

28. SYNTHESIS OF FACTS

Historical research is the systematic and objective location, evaluation and synthesis of evidence in order to establish facts and draw conclusions concerning past events.
- Walter R. Borg.

28.1 SYNTHESIS

28.1.1 Meaning of Synthetic Operation

The collection of historical facts on the basis of heuristics and hermeneutic constitutes the analytical operation of historical method. Selection of facts and classification of facts are called synthesis or synthetic operation. The literal meaning of the word '*Synthesis*' means combining of separate parts, elements etc. to form a complex whole. In historical research, the term 'synthetic operation' refers to "joining, grouping, arranging, explaining and interpreting the data so as to make the narrative meaningful and interesting".¹ It is a process whereby several ideas are grouped and arranged in a rational and meaningful manner.

28.1.2 Prerequisites of Synthetic Operation

Synthesis is the art of grouping facts. It is concerned with the proper utilization of tested facts. The important *prerequisites* in synthetic operation are 1) To understand the meaning, significance, relevance and implication of every bit of information collected; 2) To study the works that are related to the theme under investigation; and 3) To infer, interpret and arrange facts in a systematic manner. Every explanation, every cause and every inference has to be supported by an authentic data.²

28.1.3 Principles of Synthetic Operation

Synthetic operation is an unifying action. It classifies groups and coordinates tested facts into an intelligible pattern or framework. It brings out the whole out of parts and particulars. A thesis is a mosaic of facts. Synthetic operation seeks to organize facts and manage research material to raise an impressive superstructure. Certain general principles are followed while combining all relevant data into connected research writing. These principles are intended 1) to group and unify the valid and determined facts, 2) to develop these facts adequately to explain their significance; and 3) to bring out unity in the narrative.³

28.2 HISTORICAL FACTS

Historical research is centered round the discovery of facts: not inventing them. Facts are things that are known to have happened. And the past is known through the activities of historians. There is, therefore, an umbilical connection between the historian and his facts. Both are inseparable. Ranke's resounding injunction to the historians is to track down the facts. He said he was a historian first and a Christian next: such was his passion for historical facts.

History is a corpus of ascertained facts. The positivists popularized the 'cult of facts'. They justified the fatalism of facts and dominance of documents. It must be recognized that basic facts are the same for all; but only historians transform them into historical facts. They collect, select, collate and cogently arrange facts and weave the fabric of history.

Historical facts are raw materials; they are not finished products. Facts are to be processed, polished and put them to effective use. Facts have meanings; many meanings and take different shapes. Historian has to understand the nuances of facts, subject them to severe scrutiny and present them as objective a history as possible. For, history is not a string of facts per se, but narration, explanation and interpretation of facts. Hence there is continuous dialogue between the historian and his facts, a dialogue between equals; and their relationship is reciprocal. E.H.Carr in his inimitable style says that the historian without his facts is rootless and futile; the facts without their historian are dead and meaningless. He defines history as "*a continuous process of interaction between the historian and his facts, an unending dialogue between the present and the past*".

Historical facts may be classified into 3 categories. 1) *Individual facts*. They are isolated, scattered and unconnected. 2) *Typical facts*. These facts take place in the same uniform way and take place periodically like Sati, infanticide or child marriage. 3) *Collective facts*. These are facts collectively brought about by men or mob like uprisings, revolts and revolutions. Historians make use of all the three kinds of facts

28.2.1 Selection of Facts

Selection of fact is as important as collection of data. Collection and selection of facts, though independent, are interdependent functions. Facts are varied. They must be related to the research topic, directly or indirectly. From the point of view of the topic all the facts detected and delineated may not be relevant. Hence the need for selection of relevant

facts to be incorporated into the thesis. Irrelevant material must be mercilessly eliminated. Research is not to be lost in the welter of super-abundant but superfluous facts. The heterogeneous materials must be chiselled and shaped into homogeneous historical construction. The researcher should reduce facts to 'a common degree of generality'. Systematic selection ensures regularity, symmetry as certainty in reporting. In the task of selection of facts the job of the researcher is not different from that of an Inspector-General, an ambassador or of the Chief Medical Officer.⁴

