” (Powell, 1991, p. 137). Chronology of events is merely a first step in the process of historical research, providing data or material for latter steps.

A description of past events is not considered historical research. It serves as background for the researcher. It can be starting point for him.

A mere collection of facts including their description, does not constitute historical research. Facts can serve as a base. Facts have to be related and a total picture drawn, to become meaningful and contiguous one.

### 2.2.3 What Constitutes Historical Research?

“True historical research, or historiography, is concerned with analyzing and interpreting the meaning of historical events. It is a process by which a researcher is able to reach a conclusion as to the probable truth of an event in the past studying objects available for observation in the present” (Goldhor, 1972, p.98).

It is a flowing, dynamic account of past events, which involves an interpretation of these events in an attempt to recapture the nuances, personalities, and ideas that influenced these events. (Johnson lectures, Chap. 1)

From above, it follows that historical research constitutes of a narrative account of the past events written on the basis of interpretation of those events, to recapture personalities, ideas and environment of those times that shaped the events.

#### **2.2.4 Advantages**

There are some advantages of historical research as given below:

- The research is not physically involved in the situation under study;
- No danger of experimenter-subject interaction;
- Documents are located by the researcher, data is gathered, and conclusions are drawn out of sight (Key, 1997, p.2-3);
- “Historical method is much more synthetic and eclectic in its approach than other research methods, using concepts and conclusions from many other disciplines to explore the historical record and to test the conclusions arrived at by other methodologies” (Shiflett, 1984, p. 385). The author further adds, “Many methods used alone or in conjunction with other supporting techniques of data collection and analysis can adequately demonstrate that some particular situation or relationship between variables exist in the present. But the persistence and permanence of these conclusions will always be questionable without historical verification” (shifted, 1984, p. 385-6); and
- Perhaps more than any other research method, historical research provides librarians with a context. It helps to establish the context in which librarians carry out their work. Understanding the context can enable them to fulfil their functions in the society. The study of status of women in librarianship would require understanding their historical roots in society as well as in the establishment of librarianship as a profession. Similarly, investigation into the status of university librarians in India would require establishing the context. It is only through the understanding of the history that one can appreciate the environment in which librarians take decisions or carry out their professional work. In case, we want to find answers to questions like, why a particular service was started by a library or why the library reclassified its collection from Colon classification to Dewey decimal classification, then historical research can enable us to find the answers.

#### **2.2.5 Limitations**

The human past is the subject matter of historical research. It is to be noted that the past can only be known through the relics that become available to the researcher. Thus, the past can no longer be examined directly by him.

A researcher cannot re-enact the past but can only interpret it unlike experimental research.

“Since history contains an inherent element of subjectivity, the final truth on any important subject can never be written. Later historians will work with different frames of reference, new interests, and new conjectures. They will ask new questions and often discover new source material. Finally, because of the defects of the sources themselves, the total truth of an important event can never be completely established. New generations and



other nationalities will always be ready to offer new insights and new interpretations of the past” (Daniels, 1996, p. 229). In ultimate analysis, one may conclude that there is no possibility of final truth to be written.

### 2.2.6 Purposes

Historical research is carried out to serve the following purposes:

#### **To reconstruct the past**

A historian reconstructs the past systematically and objectively, reaching at conclusions that can be defended.

#### **To discover unknown events**

There are some historical events that occurred in the past that are not known. A historian seeks to discover these unknown events.

#### **To understand significance of events**

There may be significant events that may be responsible for shaping an organisation/a movement/a situation/an individual being studied by a historian

#### **To discover the context of an organisation/movement/the situation**

In order to explore and explain the past, a historian aims to seek the context of an organisation/a movement/ the situation being studied.

#### **To find answers to questions about the past**

There are many questions about the past, to which we would like to find answers. Knowing the answers can enlighten us to develop an understanding of the past events.

#### **To study cause – and effect relationship**

There is a cause-and effect relationship between two events. A historian would like to determine such a relationship.

#### **To study relationship between the past and the present**

The past can often help us to get a better perspective about current events. Thus, a researcher aims to identify the relationship between the past and the present, whereby; we can get a clear perspective of the present (Mouly, 1978, p.158).

#### **To record and evaluate the accomplishments of individuals, institutions and other kinds of organisations.**

Historians are greatly interested in recording and evaluation of the accomplishments of leading individuals and different kinds of organisations including institutions and agencies because these influence historical events.

#### **To provide understanding of the immediate phenomenon of concern**

A researcher may be investigating a phenomenon. Historical perspective can enable him to get a good understanding of the immediate phenomenon of concern.

#### **To understand the cultural context of libraries**

Libraries as institutions form an important part of culture. Study of libraries enables us to understand the culture responsible for the growth and development of libraries.

**Self Check Exercise**

- 1) Discuss what is historical research.
- 2) Enumerate the purposes of historical research.

**Note:** i) Write your answers in the space given below.

ii) Check your answers with the answers given at the end of the Unit.

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## **2.3 SCOPE OF APPLICATION**

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The historical method of research is applicable to all fields of study, including science and technology, social sciences, the humanities etc. In any field, where the study involves its origins, growth, development, impact, use, theories, personalities, crisis, etc, the historical method is found to be applicable.

### **2.3.1 Application in Library and Information Service (LIS)**

Historical research is very popular in the field of library and information science (L&IS). At the same time, it is least understood. Often, it is considered less significant, compared with other types of researches as the latter deal with issues directly related to practical problems faced by librarians. Librarians give greater importance to practical problems of their direct concern.

