

Presenting the art and the science of Qualified Historiography: Anchoring history-writing in the event of uncertainty and unreliability of narratives

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Abstract

This paper presents and articulates the art and the science of Qualified Historiography, that is, History-writing in cases of uncertainty and unreliability of the narrative— where narratives are not absolute or certain, based on hypotheses, need to be refined and recast, and therefore also need to be qualified. This is a practical and immeasurably useful approach that allows readers to sift the grain from the chaff, and cull the essence without jettisoning the meat. It can be used in many different cases, for example, when research is still underway, when data is incomplete, when it is intended to be used by one or more researchers as a platform for other researchers to contribute to nascent and budding ideas, when it brings some value to the table and adds to knowledge in some way and when a hypothesis is proposed to be presented to elicit feedback from a broader audience. This approach forms an integral part of twenty-first century historiography and is meant to be understood along with the trilogy of papers encompassing core twenty-first century historiography, namely Historiography by objectives, the core principles of twenty-first century historiography, and Anthropological historiography, which have already been published by us in various peer-reviewed journals. This approach is therefore complementary and supplementary to the aforesaid papers, and takes the principles presented therein to their logical conclusion.

Introduction

Humans have always shown a very keen interest in their ancient and hoary past. Consequently, Historiography as a well-defined field of study began to evolve and take shape from rather early times, and various approaches to research the past have been proposed since the days of yore. The term historiography therefore, refers to the art and the science of researching, reconstructing and writing history and includes formal and well laid out techniques for the study of history. It is also a formalized study of the methods of writing history and research methodologies dealing with different aspects of history and history-writing.^{1 2 3 4}

Some of the very early definitions of history were provided by the Romans and the Greeks, and different scholars both modern and ancient, notable examples being Aristotle, Dionysius of Halicarnassus, Lord Acton, Henry Johnson, Thomas Carlyle, and Marquis de Condorcet have made attempts to throw light on the nature of history.

Other schools of historiography have included Church Historiography which was more attuned towards serving religious needs, Arab Historiography which attempted to reconcile ancient Greek methodologies followed in historiography with those of Church historiography, and the famed German School of Historiography along with its dialectics (Karl Marx was also very deeply influenced by this school).

Karl Marx adopted various aspects of dialectical methodologies proposed by Hegel, even though in a highly modified form. Marx believed that most problems could be attributed to material or economic factors, and called this approach Historical Materialism. Per Marx, most non-material aspects of human existence such as art, literature and philosophy were shaped and determined by economic factors, and non-economic factors were subservient to economic factors which primarily determined historical outcomes.

Major changes have taken place in the field of historiography since the time of Karl Marx, and there has of late been a very strong tendency to view history as a science rather than as an art. It is now being studied along with diverse fields such as Geography, Sociology, Economics, Psychology, Anthropology, Archaeology, Philology and several other sciences. Schools such as the Annales School have also led to social scientific methods being incorporated into history. Newer trends in historiography include

¹ Historiography by Objectives: A new approach for the study of history within the framework of the proposed Twenty-first Century school of Historiography by Sujay Rao Mandavilli published in ELK International Journal of Social Science Volume 1 Issue 2 (2015)

¹ Introducing Anthropological Historiography as an integral component of Twenty-first Century Historiography: The role played by Anthropological Historiography in the attainment of long-term Anthropological goals and objectives published in International Journal of Innovative Science and Research Technology, February 2018, Volume 3, Issue 2 by Sujay Rao Mandavilli

² Enunciating the Core principles of Twenty-first Century Historiography: Some additional extrapolations and inferences from our studies and observations on Historiography by Sujay Rao Mandavilli published in ELK Asia Pacific Journal of Social Science (ISSN: 2394-9392) in Volume 2, Issue 4 July to September 2016

⁴ Conal Furay and Michael J.Salevouris: The methods and skills of writing history. A Practical Guide. Published in 3rd ed. Wheeling, IL: Harlan Davidson, Inc., 2010.

Cliometrics, Cultural history, Comparative history, history of literature, history of art, subaltern history and other schools of thought. Postmodernist thoughts and ideals have also been applied in History in recent times. This encompasses critical interpretations of culture, history, literature, art, linguistics, economics, philosophy, and fiction.

In the twenty-first century, the research-oriented nature of historiography cannot be emphasized enough. This brings into focus, benchmarks to develop strategies to incorporate research techniques into historical method. This is one of the bases of this paper, and this endeavour must be seen against a backdrop of increasing research focus of historiographic work.

This approach forms an integral part of twenty-first century historiography and is meant to be understood along with the trilogy of papers encompassing twenty-first century historiography, namely Historiography by objectives which comprised 39 core objectives plus scholar defined objectives and a layered and a stakeholder-focused approach, the core principles of twenty-first century historiography, and Anthropological historiography which comprised 49 objectives plus scholar defined objectives, all of which have already been published by us in various peer-reviewed journals. This approach is therefore complementary and supplementary to the aforesaid papers, and take the principles presented therein to their logical conclusion.