Writers like Schiller and Sidgwick have argued that the '*Criterion of relevance*' can be applied to all investigations. The historical researcher should have the notion of relevance. The lawyers, for instance, call relevant anything that is helpful to his case in hand. The criterion of relevance has the following *implications*: 1) It is subjective because what is selected is a part, an extract and the whole matter is not presented; 2) Selection is risky and its relevance can be questioned or disputed; 3) Relevance implies usefulness instead of giving a grasp of the essence of things; 4) The standard of importance adopted for the selection of facts in the researchers own standard of values, as pointed out by Dilthey.⁵

However, no final verdict can be given as to the criterion of relevance. What is relevant to an historian may be irrelevant to the other. Relevance, therefore, "must remain a matter to be settled by each individual historian in each individual's case".⁶ It may be safely said that the facts selected are important to the researcher to the extent they are relevant to his purpose.

28.2.2 Arrangement of Facts

Factual information may be about material objects, actions of men, and their motives and conceptions. Grouping or arranging or classifying facts is a vital step in synthetic operation. Facts are to be grouped according to some definite plan. The selection, the grouping and arrangement of facts are the sequential steps in the process of synthesis. Historical facts may be grouped on the basis of chronology, topic, geography, personality, institution, problem, and concept and so on.

1. Chronological Arrangement

Chronology is the very basis of the historical edifice. Without chronology the historian is a fish out of water. It is the backbone of history. Without dates the true casual link would be missed. Indebtedness to predecessors could not be discussed. "The more exact the date of happenings, the surer is the foundation, and the greater the solidity of the superstructure he rears".⁷

The historical material could be arranged on the basis of time sequence, i.e. chronologically. "A history is a recital of events that took place in time, and this must not be forgotten. You will kill interest as surely by leaving out the time sequence as by breaking up the natural cluster of ideas".⁸

Chronological arrangement is the most popular, time-tested and effective way of arranging historical facts. Thucydides was the pioneer in this regard. "Accordance to chronology may avert the necessity of repeating and narrative of the same events under different headings. Moreover, whatever cause may be, it usually is antecedent, though occasionally concurrent, in time to effect, and a strict chronological ordering is more likely to reveal and clarify it than a disregard of the progression of events".⁹

However, historians like Macaulay, Barzan and Graff reproached chronological approach because it produces a history which is unreadable and mixes events great and small indiscriminately. This arrangement is derided as jumble of incidents and parody of life. Nevertheless, chronological arrangements still rules the roost of historical research as it is the most satisfactory approach.

2. Topical Arrangement

Historical facts can also be arranged on the basis of the subject. It is concerned with the content of research. Topical approach involves study spreading over a period. Pure topical arrangement exhausts one topic and proceeds to the next. Sir Louis Namier, who considered the function of the historian to be that of the painter and not of the photographic camera, was the exponent of topical or subject arrangement. He penned his great 18th century studies on the basis of subjects.¹⁰ He treated the past in terms of topics.

Topical arrangement has certain limitations. *First*, it may seriously distort the objective reality of the past since it groups facts topicwise. *Secondly*, it does not take into account the significant change that had taken place over a period of time. *Thirdly*, topical order will deprive history of all coherence. *Fourthly*, it loses the effect of beholding one mass of facts after another. Despite drawbacks topical arrangement is better suited for arranging historical facts.

3. Other Arrangements

Geographical or regional arrangement of facts is at times considered as an objective form of putting facts in order. But this

approach is seldom adopted for arranging historical material because it is not constant. *Personality based* arrangement is best suited to tackle the problem of personalities. Similarly, *institution based* arrangement deals with social and economic problems. So also problem based arrangement. Historical facts can also be grouped on the basis of certain *key concepts*. There is no one all satisfactory arrangement of historical facts. The best method seems to be a judicious combination of the chronological and the topical methods.¹¹

28.3 ROLE OF REASONING

28.3.1 Positive Reasoning

There are no hard and fast rules and regulations regarding grouping of facts and presenting them in an interesting manner. Constructive reasoning has to play a significant role in synthetic operation. In the absence of adequate data reasoning is required to fill many a gap. Reasoning may be positive or negative.