A researcher can apply historical method of research to a vast range of topics such as:

#### **Origins**

Origins of public library movement in the princely State of Baroda (India)

Delhi Public Library: Origins and background

Origins of public library movement in Tamil Nadu

The Delhi University Library: A history of its beginnings, 1925-1947

#### **Growth**

Growth of college libraries in Punjab (India)

Growth of library profession in India

#### **Development**

Growth and development of reference librarianship in USA

Development of public libraries in South India

Development of library standards at the international level

Development of library equipment in USA during the last two decades

Development of methods for preservation of library resources

Study of development of university library buildings in India

Indian library development, 1947-1999

## Impact

Impact of technology on library services in UK during the last fifty years  
 Impact of information technology on cataloguing practices  
 Impact of information technology on acquisition of periodical publications

## Use

Use of equipment in public libraries in Australia from 1991 to the present  
 Use of storage media for storing of pamphlets in special libraries

## Personalities

Contribution of leading personalities to the development of library profession in USA during twentieth century

S. R. Ranganathan: Father of Indian librarianship

## Theory

From descriptive theory to dynamic theory of library classification  
 History of reference theories

## Crisis

Decline of Sapru House Library: Story of rise and fall of a great institution  
 Indian librarianship on the crossroads: Root cause of the situation of crisis

## History

History of information systems  
 History of libraries in India during nineteenth century  
 History of Delhi University Library  
 History of Indian Library Association, 1933- 1983  
 American library history, 1876-2000  
 History of Indian public library movement through 1947  
 University libraries in South Africa: Their history, condition and management

## REPRESENTATIVE EXAMPLES

Dale, Doris C. (1968). The origins and development of the United Nations Library, New York, Columbia University.

Hanson, E. R (1974). Cataloging and the American Library Association, 1876-1956, University of Pittsburgh.

Holley, Edward G (1961). Charles Evans: American bibliographer, Urbana, University of Illinois.

Mahajan, S. G. (1984). History of public library movement in Maharashtra (erstwhile Bombay Presidency), Pune, Shubhada-Saraswat Publications.

Nagar, Murari Lal (1983). Foundation of library movement in India, Ludhiana, Indian Library Institute and Bibliographical Centre.

Ohdedar, A. K. (1966). Growth of libraries in India; 1498-1836, Calcutta, World Press.

Paterson, Kenneth G (1968). The history of the University of California Library at Berkeley, 1900-1945, Berkeley, University of California.

Taher, Mohamed(2001). Libraries in India's national developmental perspectives: A saga of fifty years since independence, New Delhi, Concept Publishing

Whitehill, Walter M. (1956). Boston public library: A centennial history, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press.

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## **2.4 TYPES**

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According to Hillway (1964, p.159), there are six types of historical research as given below:

- Biographical research;
- Histories of institutions and organisations;
- The investigation of sources and influences;
- Editing and translating historical documents;
- Studying the history of ideas; and
- Compiling bibliographies.

The use of a particular type of research would depend upon the subject field of study and the nature of inquiry being pursued. In actual practice, historians are adopting a variety of approaches.

The approach of a researcher to collection and interpretation of data is influenced by the fact as to which school of thought he belongs to, such as providential perspective, new social history, narrative mode, etc. In new social history, social science–type analysis is used. In narrative mode, emphasis is on how account is written.

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## **2.5 IMPORTANCE IN LIS**

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It has contributed to the body of knowledge constituting library and information science.

According to Michael Harris, “a clear understanding of the historical definition of the functions of libraries may well contribute to increased communication between libraries” (1971, p.1)

History teaches us many lessons. It would contain description of many mistakes made in different periods, in different libraries or library schools or by professional bodies. It can help librarians, library educators and leaders of the profession to learn from the past, so as not to repeat the mistakes of the past. Similarly, successes of the past have many lessons to teach us.

Library history enables librarians to understand the present in the proper perspective. This will help us to understand and appreciate the present situation.

The history of libraries produced by historians provides significant details about libraries, how these originated and developed over a period of time. It also indicates the significance of libraries. A study on building a great collection on organic chemistry, would provide an understanding of the collection, its purpose and special features, and how it was developed over a period of time. It will enable the library professionals working in the library to realise a better appreciation of history of their own library.

Librarian historians through research make a great contribution to our understanding of the development of the profession. Thus, fulfilling their professional commitment.

“History is a major research methodology in library and information science as measured by the amount written, but its popularity has dramatically decreased in recent years. This is evident in the types of research projects that are being accepted by doctoral



committees... There are undoubtedly many possible reasons for this, but the major one seems to be the pervasive belief of some doctoral committees and dissertation advisors that historical research represents wasted effort. Research using methods adopted from the more rigorous social sciences has become the modality of research in library and information science” (Shiflett, 1984, p.387). This situation is true even today. Survey method predominates in researches being carried out at Indian library schools. There is no doubt that over a period of time, the quality of historical research in library and information science has improved a great deal. It has become more rigorous than before, involving scientific method at different stages of research. Depending upon research questions to which the answers can be found in the past only or need arises for historical verification of conclusions arrived at by other methodologies, then historical research is found appropriate.

### Library History

Often, historical research conducted in the field of library and information science is called library history. It is a label “commonly applied to an account of events that have affected any library or group of libraries, as well as to the social and economic impacts of libraries on their communities” (Busha and Harter, 1980, p.93).