Qualified historiography

When to use this approach

The approach of Qualified historiography can be used in the following contexts and situations:

1. When research is underway: One of the common areas of use of this approach is when research is currently underway, and the outcome is as yet uncertain. Thus, it would act as a platform for other researchers who could in turn contribute to research and research output. Thus, this approach greatly aids in the process of knowledge-building.
2. When data is incomplete: This approach can also be used when data is incomplete and better outcomes are possible only with more complete data. Thus, this approach aids in an active hunt for data using a plug and play method, and allows for the expertise of different types of specialists to boot.
3. When it is intended to be used as a platform for other researchers to contribute; Research in progress can be used by other scholars to contribute towards shaping of ideas towards their logical conclusion. This is therefore a building block of the knowledge creation process. Thus, this can help puzzles, riddles and mysteries in history to be solved faster, particularly those which contribute to the knowledge creation process or advance knowledge in general.
4. When it brings some value to the table and adds to knowledge in some way: This approach can be used when potentially useful knowledge is not proposed to be jettisoned, but is instead proposed to be used for the refinement of ideas, in a recursive and a constructivist fashion.
5. When a hypothesis is proposed to be presented: This approach can be used when a hypothesis is proposed to be presented to a broader audience to elicit ideas and feedback, so that suitable modifications can be made to the same. For this, suitable qualifiers need to be used, and

assumptions laid down threadbare. Thus, improved hypotheses can be generated in turn by the author or by other parties.

Here are some instances where this approach can be used. This list is only indicative and is a cross-representative of the different scenarios where this approach can be put to productive use.

Research on post-Harappan India

Research on post-Harappan India promises to be a new and an exciting field of study. While our papers now provide adequate evidence for rejecting Mortimer Wheeler's ill-conceived and obsolete Dark Age hypothesis, it is highly unlikely that the Cultures of the Post-Harappan India (commonly known as Iron age Vedic India) produced the kind of prosperity associated with the Harappan Civilization due to several reasons. 1. The cultures of Post-Harappan India would not have had (due to their geographical location) sea-based trade networks with Mesopotamia, Egypt and the rest of the old world 2. The cultures of Post-Harappan India naturally took shape under very exceptional circumstances with the migration of people to the Gangetic plains in 1900 BC due to the drying up of the Ghagra-Hakkar, and were a sudden development. 3 The kingdoms located on the Gangetic plains would not have had the meticulous planning which went into the cities of the Indus and the periods of stability that would have preceded the Mature Harappan phase. 4. The Gangetic plains were much more densely populated and a much larger portion of the population would have depended on agriculture. 5. Post-Harappan India was a very hierarchical society with aspects such as the Caste system unlike the IVC which was much more egalitarian. 6. Post-Harappan India was known for its innumerable petty dynasties, warring kings, and small, ephemeral kingdoms. Nonetheless, these cultures are of great interest, because they are of great value in constructing the cultural history of the Indian subcontinent. Given the paucity of data available and non-reliability of original sources, a research-based approach is most suited to the reconstruction of this period of Indian history. The lessons learnt can throw up great lessons for the refinement of historical methods and open up new avenues in historiographic research.⁵⁶

Hypotheses on the identity of the Harappans

We have argued that the Dravidian, Vedic and Paramunda Indus theories were based on obsolete premises, and showed why Dravidian languages, Sanskrit or Paramunda languages could not have been the languages spoken in the Indus Valley Civilization which flourished from circa, 2600 BC to 1900 BC in the North-Western part of the Indian sub-continent. An alternative hypothesis dealing with the identity of the Harappans was also presented and we argued that the IVC was intensely multi-linguistic, and that the Harappans spoke remote ancestors of what later were known as the Prakrits in the Gangetic plains. This is an ideal scenario for a research based approach, and can be presented for consensus, approval or refutation to a broader group of scholars. ⁷

Research on the dead sea scrolls

⁵ From Harappa to Hastinapura : a study of the earliest South Asian city and civilization from the point of view of archaeology and ancient Indian literature by Piotr Andreevich Eltsov.

