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**CAUSATION  
IN  
HISTORY**

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Edited by  
**INDU BANGA**

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## CAUSATION IN HISTORY

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Edited by  
**Indu Banga**

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## Foreword

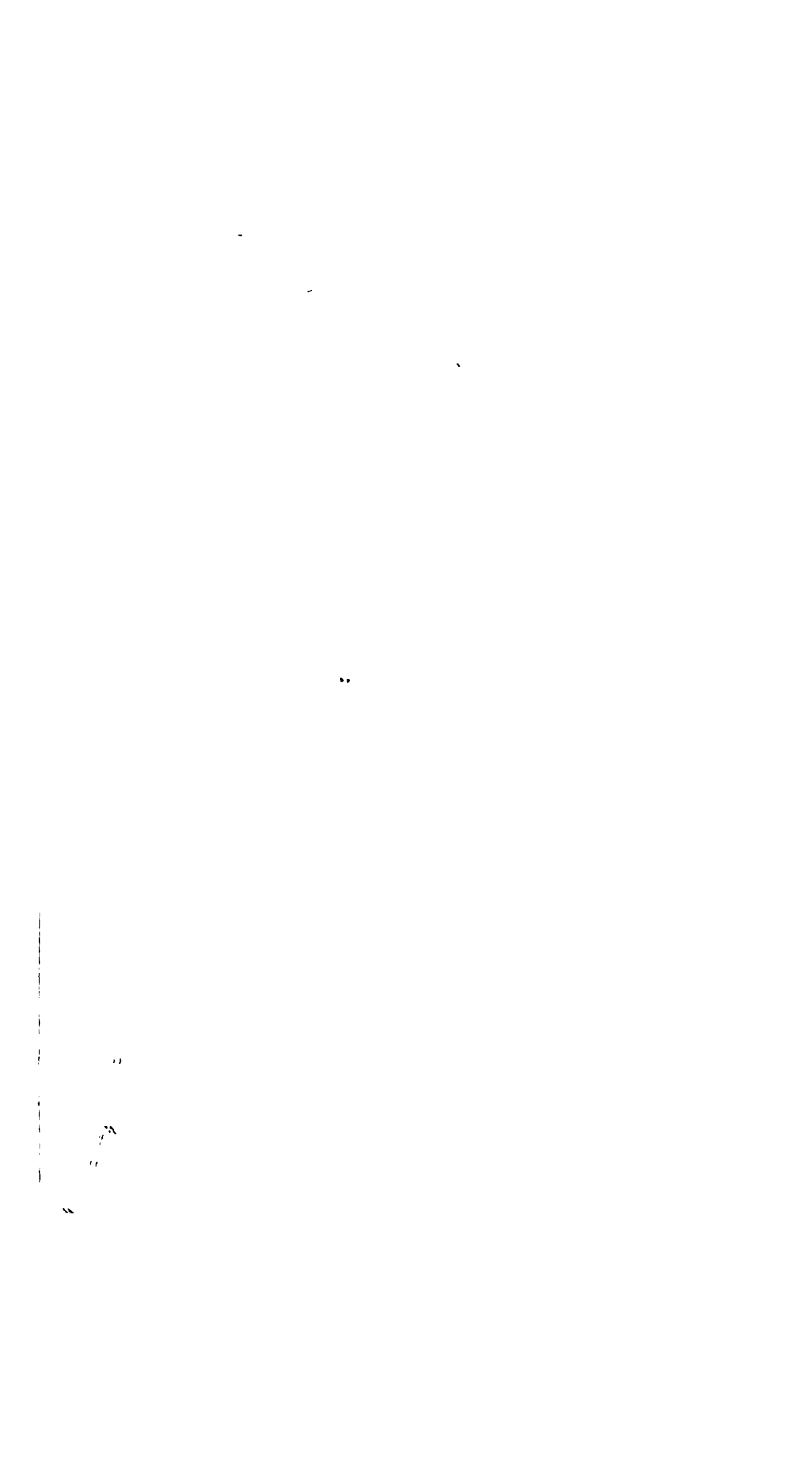
<sup>4</sup> Early in 1990, the Indian Institute of Advanced Study organized a seminar on 'Philosophy of Science' at Cochin in collaboration with the Indian Science Congress. However, the scope of this seminar was not confined to natural and life sciences. In fact, a number of philosophers and social scientists participated in the seminar. Though it was at a rather late stage that the late Professor Sukhamoy Chakravarty suggested that seminar may focus on 'Chance and Determinism', several of the participants agreed to write on this theme.