According to Shiflett, “Library history” is a rubric that covers a myriad of topics associated with libraries and other information systems. Its major form consists of the history of traditional library, but it also includes the history of any activity or event that might be part of the domain of library and information science. The use and the users of materials, the problems of governance and employment, the production of resources collected and organized by the librarians, and the role of governments in support of information activities are all legitimate concerns of library history- just as they are valid objects of other forms of research” (1984, p. 388). It is an enumeration of a wide range of the topics that are covered under library history.

At one time, library history was too often considered in a narrow sense just confined to history of libraries. As it is apparent from the definitions given above that now its scope has increased a great deal going beyond history of libraries, as well as history of books (other media as well) and printing, history of the library as a social institution, history of the use of documents of various types and libraries etc.

There is no doubt that in recent years, the quality of historical research in library and information science has improved.

## 2.6 PROCESS OF CONDUCTING RESEARCH

The process of conducting historical research is the same as for other kinds of researches. The process involves the following steps:

- Identification of research topic and formulation of the research problem;
- Collection of background information or contextual information about the research topic;
- Formulation of the questions to be answered or formulation of hypothesis(es) (if appropriate) to explain causal relationships between historical variables;
- Systematic collection of evidence or data or literature review;
- Rigorous evaluation of historical resources (the authenticity of the resources and validity of their contents);
- Interpretation; and
- Synthesis into a narrative account.

### 2.6.1 Identification of Research Topic and Formulation of Research Problem

The researcher must first of all identify (define) a historical problem of significance that needs to be solved or he can identify an area of knowledge that needs to be developed. It may be a study of the present situation of a university library where understanding of the past will enable the authorities to plan for the future.

In order to identify a historical problem, the researcher must have thorough knowledge about the concerned library and also he needs to be interested in this area. In selecting a topic, he must see to it that there should be a reasonable amount of evidence that is readily available. He should also know how and where to access it. Availability of adequate sources of information is a must for producing a good narrative.

Ideas for a historical research topic can be picked by a researcher from a variety of sources of information such as:

- A report on library and information science education dealing with current issues;
- Review of national policy for library and information science (India);
- Impact of information technology on growth and development of university libraries in UK; and
- Development of college libraries in Canada: A report along with a proposal for their modernisation.

### 2.6.2 Collection of Background Information or Contextual Information

After identification of a research topic (defining the topic) and formulation of the problem, carry out survey of the available literature. This step deals with identifying, locating and gathering information regarding the research topic, the kind of data to be gathered, the procedure to be followed and where it is to be gathered, would depend upon the type of the topic being investigated.

To gather enough background information or contextual information, generally start with secondary sources, to find out how the previous researchers have done similar research, what sources and research methodology they adopted. Every secondary source of historical data would suggest other sources including bibliographic tools as given below:

- Monographs, journal articles;
- Bibliographic tools: Library catalogues, bibliographies, indexing and abstracting services, research guides, bibliography of bibliographies, etc.; and
- Reference sources: Encyclopedias, dictionaries, yearbooks and annuals, etc.

History is primarily based on the study of written or printed sources, now there is a flood of electronic sources, many of them available on the Internet. Typically, these are classified as primary, secondary and tertiary sources. These may be published sources, manuscripts (handwritten) or nonprint materials.

#### Primary Sources

A primary source is a document that contains the original statement on the topic being investigated by the researcher. These contain evidence that is closest to the event under investigation as recounted by observers and participants. Primary sources represent “the data which lie closest to the historical event. They are considered to include the testimony of eye-witnesses, or observations made with one or the other senses or by

some mechanical device. In most cases, primary sources are the written record of what the writer actually observed or the first-hand expression of his or her thoughts” (Powell, 1991, p. 139). Thus, it is the direct outcome of the event or the record of eyewitnesses. It bears direct involvement with the event being studied, such as diaries, letters, speeches, and an interview with the person who personally experienced the event, original map, etc. It is not a copy, a repackaging or summary of the original. The basic criteria to identify a particular source as a primary document is, just ask, “Is it a firsthand account?”

These include the following:

- Documents generated by the events themselves such as archival records (governmental, institutional, commercial, ecclesiastical, etc), internal letters and memoranda (memos), speeches, summaries or minutes of conferences and meetings, photographs of people, buildings and equipment, statistical information (such as tally sheets and surveys), lists of holdings (goods, equipment, etc), and reports and statements (mission statements, employees guidelines, rules and regulations etc);
- Documents produced to record events immediately such as chronicles, diaries, reports produced by journalists and interviews conducted by them, drawings and photographs, motion picture films, tape recordings and video recordings;
- Documents in supplementary forms produced much later in the form of oral sources, oral traditions and folklores, languages themselves, say fables, folktales, folklore etc are a good source; and
- Artifacts or realia such as inscriptions, seals, coins, medals, drawings, pictures, ruins of monuments.

### Secondary Sources

A secondary source is the one derived or created from a primary source (that first reported the event being studied). It reports events based on use of primary and other secondary sources as bases of data collection. It contains information reported by a person who did not directly observe the event, object, or condition (Key, 1997, p.1). Thus, these report events by a person other than a direct observer or a participant in the events. These are considered less useful than primary sources.

A secondary source may be one or more steps removed from the primary source in terms of time, place or authorship. A source becomes a primary or secondary source depending upon its proximity to the actual event under investigation (Powell, 1991, p.140).

Examples of secondary sources are given below:

- Textbooks
- Encyclopaedias
- Monographs
- Articles in magazines.

A copy of an original document is a secondary source as it may not be an authentic one. In copying from the original document, certain errors or omissions can occur intentionally or unintentionally. The original might get modified at the stage of copying through editing or interpretation.