Positive reasoning draws certain inferences from the facts established. The analogy between the past and the present is adopted in positive reasoning. From the study of a given set of facts it is possible to infer the existence of the other connected facts. A thorough knowledge of particular facts is necessary for positive thinking. It must, however, be ensured that the facts interconnected are found with each other. Positive reasoning, though more complex, is of "greater use to historians".¹²

27.3.2 Negative Reasoning

Negative reasoning, on the other hand, is based on the assumption that the absence of any indication in a document will mean that there was no such fact at all. Negative reasoning is "argument from silence".¹³ This type of inference is wrong because 1) it is not essential that every fact should have been recorded; 2) it is possible that the fact was recorded but the document in which it was recorded has perhaps been lost; and 3) certain facts are not recorded by the contemporary writer because of fear of authority.

Reasoning – positive or negative – is based on presumptions and assumptions and not on certainties. Hence the researcher must be careful and cautious while drawing inferences on the basis of constructive reasoning. However, when several inferences point in the same direction they confirm each other and end by producing a legitimate certitude. "History fills up some of its gaps by an accumulation of reasonings".¹⁴ In short, creative reasoning is the most efficient tool for research decisions.

interpretation and generalization and governing meaningful recommendations. Clear thinking and clear writing go together. In the words of Whitney "There is high positive correlation between good thinking and effective writing".¹⁵

28.4 CHECKLIST FOR SYNTHESIS

Understanding the thought behind the evidence is crucial to establish the truthfulness of the source. Only by analyzing and comparing a wide range of data can the researcher hope to achieve this understanding. The understanding must involve a sensible selection of source and its synthesis into an account. The following suggestive *checklist of 15 elements* may be used for effectively synthesizing the data: 1) literal and real meaning of the statement; 2) observation of the detail; 3) reporting of the detail; 4) bias and subjectivity; 5) corroboration, contradiction and measurement; 6) probability, plausibility and certainty; 7) working hypothesis; 8) causation; 9) motivation; 10) individuals and institutions; 11) contingency; 12) facts as values, ideas and objects; 13) inference; 14) relevance; and 15) arrangement. There is no hard and fast rule as to in what form or order these elements are to be used. Nor is there any method to correlate the facts obtained. However, the researcher must be conscious of the elements of synthesis.

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29. EXPOSITION OF THE SUBJECT

A man who has knowledge but lacks the power clearly to express it is no better off than if he never had any ideas.
- Pericles

29.1 MEANING OF EXPOSITION

Exposition is the concluding operation. It is the climax stage in historical research. It represents the actual writing of the thesis of history. Exposition means explaining or making clear by giving details. It is the presentation of historical facts in an intelligent, intelligible and interesting way. It is upto the researcher to make his writing a work of art. Facts must be presented in a fascinating way and imagination plays a key role in exposition. Originality, clarity and lucidity are the hallmarks of exposition.

29.2 INTERPRETATION

Higher Form of Analysis

Collection of sources and combination of facts do not make history. The narrative must yield significant results. Therefore, the data so laboriously collected, collated, examined, scrutinized, grouped, arranged and elucidated are now subjected to a different kind of evaluation to bring out the relationship among the facts. It goes beyond the stage of description or narration and aims at higher form of analysis and synthesis. It's aim is to get as much as possible out of a particular account and to explain how, why and with what effect things happened and what their inter-relation was.