At the time of preparing the proceedings of the seminar for publication, Professor Indu Banga observed that three papers dealing with the theme of 'causation in history' complemented or supplemented one another in such a way that, if put together, they could form a separate unit with special interest for historians and social scientists. These three papers were reprinted to form this booklet.

I am thankful to Professor Indu Banga as much for editing these papers as for giving the idea of their separate publication and for writing an appropriate preface.

Shimla  
October 4, 1991

J.S. GREWAL  
Director



## Preface

The three essays in this volume reflect on the centrality of causation in history from somewhat differing perspectives. But they converge on what may be regarded as the broad professional consensus on the nature and method of history as an autonomous science.

Accounting for change is as old as history-writing itself. In the essay on 'Cleopatra's Nose' Professor Grewal discusses the concept of causation in relation to the changing worldviews since the ancient times, and with reference to the rise of modern science. The essay brings out how with the changed view of science in the 20th century, the view of history and causation also changed.

The ancient Greek historians invoked a variety of human, institutional and natural causes to explain change. Their conception of causation was linked up with their idea of the usefulness of historical knowledge for the future. Since the 'unknown and the uncontrollable' elements, variously called Fate, Fortune, Destiny or Chance, could not possibly help man in 'dealing with the future', these were seen essentially as 'undeserved calamities'. Accidental happenings acquired some significance in the 16th century paradoxically after the 'discovery' of laws governing the natural world. While Pascal invoked chance or 'Cleopatra's Nose' in support of the belief in Providence, the historians of the Enlightenment invoked it to undermine that belief, and to emphasize the role of general causes. In the 19th century, under the influence of Positivism, which equated the human world with the world of nature and searched for universal laws, philosophers and historians remained pre-occupied with the search for the general causes of historical events and the laws governing the social world. Chance was thus once again relegated to the backstage. It was reinvoked at the turn of the century to register a revolt against Positivism and to rescue history from its deterministic stranglehold.

However, historians did not have to lay the stress on chance for long to assert the autonomy of their discipline vis-a-vis science. Emphasis on history as 'a special form of knowledge' coincided with the changing conceptions of science in the 20th century. In physical sciences nature came to be viewed no longer as something given and distinct but as process undergoing change in interaction with man; scientific knowledge was no longer viewed in absolute but relative terms – relative to the situation, the scientist and historical developments; and the laws of science not as universally valid standards, but as theories and hypotheses opening the way to fresh knowledge. With this built-in provision for progress in scientific knowledge, the physicist's enterprise did not seem too far

apart from the historians'. Their understanding of the past rested on empirical evidence, albeit derived inferentially; their generalizations served as hypotheses for further investigation; and the historical knowledge was both relative and progressive, growing with the discovery of fresh facts and fresh interpretations.

The historians could now have a more rigorous view of causation treating it 'as a tool' essential to explain change. They could now view determinism as simply the belief that everything that happens has a cause or causes, and that all human actions are both free and determined according to the point of view from which they are considered. Likewise, accidental happenings too had causes, but these represented causal sequences which could not be synthesized into generalizations amenable to rational interpretation and application to other times and places. Thus, though not rejected altogether, chance happenings have come to be assigned only a marginal place in historical causation. There is a possibility, however, that because of the inbuilt provision in history for the incorporation of new evidence and new interpretation, the chance coincidences are 'not necessarily condemned to remain irrelevant for all times'.