### Tertiary Sources

These sources include bibliographies, catalogues and indexes that guide a researcher to primary and secondary sources.



### *Significance of Primary Sources*

Researchers consider primary sources more useful than secondary and tertiary sources and they prefer to use these.

The use of primary sources:

Allows use of data based on testimony of eye-witnesses, or observations made with human senses or by a mechanical device. Thus, these are original sources representing firsthand account. These contain the original statement on the topic being investigated by the researcher. These are sources that first reported the event being studied.

- Strengthens the reliability of the study.
- Provides a solid base for arriving at valid conclusions.
- Provides historical data that serves as raw material for historical interpretation.
- Ensures the integrity of the study.

Experience shows that most often, a historian cannot base his research entirely on primary sources. According to Powell, “In fact, secondary sources may provide important information and conceptual development not available elsewhere. But as secondary sources do not represent “eye-witness” accounts, the researcher should keep in mind their limitations and avoid an overreliance on such materials. Secondary sources are perhaps best used for rounding out the setting or filling in the gaps between primary sources of information” (Powell, 1991, p. 140).

A secondary source may be one or more steps removed from the primary source in terms of place, time or authorship. Just possible, a secondary source (a copy produced from an original document) may not be an authentic one. In copying from the original documents, certain errors can creep in through omission or commission. The original may have been modified, through editing or interpretation.

### **Self Check Exercise**

- 3) What are the steps involved in conducting historical research?
- 4) Why does a researcher not prefer secondary sources to primary sources of information?

**Note:** i) Write your answers in the space given below.

ii) Check your answers with the answers given at the end of the Unit.

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### **2.6.3 Formulation of Hypothesis(es)**

In the study of a historical event, there may be many questions that may arise about it, to which we would like to find answers. Knowing the answers to these can enlighten us.

The event to be studied may be, “Public library movement in the State of Tamil Nadu (India)”. The movement started around 1950. Why it got delayed? Was it due to lack of political will? Was it due to lack of philanthropy? Was it due to lack of sufficient literate population? Was it due to lack of sufficient published literature in the languages



predominantly used by the public? Was it due to lack of financial resources? Was it due to lack of awareness on the part of the public about their right to have access to free public libraries?

Dr. S R Ranganathan was librarian, Madras University Library for over two decades. He succeeded in building a great library. However, due to power politics, he was forced to resign before his retirement. In a historical study of the contribution of Ranganathan, some of the questions would arise.

These are given below:

- Why was he selected as a librarian over other candidates?
- What was the role of the then Vice-Chancellor of the University and the Chairman of the library committee in his selection?
- What were his major contributions to the development of the University Library?
- How did he succeed in spite of dirty politics based on caste lines dominating the academic environment?
- What were his major successes and failures?
- What were the events in the power politics that led to the resignation of Ranganathan?

Use of hypotheses serves useful purposes as given below:

- It increases the objectivity of the investigation.
- It minimises researcher bias.
- A historian, often would have access to a large amount of data that may prove to be difficult to handle unless he is able to decide which is relevant or which is not relevant to his research. Hypotheses provide him guidelines for deciding which data is relevant or not at each stage of collection, analysis and interpretation of data. Thus, one can evolve strategies to collect data.
- It provides him a basis to identify various factors in relation to one another and also to synthesise them into generalisations or conclusions (Mouly, 1978, p.160).
- It serves a useful purpose as an aid to conduct rigorous studies.
- The formulation (when appropriate) of hypothesis(es) to be tested to explain the relationships among historical variables, is the central question(s) around which the evidence is organised and also presented, to prove or disprove the hypothesis (es). A researcher should not merely select and present only that kind of information, which can prove the hypothesis(es), but rather make a conscious effort to examine the total information available to him covering all aspects of the problem being investigated.

Keep in mind that the hypothesis (es) will enable to draw the lines along which the researcher needs to gather information, so as to avoid wasting efforts collecting information that has no relevance to hypothesis (es). In case the formulation of hypothesis (es) is not appropriate, then, one should formulate questions. The guidelines mentioned above are equally applicable in case the questions instead of hypothesis (es) are formulated.

There is no doubt that it is more difficult to test a historical hypothesis than in other types of researches. This is due to the reason that historical research is considered *ex post facto* in nature. The events being investigated have already taken place. Therefore,

the researcher has no control over the variables. He cannot manipulate them. It is also not possible for him to repeat or re-enact the event. He can merely interpret the available data related to the event that occurred in the past. As a consequence, study of the phenomenon of causality, though important becomes complex and difficult to deal with. Consideration of causality forces takes the researcher forward beyond descriptive study to consideration of as to why certain relationships between variables seem to be there.

#### **2.6.4 Systematic Collection of Evidence or Data or Literature Review**

In order to produce a work of history, a historian undertakes steps consisting of selection, evaluation, interpretation and synthesis of data into a narrative exposition. Here we are concerned with collection of evidence or data. The gathering of primary-source (first hand) evidence is the most difficult task.

Selection of sources is an essential step especially for recent history. Selection is done taking into consideration, “the nature of the researcher’s particular problem and the criteria of relevance and significance that drive from his hypotheses. Selection is facilitated by the use of bibliographic aids and existing secondary works but the historian of a recent topic must nevertheless be prepared to sift and digest masses of material, most of which will not directly appear in the final work” (Daniels, 1996, p. 228).