Importance

Interpretation is an important aspect of the research process. It is only through interpretation the researcher can explore and expose the relations and processes that underlay his findings. It is a search for broader meaning of historical facts. Interpretation has two aspects: 1) to establish continuity in research through the linkages of the study; and 2) to establish some exploratory concepts. It also extends beyond the data to include and interpret the results of other researches in the same field. It is a device to understand better the factors that have been observed by the researcher in

the course of his study. Further, it provides a theoretical conception which can serve as a guide for further research. Interpretation is considered to be the basic component of the research process because 1) it enables the researcher to understand the principle that works behind his findings and to link up his findings with that of other studies; 2) to establish explanatory concepts that can lead to further studies; and 3) to enable others to appreciate the significance of the research results. However, the value of interpretation depends on a) the abundant availability of sources; b) the condition of the sources; c) the availability and reliability of the witnesses; d) the analysis of evidence in the context of events; e) relevant methodology; and f) disciplinary training of the researcher.¹

An Art

Interpretation is an art. It requires skill, dexterity and imaginative insight on the part of the researcher. It is acquired though patient practice and earned experience. The researcher may also seek guidance from experts in this regard. The techniques of interpretation involves: 1) giving reasonable explanation of the relation of facts with historical understanding; 2) considering extraneous information collected during the study; 3) locating the omissions and commissions in logical argumentation; and 4) weighing all relevant factors affecting the problem before interpreting results.²

Attributes

R.J. Shafer assigns the following attributes to historical interpretation:³ 1) It is digested evidence. That is adequate synthesis of evidence will not be obtained without proper digestion of evidence. 2) Final synthesis is generalization. "All historians practice generalization willy-nilly".⁴ 3) Successful interpretation involves the capacity to judge the quality of other similar interpretations. This will avoid repeating the work that has already been done adequately by others. 4) Interpretation results in emphasis. This refers to the identity or skill devoted to a part of the treatment of the subject. 5) Arrangement or the grouping of evidence is interpretation. Interpretation or judgment promotes communication and understanding. "Certainly there will be little communication if historical evidence is simply printed in sequential blocks of worlds selected by a blindfold man grouping in a bin of notes".⁵ 6) Inference is an important ingredient of interpretation. It is 'informed invention' and a creative process. The researcher "creates attitudes toward facts by the processes of selection and combination and by his ascription of motivation and causation".⁶ It is pointed out that the greater the inference the further

removed the interpretation is from the evidence. This does not mean that the largest possible synthesis should not be attempted.

29.3 PLANNING THE WRITING

The writing of the thesis has to be properly planned and organized. The parts must be fitted into the whole. The ideas are to be arranged in a logical order. The thoughts must be treated in a single unified discourse. Distractions and irrelevancies should be scrupulously avoided. The historical material must be so planned as to ensure unity, coherence and flow. One group of facts should logically follow another. Jumbling of facts will mar the unity of the work. Form must match the content. The sections, the chapters, the paragraphs and the sentences must be properly placed. The organization of the thesis is indeed an art and it must be carefully, imaginatively and patiently planned. Research writing plan is the firm foundation on which the mansion of history is raised.

29.3.1 Chapterisation

The mass of material must be given a form. The form should satisfy the requirements of cogency, coherence and completeness. It must ensure unity of presentation. The data must be suitably divided, sub-divided and distributed. The techniques of doing this is to chapterise the material in hand. The purpose of a chapter is to present a topic clearly and cogently. Each chapter must be a self-contained unit by itself. The chapters must be equally divided as far as possible. One chapter of five pages and another of fifty pages will mar the unity and balance of treatment. Since a chapter is written on a specific topic or idea each chapter must have organic link with the succeeding one. The sections, sub-sections and paragraphs shall have the same organic connection. In short, intelligent interlocking of chapters will render the thesis really valuable.

28.3.2 Paragraphs

The successful paragraph is a joy to writer and reader, says R.J.Shafer.⁷ Each chapter is divided into paragraphs and each paragraph is a micro-level division of ideas, reflecting the organization of the parts. Each paragraph should begin with a topic sentence, clearly stating the subject to be discussed. The following sentences should be relevant to the theme announced in the opening sentence. That is, the sentences must be well connected with the matter immediately at issue. In other words, the meaning of each sentence should flow from that of the preceding sentence. No abrupt changes should be done within paragraphs. Each

paragraph should be concluded with a sentence summarizing its subject-matter. The secret of a successful paragraph construction consists in transitions between paragraphs and between sentences within paragraphs. In short, the paragraphs are the organic branches and twigs of chapters.