Professor Ravinder Kumar suggests that to understand the relevance of the concepts of chance and determinism for the historical process, it may be worthwhile to break different sectors of human life broadly into three concrete and related spheres each of which associated with a somewhat distinct form of causation. At the base of the social world lies man's adaptive interaction with nature whose bearing on society can be predicted with reasonable measure of certainty. Much less susceptible to prediction, and yet capable of revealing long term trends, are the enduring structures of society, its political and intellectual life and its economic organization. At the third level of historical causation lie the conscious and unconscious actions of individuals and social groups which are never fully determined by the physical environment or the social circumstances. If the fortuitous play of chance and unpredictability has any place in historical explanation then it is in the realm of thoughts and actions of men in society.

The interplay of the three levels of causation is capable of a fairly rigorous reconstruction of the past. But the historians may differ radically over the nature and precedence of causes invoked by them. There are different and often divergent reconstructions as there are multiple pasts and different ideologies of social action. Yet all of them, even those with a deterministic bias believing in an overall pattern and direction in history, and its predictability, share the basic assumption about the character of the historical process as 'a connected flow of events from the past to the present, held together by a chain of cause and effect across time'.

Notwithstanding the indispensability of social theory for comprehending the historical process, there is a 'creative tension' between history and theory. The

empirical explorations of the past acquire an autonomy of their own capable of transcending the theoretical framework within which they were commenced. The 'historical logic' as distinct from formal logic, draws upon the conscious and unconscious motivations and social behaviour of particular individuals and human communities in a concrete sequence of cause and effect. The 'partial irrationality' of human beings and their aggregates makes it difficult to frame any rigorous laws of social behaviour or predict the future with any certainty. The feedback effect of the growth of knowledge upon the human actor further precludes possibilities of predictions about the future course of human history. The inherent uncertainties in the 'historical logic' and its empirical matrix thus have the potential for the creation of new social theory through the replacement of an existing generalization by a more fruitful one.

While underlining the centrality of causation for the philosophy and methodology of history, the third essay argues that the historians generally use the word 'cause' for 'any one of a number of antecedents identified to explain the consequent and separated from it by a temporal interval, howsoever slight'. The historians proceed by simplifying causes in terms of their relative bearing on the consequent. They take into account all kinds of relevant antecedents, neither material nor cultural factors alone making much sense to them. They seek to identify multiple 'causal chains' from different sectors of life, and with differential regress in the past. They look for spatio-temporal continuity, that is, the cause continuing into the effect and the effect becoming cause.

Causal analysis rests on theory in the sense of 'a set of logically coherent propositions' with a suggestive potential'. A conscious use of theory 'as an analytical tool' enables the historians to fruitfully employ the insights, concepts and techniques of the other human sciences which also suggests new questions and opens up new avenues of research. In this 'constructive orientation to the allied sciences' they see no threat to the autonomy and the distinctive empirical character of history.

Finally, all perceptions of causality rest on the historian's value preferences embedded in his existential situation and informed by his outlook on the future. 'Value-orientation' not only influences the selection and the ordering of antecedents, it also imparts depth and a sense of reality to historical reconstruction. 'Unless a historian wishes his work to be still-born, his causal explanations have some relevance to the contemporary society and its problems and goals'.



# Cleopatra's Nose

J.S. GREWAL

## I

In the second decade of the present century, J.B. Bury published an essay called *Cleopatra's Nose* in which he developed the argument that history, unlike science, is governed by the fortuitous 'collision of two or more independent chains of causes' and not by causal sequences which form the subject-matter of science. He had argued some years earlier in an essay on *Darwinism and History* that historical events cannot be explained in terms of general 'laws because the 'chapter of accidents' and 'chance coincidence' entered into historical processes as a disturbing element.<sup>1</sup> Thus, Bury turned to Cleopatra's nose in a revolt against the prevalent dominance of positivism which insisted on the equation of the human world with the world of nature and searched for universal laws governing the human world.