Libraries are good at collecting and maintaining records of housekeeping statistics but those records that are required to make library history meaningful and interesting are often lacking. If a historian were looking for records for biographical treatment of Dr S R Ranganathan at Madras University Library, where he was librarian for more than two decades, then he would only find sketchy archives on him. Same is the case with other libraries, especially with regard to archives of interest to library historians. Records of such nature are either lost or not well maintained. Producing oral history interviews of librarians and teachers of library and information science on topics of recent origin can go a long way to fill up the gaps.

#### **2.6.5 Rigorous Evaluation of Historical Sources**

Data used by a historian is usually called evidence. Historical research is totally based on evidence, which is always of the past. It is complex in nature and usually vast in quantity. A historian spends tremendous amount of time in sifting relevant evidence. He narrows it down, choosing it very carefully. Often, evidence presents surprises at each stage of sifting.

The quality of historical sources varies a great deal, especially Internet sources. Every information source must be evaluated for authenticity and accuracy before being used for evidence as these are affected by a variety of factors like economic, political, ethical and social environment as well as personal likes and dislikes, prejudices. The published sources like books and periodicals usually go through filtering process. This may involve peer review and editing. However, most of the information available on the Internet is unfiltered. This poses a danger. The question arises as to whether or not the information source being used by him is appropriate for his research work. Before using sources, he must evaluate these irrespective of whether the resource is Internet source or any other one.

A researcher would like to know if the sources being used by him are:

- Relevant to his research (that is appropriate for his research work),
- Worthwhile (substantial enough to serve his purpose), and
- Competent (genuine, accurate and trustworthy).

***Approach 1***

For evaluation, one may use the following criteria:

- Authority,
- Scope,
- Uptodateness,
- Reliability, and
- Objectivity.

***Authority***

Who is the author or developer of the source? What are his qualifications and experience in the field concerned?

Who is the publisher or producer of the site? What is his reputation?

Find out how the information has been documented, giving footnotes and / or a bibliography? Examine the documentation, to determine the quality of sources covered.

***Scope***

What topics have been covered? What is the extent of coverage of topics (in depth or broadly)?

***Uptodatedness***

How up to date is the content of the source? Has the date of publication been given clearly?

In case of an Internet source, it may indicate, the date of writing or when it was updated last or when the database was activated.

***Reliability***

How far information is reliable and free from errors? Internet sources are not usually verified by editors or evaluated by referees. Thus, there is a great possibility of inaccuracies taking place.

***Objectivity***

Find out, if there is bias in the presentation of information? Is there an attempt to influence the opinion of the readers towards certain ideology or school of thought?

***Conclusion***

A researcher must use a variety of sources, including traditional printed resources as well as Internet ones. However, he must apply the criteria described above to all kinds of sources used by him.

***Approach 2***

As mentioned above, in the process of gathering historical evidence, a researcher is required to continually evaluate documents being used for their authenticity and accuracy.

Another approach used by historians for determining the authenticity and accuracy of historical documents constitutes of textual criticism. Textual criticism consists broadly of two groups, namely external criticism and internal criticism. Any document used for historical research must pass tests of both external and internal criticism. Historical criticism enables a historian to expose forgeries, identify inherent defects (such as deliberate bias or deception, errors of judgment or memory, incompleteness of evidence) in historical sources.



### *External Criticism*

This involves determination of “validity, trustworthiness, or authenticity of the source” (Johnson lectures, chap 12, p.5). This is concerned with examining the historical document from outside, so as to establish its authenticity. The question to be asked, “Is it what it purports to be?” At times, this can be done through analysis of handwriting or carrying out carbon 14 test used for determining the age of the paper. Carbon 14 test is not applicable for Internet resources.

In order to establish the authenticity of the evidence, the researcher checks the genuineness or validity of the source. The question to be asked is it really, what it appears to be or claims to be? Can we use it as evidence?

To establish the genuineness of a document or relic, the following questions may be asked (Key, 1997, p.2):

- Does the language and writing style conform to the period in question and is it typical of other works done by the author?
- Is there evidence that the author exhibits ignorance of things or events that man of his training and time should have known?
- Did he report about things, events, or places that could not have been known during that period?
- Has the original manuscript been altered either intentionally or unintentionally by copying?
- Is the document an original draft or a copy? If it is a copy, was it reproduced in the exact words of the original?
- If manuscript is undated or the author unknown, are there any clues internally as to its origin?

To assess the authenticity of a source, a researcher may use the following techniques:

- Bibliographical technique (bibliographical analysis),
- Techniques taken from auxiliary disciplines such as linguistics, epigraphy (textual analysis), these can help trace the origin of the document.
- Techniques of physical sciences, such as chemistry (chemical analysis of paper and ink). Carbon 14 test is used on paper to determine the age of paper used in the source. Chemical analysis is not applicable for Internet sources.

The use of above techniques would indicate to the researcher with a reasonable degree of confidence whether or not a particular source is authentic. However, one may be unable to prove its authenticity.

### *Internal Criticism*

After the source has been authenticated, then it is tested for accuracy (in other words plausibility and consistency). Internal criticism involves determination of reliability or accuracy of the information contained in the resource. It is concerned with accuracy of the document involving “the competence and integrity of the author, and the occasion of origin of the document” (Goldhor, 1969, p. 103). The purpose being to determine whether or not the author was competent, honest, and objective (unbiased). How long after the event happened, it was reported? Does the account reported by the witness of the event agree with accounts given by other witnesses?

Internal criticism is carried out using positive and negative criticism. Positive criticism consists of assuring that statements made or meaning conveyed in the sources is clear



enough to be understood. There may uncertainty in the words and phrases employed in the source. Sometimes, connotation of terms can change over time. On the other hand negative criticism refers to the process of establishing the reliability or authenticity and accuracy of the contents of the sources (Johnson lectures, chap 12, p.5) this involves judgment on the part of the investigator which is quite difficult. The primary sources containing firsthand accounts by witnesses of an event are considered reliable and accurate.

