

The Method of History: A Beginner's Guide

The word “history” is often understood to refer to things that happened in the past. The discipline of history, however, does **not** refer to things that happened in the past. Instead, history is a discipline that consists of several methodologies through which historians understand and interpret the events of the past. To interpret the past, we rely on a number of sources. A **primary source** is a source produced during the time period we are studying e.g. a primary source for the Mughal Empire (1526-1857) is the *Baburnama*, which was written by Babur, the founder of the empire. A primary source for the Indian independence movement might be the letters or political speeches of Gandhi. These sources tell us how the people who lived through the events we are studying experienced them. Our goal is to try to see the world through the eyes of people inhabiting an entirely different time; while we know this is never fully possible, our sources allow us to imagine the past on its own terms to a great extent.

Exercise: Imagine that it is 200 years from now and a historian is studying the COVID-19 pandemic. What primary sources would they use to understand our lives?

The facts of history are as important as our interpretation of these facts. For instance, here is a fact: In 1857, a number of North Indians waged an uprising against their British rulers. On its own, this fact tells us very little; all we know is that an uprising took place in which Indians fought against the British. However, history is about how we interpret the causes, consequences, and significance of this event. Some questions historians would ask about the uprising of 1857 would be: What were Indians fighting for? How did the British see the event? Why did Indians of different linguistic, ethnic, and class backgrounds see the event differently? How did Indian parents pass on memories of 1857 to their children?

Exercise: Think of important events that have taken place during the pandemic and the interpretations our future historian from 200 years later is going to give to them.

In order to interpret the past, we also turn to **secondary sources**. A secondary source analyzes primary sources and is often not written during the time we are studying. While a primary source on the 1857 uprising might include the diary of a soldier who took part in it, a letter written by someone who witnessed it, or a statement by Queen Victoria about the uprising, a secondary source would be a textbook, such as those we read in school, or a recent scholarly work about the uprising. A secondary source may have quotes from primary sources and one secondary source may also draw upon another secondary source.

Exercise: If our historian from the future wrote a book about the pandemic of 2020, after reading our social media postings about it, or our newspapers, that book would be a secondary source i.e it would be written by someone who hadn't lived through the event described, but used primary sources to write about it. If you want, you can come up with a title for this book!

We operate under the assumption that all sources are partial. This means that (i) no source can tell a complete story; every source carries a part of a larger story and (ii) the authors of sources are partial to their own point of view. Every author's point of view (including this one's) is shaped by the times in which s/he lives, the ethical dilemmas of the time, and the political events authors might have witnessed. If we understand how our predispositions are

shaped by the times in which we live, just as the predispositions of others were shaped by the times in which they lived, then we can develop a balanced perspective. We can also learn how to study the past with a view to understanding the choices available to those who came before us and to understanding ourselves because we too are a product of history.