Cleopatra's nose had originally figured in Pascal's *Pensees* published in the early 17th century. 'Cleopatra's nose', he said, 'if it had been shorter, the whole face of the earth would have been different'. He was trying to underline human frivolity and its consequences. Infatuation arose from I-know-not-what but its effects were terrible: 'This *I know not what*, so small a thing that we cannot recognize it, shakes a whole country, princes, armies, and everything'.<sup>2</sup> Pascal goes on to talk of chance as well. Pilate sent Jesus to Herod only because the Jewish mob gathered before Pilate to accuse Jesus Christ uttered 'by chance' the word Galilee. This 'chance utterance' became the cause of the fulfilment of the mystery that Jesus would be judged by both the Jews and the Gentiles. Again, 'Cromwell was about to ravage the whole of Christendom; the royal family had been brought down, and his own would have been established for ever but for a small grain of sand that formed in his bladder. Rome itself would have trembled beneath him, but once that little gravel was there, he died, his family fell from power, peace reigned, and the king was restored'.<sup>3</sup>

However, Pascal was not concerned with the discipline of history. Writing in defence of Christianity, he attached importance to the role of chance in human affairs in order to defend the doctrine of Providence by implication. The rise of new science, particularly its formulation by Descartes, which was reinforced by Newtonian laws, appeared to pose a serious threat to belief in Providence. As Pascal himself says, he could not forgive Descartes: 'He would gladly have left

<sup>1</sup> R.G. Collingwood and E.H. Carr have taken notice of these essays: *The Idea of History*, Oxford University Press, London 1967 (reprint), p. 149; and *What is History?*, Pelican, 1977 (reprint), p. 100, respectively.

<sup>2</sup> Blaise Pascal, *The Pensees* (tr. J.M. Cohen), Penguin, 1961, p. 78.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 90.



God out of his whole philosophy. But he could not help making Him give one flip to set the world in motion. After that he had no more use for God'.<sup>4</sup>

Descartes did claim that he had discerned 'certain laws' which were 'being strictly observed in everything that is, or that happens in the world'.<sup>5</sup> It did hardly matter that these laws were established by God who also planted the notions of these laws firmly in the minds of men, because the world was governed by laws and not by Providence. The human body as well as the world of nature appeared to work like a machine, and the laws of nature appeared to be identical with 'the laws of mechanics'.<sup>6</sup> Descartes' conception of mechanical laws, carried to its logical conclusion, undermined the notion of chance as well as the belief in Providence. A mechanistic view of the world was *ipso facto* deterministic.

## II

Chance and determinism were not altogether new ideas in the early 17th century, but they were acquiring new significance in the contexts of the changing worldview. For a proper appreciation of this change we may turn briefly to the ancient historians whose thought, as mediated through the Renaissance, was familiar to most of the educated individuals in Europe during the 16th century. In fact, both Pascal and Descartes were in revolt against the authority of the ancients.

Herodotus, the universally acknowledged father of historiography, was acutely conscious of change in human affairs. Human life was 'like a revolving wheel'.<sup>7</sup> Cities, like individuals, witnessed changes in their fortunes: some of the great cities of the past had become small and some of the small towns had grown into big cities.<sup>8</sup> If nobody remained prosperous for long and no city continued long in prosperity, it was because 'the gods are jealous of success'.<sup>9</sup> It was not in human power 'to avert what is destined to be'.<sup>10</sup> At another level, even the gods could not 'escape destiny'.<sup>11</sup> The gods intervened in human affairs because of envy and righteous anger, through oracles, portents and dreams, but they had only a limited role to play.<sup>12</sup> Herodotus gives considerable importance to human and natural elements. Not only individuals but a whole people im-

<sup>4</sup> Ibid, p. 82.

<sup>5</sup> Descartes, *Discourse on Method and Other Writings* (tr. Arthur Wollastan), Penguin 1960, p. 68.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, pp. 78 & 79.