To determine the accuracy of a document, a historian should ask the following questions (Goldhor, 1969, p.103-104):

- What do you know about the author?
- Was he generally sincere or was he biased?
- Was he knowledgeable and competent?
- Was he even in a position to know the truth, and did he have access to reliable sources of information?
- Does he demonstrate ability to report accurately, clearly, and dispassionately?
- What was the purpose or reason for the preparation of the document?
- Is there any basis for believing that the record was influenced by public opinion, literacy motives, bias, prejudice, vanity, or other such factors?

The above test is very strict. Not many documents concerning library history will pass the above test in a satisfactory manner. However, the document must indicate no bias, no ignorance, and no personal motive (self-interest) of the author.

In the process of gathering historical evidence, a researcher may ask the following questions to evaluate the sources for their authenticity and accuracy (Losee and Worley, 1993, p.157):

- Did the person claimed, produce at the time and the document, and was it distributed and used as claimed?
- Did any person who produced data (written and spoken) have any possible motive or bias in choosing what to communicate and what not to communicate?
- How reliable is an informant?
- Is information complete, and if not is there a possible reason for what is present and what is missing?

### ***Approach 3***

Very often, historians employ three heuristics for establishing authenticity and accuracy of information sources, namely corroboration, sourcing and contextualisation. Corroboration involves comparing documents on the same events to find out whether or not they provide the same information. Sourcing consists of identifying the author (full name, dates of birth and death, status, etc), place and date of creation of the source. Contextualisation refers to identifying of the place and date or period when the event of concern took place. Using these three techniques together can help a historian to establish authenticity and accuracy of an information source.

### **2.6.6 Data Interpretation and Synthesis into a Narrative Account**

Data synthesis includes selecting, organising, and analysing the data in terms of topical themes and central ideas or concepts. Then, these themes and central ideas are put together to form a narrative account that is contiguous and meaningful whole.

“Synthesis of historical data is the most difficult step of all. A conceptual scheme must be developed around which the facts are to be organised, with an appropriate logical sequence of topics and points. Then a detailed outline is prepared. Finally, the narrative is composed with due concern for balanced presentation and the leavening of generalization with illustration” (Daniels, 1996, p.228).

A good historian makes an effort to:

- give the most meaningful representation of reality,
- fill up gaps wherever those exist, giving necessary explanations,
- reconcile inconsistencies in the data,
- carefully conjure up an intelligent guess, where facts are lacking but admits honestly that he is using an intelligent and educated guess, and
- provide footnotes and bibliography, citing original sources and scholarly authorities, used by him to arrive at the conclusions.

A good historian employs lucid and logical expression to present his findings along with supporting evidence to his intended audience consisting of knowledgeable critics and scholars. In presenting a report, the following guidelines should be kept in view:

- The evidence and conclusions should be presented (written) in a way whereby these can be communicated to the concerned readers effectively.
- The researcher should use his intelligence, imagination and sense of discrimination just like a good detective, to provide a narrative exposition that is both contiguous and meaningful.
- The write up should be interesting, graceful and flowing narrative using readable but scholarly style, with emphasis on clarity and continuity of thought.
- All aspects of the topic as well as the problem must be covered.
- He must accurately describe the past, incorporating historical evidence, blending it into the account. He must be careful to not to simplify or misrepresent.
- Historical research due to its very nature often is subjective in nature. Thus, relatively speaking, it is susceptible to researcher bias. In any case, he must avoid bias or misjudgment. However, a historian should follow a style of presentation that is objective but not lacking in feeling or colour. In case a researcher feels that he has a known bias, as an honest researcher, he must state the same clearly, so that the reader can form his or her own judgment regarding the interpretations and conclusions drawn by the author.
- The evidence must be analysed and interpreted so that it supports the hypotheses (if any) and conclusions.
- The conclusions arrived at and the supporting evidence should be presented in a clear and unambiguous prose.
- Complex ideas need to be explained in a simple style without being simplified.
- A good historian is one who accepts the fact that his conclusions are tentative and should always be willing to revise or reject his conclusions in the light of new data that may become available later on. At times, skepticism is necessary and serves a useful purpose.
- Facts and interpretation should be presented along with documented evidence:  
(a) whereby the readers can evaluate the conclusions reached at by the researcher.  
In other words, readers can critically examine the documented sources to find out

whether or not, they would have arrived at the same conclusions as drawn by the researcher, (b) documented evidence can also enable other researchers to replicate the study, resulting in greater scientific accuracy, This is how knowledge advances.

- Above all, a researcher must display intellectual honesty.

## 2.7 INTERNET

In recent years, Internet has become a significant resource for research, a revolutionary communications delivery system. This is due to the growth of World Wide Web, an Internet interface having sound, graphical and video facilities. Many academic, professional, commercial and government organisations have established their web sites providing valuable data and information. There are libraries that have set up digital libraries, such as National Digital Library of Library of Congress, New York Library Digital Library etc. Lot of useful data is available along with trash and propaganda material.