28.3.3 Headings and Subheadings

Headings and subheadings in chapters call the attention of the reader to the material presented and to its organization. They give clarity to research writing. Few or no headings and subheadings in a thesis of hundred to three hundred pages make it difficult to find the points of organization of material. It will be difficult to remember the total pattern of the work.

Providing appropriate headings and subheadings has several *advantages*. 1) Even the casual reader can see the topography, curves and contours of the organization of the thesis. 2) A friendly critic can help the writer to repair the damage if any before it is too late. 3) The reader is not led to expect more than the thesis will give. 4) The limitations of the research writing are clearly seen. 5) It forces the researcher himself to stay within the framework of thesis organization. 6) Rewriting will be considerably easier.

29.3.4 The Question of Emphasis

The importance of emphasis in exposition is self-evident. The researcher is confronted with the problem of doing '*proportionate justice*' in the selection and presentation of events, ideas, persons, institutions, trends, dates etc. Since some events, ideas, persons etc. are of greater importance than the rest, the question of highlighting them in regard to their cause as well as consequence assumes importance. The relative importances of the problems are to be decided in order to make the exposition of the subject-matter more effective.⁸

29.3.5 The Writing Style

The personality of the researcher is reflected in his style of writing. The research writing is a communication between the researcher and the reader. Hence, utmost attention should be paid for writing the research report. It should be clear in presentation, easy to read and accurate in statements. The following points must be kept in mind at the time of writing the thesis: 1) *Clear thinking*. Clarity in thinking and clear presentation go together. Hazy thinking will result in poor writing. 2) *Command over language*. The researcher should have a good command and control over his language, meticulous attention should be

paid to clarity, facts and incisiveness rather than embellishment, drama and persuasion. Faulty sentence structure, illogical paragraphing, poor punctuation, incorrect spelling, inapt quotations and other variations of language usage render an otherwise promising manuscript virtually worthless.

Indiscriminate use of technical terms to exhibit profundity or to appear scientific will deprive the thesis of its utility. Technical terms, wherever employed, should be explained and expanded in terms of plain language. Pedantic style which is intelligible to scholars only should be avoided since the fruits of research should reach wider audience. Whatever may be the style of the writer, the thesis must be easily readable, though readability is not an index of scholarship. Depth of research should not be sacrificed at the altar of attractive style.

3. **Brevity.** Brevity is the spice of the thesis and soul of research reporting. Economy of words must be ensured. Concentration of ideas is necessary. Repetition and superfluousness will obstruct the lucidity of presentation and will interface with precision and clarity. 4) **Objectivity.** The research writing must not only be readable but also must be reliable. So, it should be written objectively. Like science it must reveal the truth. It may not be as exact as science but it must be objective. 5) **Short sentences.** A sentence is a set or group of words which makes complete sense. The sentences must be short and sweet. Complex serpentine sentences crammed with jargons will be distractive and dysfunctional. 6) **Avoid colloquialism.** Colloquial or conversational style of writing is inappropriate in research writing. Personal pronouns as I, We, You, Me, My, Our and Us should not appear in the thesis except in quotations. Thesis has no place for personal experience or opinion. It should be a critical analysis of a problem. Scientific impersonality must be maintained throughout the research exposition.

29.3.6 Serialisation

Serialisation is the heart of exposition. Linking up the events is called serialization. Chronology, causation and imagination are the three methods of serializing historical events. The *following are the principles of serialization*: 1) Events may be serialized on the basis of a study of the past and conclusions and generalizations are drawn upon them. 2) The researcher may serialize events by applying to past events data from his own experience. 3) Serialisation may be attempted in accordance with a simple and all embracing formula such as race, environment or geographical determinism. 4) Events may be serialized generalization. In

short, the purpose of serialization is formulation of generalizations. "Its main task is the search for the binding connections among facts which form the ultimate conclusion of every science".⁹

But to draw conclusions from the study of the past events, to build generalizations upon them and to formulate laws of history is the task of the philosopher of history or of the sociologist but not that of an historian. At best, these are for him instruments or tools. They provide a most valuable point of view from which events, common origins, analogous motives can be appreciated.

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