⁶ Ancient Indian Historical tradition by F E Pargiter published in 1922

⁷ The Demise of the Dravidian, Vedic and Paramunda Indus Hypotheses: A brief explanation as to why these three Hypotheses are no longer tenable by Sujay Rao Mandavilli

The Dead Sea Scrolls are a collection of ancient Jewish and Hebrew religious manuscripts which were found between the years 1946 and 1957 at the Qumran Caves on the banks of the Dead Sea. Traceable to between the third century BC and the first century CE, the Dead Sea Scrolls are considered to be amongst the most important finds in archaeology, with a very great historical significance because they include some of the oldest surviving manuscripts of books forming a part of the biblical canons, and throw light on early Christianity. Several thousands of written fragments have been unearthed in the Dead Sea area. They are a part of the remnants of larger damaged manuscripts, with many holding only small quantum of text. Additionally, a small number of much better-preserved manuscripts have survived – few have associated the scrolls with the ancient Jewish sect called the Essenes, although some argue that priests in Jerusalem, wrote the scrolls. 8

The shroud of Turin

The Shroud of Turin which is also sometimes known as the Holy Shroud, is a linen cloth with the image of an unidentified man. Some scholars claim that it is the image of Jesus of Nazareth aka Jesus Christ, and believe the fabric is a part of the shroud in which he was wrapped after his crucifixion. Traced way back to the year 1354, the shroud was denounced by the bishop of Troyes who proclaimed it to be a fake. The Catholic Church currently neither formally endorses the shroud nor rejects it completely. The shroud has been preserved at the royal chapel of the Cathedral of Turin since the year 1578. In 1988, radiocarbon dating proved that the shroud could be reliably dated only to the Middle Ages, and its date was placed to a period between the years 1260 and 1390..The image on the shroud is relatively clearer when photographed in black-and-white than it appears in color photographs. The shroud has been studied by various scholars of different backgrounds, but it remains a controversial issue among scientists and scholars of biblical studies to this very day. 9

Jack the Ripper

Jack the Ripper is the name given to an unidentified serial killer who operated in slum districts in and around Whitechapel in the Eastern part of London in the autumn months of 1888. He was also variously referred to as the Whitechapel Murderer and Leather Apron. Jack the Ripper is known to have attacked female prostitutes who operated in the slum areas of East London. Their throats were slit and their bodies mutilated. Internal organs were removed from three of the victims and this suggested that the killer also had surgical knowledge. The name "Jack the Ripper" can be traced to a letter written during the period by an individual who claimed to be the murderer. This letter is now widely believed to be a hoax. 10

Historicity of King Arthur

The historicity of King Arthur has been hotly debated by academics and popular writers alike. While there have been many claims made over the ages that Arthur was a historical person, according to the

⁸ The Digital Dead Sea Scrolls: Nature and Significance". Israel Museum Jerusalem. Archived from the original on 1 October 2014. Retrieved 13 October 2014.

⁹ Taylor, R.E. and Bar-Yosef, Ofer. *Radiocarbon Dating, Second Edition: An Archaeological Perspective*. Left Coast Press, 2014,

¹⁰ *Serial Killers: True Crime* ISBN 978-0-7835-0001-0

broad consensus among historians he is just a mythological figure. However, a handful of historians continue to vouch for Arthur's historicity till date, and claims and counterclaims are often made by various parties.

The first mention of Arthur occurs in the year 828 in "Historia Brittonum", in which he is presented as a military leader fighting against the invading Saxons. He thereafter evolved into a legendary figure from the twelfth century onwards, after Geoffrey of Monmouth's fictional work "Regum Britanniae" was authored.¹¹

Principles

The following are the core principles of this approach:

Qualifiers

A qualifier may be defined as a word or group of words that modifies or limits the meaning of another word or group of words. Qualifiers should be added to the narrative, preferably in a separate section or in footnotes. The objective of these qualifiers is to explain to readers that the narrative is only tentative and subject to the qualifiers added. The qualifiers should be as detailed as possible, and throw light on the tentative nature of proposals, including lacunae, if any. They should also be specific, and refer to a specific section or point in the narrative.

Annotations

An annotation may be defined as a note added as a comment or explanation to a text. Annotations should throw further light on qualifiers, and explain the reason for the tentative nature of proposals, and clarify the limited nature of the narrative, and the nebulous and hazy areas. These should again be detailed and specific, and be linked clearly to both qualifiers, and sections in the narrative.

Strict no to pseudo-science

Pseudoscience comprises beliefs, statements, or practices that claim to be factual or scientific but are not compatible with the scientific method. Pseudoscience is characterized by unfalsifiable claims and reliance on confirmation bias without rigorous attempts at scrutiny or refutation. Researchers of history must maintain a scientific temper, and must not be swayed by pseudo-science. Pseudohistory is another form of pseudoscience which attempts to distort or misrepresent the historical record, by employing methods very closely resembling those used in scholarly historical research, but lacks rigour and bonafide method.

Examples of pseudo-history include.