A historian should know how to sift through data to cull out useful data. Subject directories and search engines are useful in finding history sources. There are thousands of primary sources relating to history available on the web and gopher FTP files. The problem with many of these web sites is that often the basic information required by a historian to evaluate the accuracy, completeness and genuineness of the sources is missing, such as purpose of the website, the location of the manuscript or printed source used for preparing the online document. Sometimes, the material is written from a particular point of view, or the facts may be misinterpreted to serve a particular end. More often, web sites set up by academic bodies and governments are considered more authoritative. Very often, it takes too much time to load the page. To have a fast search, one would require a computer with a fast processor and a modem. It is much more difficult to search Internet for secondary sources than primary ones.

Searching is full of problems. Each search engine uses its own methodology for searching. On a particular topic (based on search of words and phrases), it may provide such a large number of documents that the searcher may have to spend too much of time to select the relevant ones, thereby losing patience, However, one must remember that more time is consumed, if one were to go to a library personally to locate the required document. It may or may not be available on the shelf. It could be in the hands of a reader or borrowed out. In case, the library has to get a document on inter- library loan, then it would take a few days or weeks to get it.

In searching information, one comes across some serious problems as given below (Griffin, 1999, chap 12, p.2):

“One very frustrating problem: sometimes when you select a link, a message informs you that the server (computer) on which the material resides somewhere in the world is not accepting your request and suggests that you try again later. (An immediate retry sometimes gets results, sometimes not.) At times you will get a message stating that the site does not have a DNS number. (Sometimes an immediate retry proves the message wrong!) From time to time you will find that the material you want is available but, for one or more reasons, you have to wait a long time for it to load”. “A related problem, and one far more serious, is that links lead one to messages stating that the material requested is “not found,” meaning probably that, the link, when created, was good, but the document or directory is no longer on the Internet or has a different address. Sometimes this difficulty can be overcome by using a search engine to do a title search, sometimes not”.



A historian must keep in view that Internet is an additional resource beside the libraries. At present, only few sources of information of interest to a library historian are available on the Internet. But increasingly more sources are becoming available, thanks to digitization projects undertaken by various agencies including libraries as well as individuals. A great benefit of Internet is that it provides tons of information and also guidelines about how to carry out historical research effectively and efficiently.

## **2.8 SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH**

According to Busha and Harter, “application of scientific method to the conduct of inquiry is not limited to experimental and survey research. The scientific approach can also be used in historical inquiries. History is both a science and an art. Good historians make use of scientific methods when they collect, verify, and analyze information; the art of writing creative and interesting prose for historical narrative reports complements the scientific approach.” (1980, p.91). They further point out that some historians believe that scientific method can not be applied to historical research due to lack of “rigorous analytical precision and precise explanations” (1980, p.91). A similar view has been put forward by Powell, who mentions, “a number of researchers, including some historians, have argued that historical research cannot be considered true scientific research because it does not permit enough precision and objectivity.” (1991, p.137).

This is not exactly true. The fact of the matter is that it is difficult to apply it. It does not have the rigour of research methods like experimental and survey methods as it is not able to meet the standards of enquiry laid down in other methods. Historical research is ex post facto in its nature and usually; historical events are complex phenomena, where it becomes difficult to arrive at conclusions that can meet high level of confidence.

There are others who argue that historical research can meet the same standards of inquiry as do other methods (Mouly, 1978, p.157) A good historian always tries to adapt scientific approach to the best of his ability. He uses scientific method of inquiry at different stages of research process, such as, formulation and testing of hypothesis, collection, analysis, interpretation and synthesis of data, writing of the narrative. He adopts systematic approach at all stages. Systematic (that is systematic way or approach) is the key word in his investigation of the historical event of his concern. These are the distinguishing features of true historical research. However, there is no doubt that in spite of its limitations, historical research has made an important contribution in the field of library and information science. Historical knowledge has helped in the advancement of this area of study.

### **Self Check Exercise**

- 5) Describe the process of data synthesis in historical research.
- 6) Why is scientific method difficult to apply in historical research?

**Note:** i) Write your answers in the space given below.

ii) Check your answers with the answers given at the end of the Unit.

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## 2.9 PROBLEMS

### Data

*Amount of Data:* Often, it is difficult to decide as to how much data is sufficient to reach meaningful conclusions.

*Selection of Data:* A historian must avoid improper or faulty selection of data. This may happen due to relying too heavily on some data, ignoring some data, etc. This can result in a bias in the study.

*Evaluation of Historical Data and their Sources:* Inadequate evaluation of data and their sources, can lead to misleading results.

*Synthesis of Data into a Narrative Account:* Due to the very nature of historical research, it becomes most fruitful, if a researcher is able to successfully synthesize or integrate the facts into meaningful generalizations. Thus, a failure on the part of a researcher to interpret data adequately is considered a serious setback.

There are four problems at the stage of synthesis and in report preparation as given below:

- 1) Trying to infer causation from correlated events is the first problem. Just because two events occurred together does not necessarily mean that one event was the cause of the other.
- 2) A second problem is defining and interpreting key words so as to avoid ambiguity and to insure that they have the correct connotation.
- 3) A third problem is differentiating between evidence indicating how people should behave and how they in fact did behave.
- 4) A fourth problem is maintaining a distinction between intent and consequences. In other words, educational historians must make sure that the consequences that were observed from some activity or policy were the intended consequences. (Johnson lectures, chap 12, p.8)

Historical synthesis and interpretation are considered an art, which is subjective in nature. This raises a serious problem of subjectivity. "Historical synthesis is necessarily a highly subjective art. It involves the intuitive perception of patterns and relationships in the complex web of events, as well as the art of narrative writing. Explanations and judgments may be called for that will involve the historian's own personality, experience, assumptions, and moral values. Inevitably there are personal differences among historians in this respect, and prolonged academic disputes among historians of different schools or nationalities have arisen over practically every event. The initial reduction of complex events of the recent past to comprehensible pattern is particularly difficult and subjective..." (Daniels, 1996, p.228). Since the very process of writing a narrative is a human one, therefore, total objectivity is almost impossible. As a consequence, bias, distorting of facts to fit preconceived notions or ideas are not unusual. It may also be kept in mind that historical conclusions are conditioned by place, time and as to who is the author. In order to overcome, some of these inherent weaknesses, the writer must clearly indicate, the underlying assumptions in his approach. In case, he belongs to a particular school of thought, the same must be stated clearly.