<sup>7</sup> Herodotus, *The Histories* (tr. Arbrey de Selincourt), Penguin 1955, p. 97.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, p. 15.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, p. 191.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, p. 202.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, p. 50.

<sup>12</sup> J.B. Bury, *The Ancient Greek Historians*, Dover Publications, New York 1958 (reprint), p. 46.

proved or deteriorated in terms of moral qualities.<sup>13</sup> The physical environment was sometimes seen by Herodotus as affecting human traits. Soft countries produced soft men: 'It is not the property of any soil to produce fine fruits and good soldiers too'.<sup>14</sup>

Thucydides, the second best known Greek historian, dwelt on the natural and human elements even more than Herodotus to explain historical change.<sup>15</sup> The plague, for instance, had a great effect on the attitudes of men. Not knowing what was to become of them, men became utterly careless of everything, whether sacred or profane. There was no fear of gods, and there was no thought for the law. Concern for honour and welfare yielded place to pursuit of the pleasure of the moment.<sup>16</sup> Earthquakes and oracles, like the plague, affected men's minds. An earthquake at Delos, the first in Greek memory, was thought to be ominous of events to come. Predictions and oracles, which were being chanted in all cities, were not allowed to pass without remark.<sup>17</sup> Thucydides was not unaware of what may be called impersonal causes. In his considered view, the real cause of the Peloponnesian war was never explicitly stated: it was the growth of Athenian power which inspired alarm and induced its enemies to react.<sup>18</sup> The Athenian power declined primarily because of human mismanagement. Chance became important only in the context of this mismanagement.<sup>19</sup> Thucydides recognized the operation of the unknown in human affairs, but not of things occult. Even the unknown was reduced to its minimum significance in his explanation of historical change.<sup>20</sup> His references to 'the hand of Heaven' and the 'freaks of chance' appear to refer to either the unknown or the incalculable.<sup>21</sup>

Polybius, by far the most philosophic of the ancient historians, talks of 'the workings of Fortune' in its 'envious dealing with Mankind'; 'her empire is most absolute over just those oases in human life in which the victim fancies his sojourn to be most delectable and most secure'.<sup>22</sup> Nonetheless, Polybius finds fault with writers who ascribe public calamities or private misfortunes to Fate.<sup>23</sup> He suggests that the term 'misfortune' should be used only for undeserved calamities: the acts of folly which bring odium upon their authors should be termed 'disaster'.<sup>24</sup> Commonwealths disintegrated due both to external and in-

<sup>13</sup> Herodotus, *The Histories*, p. 562.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 599.

<sup>15</sup> J.B. Bury, *The Ancient Greek Historians*, p. 129.

<sup>16</sup> Thucydides, *The Complete Writings of Thucydides: The Peloponnesian War* (tr. John H. Finley, Jr), The Modern Library, New York 1951, p. 113; and Arnold J. Toynbee, *Greek Historical Thought from Homer to the Age of Heraclius*, J.M. Dent & Sons, London 1950 (reprint), p. 198.

<sup>17</sup> Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*, p. 88.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>19</sup> J.B. Bury, *The Ancient Greek Historians*, p. 124-5.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 129-30.

<sup>21</sup> Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*, pp. 48 & 119.

<sup>22</sup> Arnold J. Toynbee, *Greek Historical Thought*, p. 248.

<sup>23</sup> J.B. Bury, *The Ancient Greek Historians*, pp. 201-2.

<sup>24</sup> Arnold J. Toynbee, *Greek Historical Thought*, p. 246.

ternal causes, and the latter obeyed fixed laws.<sup>25</sup> Whether normal or apparently abnormal, nothing can be brought about 'without a cause'.<sup>26</sup> Polybius also makes a distinction between 'the occasion and the cause'.<sup>27</sup> He looked upon the success of the Romans as naturally arising from their political ambition combined with their training and discipline.<sup>28</sup> Believing in the eminent significance of the individual in history, Polybius recognized the importance of group characteristics moulded by climate and social and political institutions.<sup>29</sup>