E.g. An exaggerated epic age in the Gangetic Plains in India

¹¹ Tom Shippey, "So Much Smoke", *review of Higham 2002*, *London Review of Books*, **40**:24:23 (20 December 2018)

The Epic age in India is thus called because the greatest epics produced in India were written during this period. The epic period is roughly estimated to be between 1000 BC to 600 B.C. Ancient Indian society is described vividly in these three epics. The two famous Indian epics that are dated to this period are the Ramayana, and the Mahabharata. While most scholars accept that the epics contain some historical information, Hindu nationalists present an exaggerated account of the epic age, dating it back to 12000 BC, basing it on flimsy evidence such as archeoastronomy. Some date it back to even before the Indus age, All this smacks of ultranationalism, and is clearly pseudoscience.

Atlantis

Atlantis is a fictional island mentioned in Plato's works and is a naval power that lays siege to Ancient Athens. According to this story, Athens successfully repels the Atlantean attack. Atlantis ultimately falls out of favour with the deities and submerges into the Atlantic Ocean. Although this idea has been influential and has captured the popular imagination, it is by and large considered to be pseudo-historical. Many attempts have been made to discover this fictional island.¹²

Lemuria

Lemuria was a imaginary continent proposed in the year 1864 by Philip Sclater which was said to have sunk beneath the Indian Ocean. The hypothesis was proposed as an explanation after the discovery of similar lemur fossils in Madagascar and India .Theories about Lemuria later became untenable when Alfred Wegener's theory of continental drift was largely accepted by the scientific community, and the idea generally drifted in the realms of the pseudo-scientific. This idea still has some currency among Dravidian nationalists who see Lemuria as some sort of a Dravidian homeland, associated with a hoary Dravidian golden age.¹³

The chariots of the Gods

“Chariots of the Gods” is a book written in 1968 by the popular author Erich von Däniken . It postulates the hypothesis that several technologies adopted by different ancient civilizations were provided by ancient astronauts who were accepted as gods. The main thesis of Chariots of the Gods is that extra-terrestrial beings greatly influenced the adoption of several ancient technologies. According to Von Däniken some ancient structures and artifacts appear to reflect sophisticated technological knowledge which was unknown at the time. Von Däniken suggests that these artifacts could have been produced by extra-terrestrial visitors or by humans who learned the knowhow of these technologies from extra-terrestrials. Many of those theories have now been completely debunked and falsified, and there is

¹² Hale, John R. (2009). *Lords of the Sea: The Epic Story of the Athenian Navy and the Birth of Democracy*. New York: Penguin. p. 368. ISBN 978-0-670-02080-5

¹³ Ramaswamy, Sumathi (2004). *The Lost Land of Lemuria: Fabulous Geographies, Catastrophic Histories*. University of California Press. [ISBN 0-520-24032-4](https://doi.org/10.15269/9780520240324).

hardly any acceptance in science. This hypothesis is a classic case of pseudo-science, and is targeted mainly at a popular audience. ¹⁴

Present facts as they are: Adapt only where required

Another important aspect to be borne in mind is that facts must be presented as they are, and minimal adaptations must be made; thus, the objective will be for the author or researcher not to add his own assumptions but to present facts in an undistilled form. Thus, a researcher must always adopt a neutral stance, regardless of personal opinion or ethnic pride. This is of paramount importance in the interests of clarity and ambiguity. Wherever required, different hypothesis or scenarios may be presented and the reader may be allowed to pick and choose based on his knowledge of the topic.

Checks and balances

As many checks and balances as possible must be incorporated into the narrative, so that risk of downstream confusion may be avoided. Thus, the work must incorporate some modicum of reliability. The researcher must be well aware that the work will be used downstream by other researchers, and there must be minimal risk of faulty use as such. Thus, every researcher must be aware of his social duties and responsibilities, and his duties and responsibilities towards the research community at large. Risks in the narrative must also be clearly documented and communicated.

Must provide some benefit to science

Every research endeavour must provide some benefit to science. Thus, a researcher may pursue his or her favourite topic, but must counterbalance it with what is useful for science and for the research community at large. Topics may also be likewise prioritized, and topics that are of greater importance to science in general may be taken up first.

Layered presentation to historiography

We had also proposed a layered approach including layers such as the research layer and the presentation layer to ensure that the requirements and needs of different stakeholders are taken into account and to make the entire process of research into history and history-writing more effective. Thus, different approaches to history writing and communication can be recommended for different layers. This approach is expected to be maintained in qualified historiography also.

Conclusion

Thus, qualified historiography can offer a great benefit to historiography and science by bringing topics from the realms of the uncertain to the certain. It must be accompanied by several checks and balances though as explained in this paper. More importantly, it must not be hijacked by people of vested interests or ideological affiliation. If this is done, unfortunately, all our efforts shall have gone in vain.

¹⁴ Story, Ronald (1976). *The space-gods revealed : a close look at the theories of Erich von Däniken*. New York: Harper & Row. p. 2. ISBN 0-06-014141-7. Citing *Der Spiegel*, in issue 12/1969 (March 17, 1969), p. 184 and issue 12/1973 (March 19, 1973), p. 145