### Sources

*Heavy Use of Secondary Sources of Information:* In case of research into events that occurred in a period earlier than the recent ones, a researcher often has to depend heavily on secondary sources due to lack of primary sources.

## Broad Area or Problem

*Broad Problem:* In case one is concerned with a broad area of study or problem, then very often the historical issues involved become too complex to study.

## Presentation

*Style:* The writing style should be attractive and also aim to inform the reader. This is not an easy task.

*Scholarship:* It should make a significant contribution to new knowledge and reflect scholarship.

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## 2.10 SUMMARY

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True historical research employs application of scientific research at all stages of the research process including formulation and testing of hypothesis (es), collection, analysis, interpretation and synthesis of data and writing of the narrative. Systematic (that is systematic way) is the key word used at all steps. Thus, historical conclusions arrived at by the historian can rightly claim to have logical validity that is somewhat comparable to those in other social sciences. However, true historical research must be distinguished from chronology or just description of events. These merely constitute steps in the research process. It is to be noted that, it is the application of scientific research that distinguishes true historical research from mere chronology or just description of events.

A good historian always tries to adapt scientific approach to the best of his ability

One must admit that there are certain limitations of historical research. These include ex-post facto nature of historical research, where the historian works from available evidence back to the event, complexity of the phenomenon being investigated, problems in studying causality within a relationship of factors involved and impossibility of replicating the past events. Besides, historical research is a highly subjective art. The process of writing a meaningful narrative is a human one, where total objectivity can never be achieved. There is always a possibility of a researcher bias, leading to distortion or suppressing of facts to serve preconceived notions, affecting the objectivity of the conclusions. Thus, it becomes difficult to arrive at conclusions with any high degree of confidence.

The job of a historian is quite difficult. Often, he has to deal with events, for which there may be only very few primary sources of information. Thus, he is forced to rely more on secondary sources. At times, the problem being investigated may be too broad, where the environment for the historical event may be too complex, involving a large number of factors or variables. In some studies, the data gathered by the researcher may be too vast, requiring a great deal of sifting. This can be a big headache for him. Here deciding what is relevant and what is not relevant can be really difficult.

There is no doubt that in spite of its limitations, historical research has made an important contribution in the field of library and information science. Library history (historical research done in library and information science) has grown as a separate area of study generating its own literature. Those who specialize in this area are called library historians. Library history is growing day by day. There are separate organizations to serve the cause of library historians. IFLA (International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions) has a separate section on Library History. American Library Association has created Library History Round Table.

A good library history cannot be written without adequate sources of information. Library history not only lacks adequate records but those available in libraries are not always easily accessible. Therefore, librarians must give a high priority to acquiring, organizing and making them accessible. Through oral history projects, based on interviews of leading library educators and librarians, records can be generated to serve the purpose.

## 2.11 ANSWERS TO SELF CHECK EXERCISES

- 1) Historical research is a study and analysis of the past events to predict the future. It involves systematic collection and objective evaluation of data related to past events. Merely collecting data related to the past events and presenting a chronology is not historical research.
- 2) The purposes of historical research are:
  - To reconstruct the past;
  - To discover unknown events;
  - To understand significance of events;
  - To discover the context of an organization /movement/the situation;
  - To find answers to questions about the past;
  - To study cause – and effect relationship;
  - To study relationship between the past and the present; and
  - To record and evaluate the accomplishments of individuals, institutions and other kinds of organizations
  - To provide understanding of the immediate phenomenon of concern
  - To understand the cultural context of libraries
- 3) The steps involved in conducting historical research are:
  - Identification of research topic and formulation of the research problem
  - Collection of background information or contextual information about the research topic
  - Formulation of the questions to be answered or formulation of hypothesis (es) (if appropriate) to explain causal relationships between historical variables
  - Systematic collection of evidence or data or literature review
  - Rigorous evaluation of historical resources (the authenticity of the resources and validity of their contents)
  - Interpretation
  - Synthesis into a narrative account
- 4) A researcher does not prefer secondary to primary sources of information because these report information concerning an event, object, or phenomena not directly observed by the author/ compiler. As a result, the authority of these sources is less compared to those of primary sources.

- 5) Data synthesis involves collecting, organizing, analyzing and presenting the data systematically. It is important that the presentation is coherent. Therefore the researcher should plan the presentation regarding how the topics have to be sequenced from general to specific. There should be adequate diagrams supporting the narrative.
- 6) It is difficult to apply scientific method to historical research due to lack of precision and objectivity. Historical method of research lacks the rigour of survey and experimental methods. It is post- facto in nature handling complex phenomena where it becomes difficult to apply scientific method.

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## 2.12 KEYWORDS

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|----------------------------|---|
| <b>Historical Research</b> | : Systematic collection and objective evaluation of data relating to past events concerning causes, effects or trends of those events to explain present events and predict future events |
| <b>Library History</b>     | : Historical research conducted in the field of library and information science   |

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