Polybius was not quite alone among the ancient historians to bring in climate or political institutions. Hippocrates postulated that in the majority of cases 'you will find that human body and character vary in accordance with the nature of the country'.<sup>30</sup> He ascribed the differences among Asian peoples to climatic variations.<sup>31</sup> Political institutions too affected human motivation and attitudes: people under despotic rule do not try to improve themselves militarily because they know they are not playing 'for equal stakes'.<sup>32</sup> Another historian looked upon the mastery of the sea as the unique advantage of the Athenians.<sup>33</sup> For Diodorus, peace and prosperity accounted for the rise of great artists, philosophers, orators and men of action in Athens.<sup>34</sup>

Polybius, however, underlined the importance of causation more than any other ancient historian. Instead of giving merely a bald narrative of events, the historian should concentrate on their 'antecedents, concomitants and consequences': 'If you abstract from history the "why" and the "how" and the "wherefore" of a particular transaction and the rationality or the reverse of its result, what is left of her ceases to be a science and becomes *tour de force*, which may give momentary pleasure, but is of no assistance whatever for dealing with the future'.<sup>35</sup> Here, concern for causality appears to be linked up with the value or the use of historical knowledge. In a sense, Polybius brings causation to the centre of historical inquiry, for only the rationally understood past is useful for the future.<sup>36</sup>

The foregoing paragraphs clearly show that the ancient historians, on the whole, show considerable concern for historical change and invoke a number of elements to account for it. The most important elements relate to human beings themselves, their aspirations, and their strengths and weaknesses. Interaction with physical environment is brought into account for certain observed

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, pp. 117-8.

<sup>26</sup> J. B. Bury, *The Ancient Greek Historians*, p. 202.

<sup>27</sup> Arnold J. Toynbee, *Greek Historical Thought*, p. 171.

<sup>28</sup> J.B. Bury, *The Ancient Greek Historians*, p. 203.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, p. 212.

<sup>30</sup> Arnold J. Toynbee, *Greek Historical Thought*, p. 168.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, p. 166.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, p. 165.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, pp. 190-1. Presumed to be an anonymous work of c. 460-410 B.C.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, pp. 189-90.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid, p. 154.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, p. 153.

phenomena, and political and social institutions are seen as relevant for historical explanation. It is significant to note that the unknown and the uncontrollable elements figure in their accounts of historical change as Fate, Fortune and Destiny or as Chance. There is, nevertheless, a certain degree of sophistication in their conception of historical causation. What is more to the point, there is no notion of natural laws governing human affairs: nor does Cleopatra's nose produce any devastating effects.

### III

'If we ask what was the most original, and in the long run the most influential new intellectual development of the early modern period in Europe, it is difficult, even considering the rival claims of new forces in religion, literature and art, and allowing for medieval origins or anticipations, to deny that the answer must be the rise of modern science'.<sup>37</sup> Its discoveries and inventions had begun to impress the discerning individuals already before the close of the 16th century. The new inventions of printing, gun-powder and the mariner's compass brought about radical change, according to Bacon, 'first in literature, then in warfare, and lastly in navigation'. He asserted, in fact, that 'no empire, sect, or star appears to have exercised a greater power of influence on human affairs than these mechanical inventions'.<sup>38</sup> The historian Jean Bodin added to these inventions the advances made in geography, astronomy, industry and commerce, and suggested that the whole world had become as it were a single state.<sup>39</sup>

If scientific inventions began to impinge upon human life, scientific thought began to impinge upon men's thinking about the human world which came to be regarded as 'natural', a product of history. Empirical interest in the facts of the natural world was followed by empirical interest in the facts of history. As much as the rise of new social sciences like economics, sociology and psychology, the rise of modern historical writing is unthinkable without the rise of modern science. Furthermore, questions began to be asked whether or not laws governing the social world could be discovered to be used for social reconstruction.

The nature of the impact of scientific thought on thinking about the human world may be illustrated with reference to Jeremy Bentham, the precursor of John Stuart Mill in formulating utilitarianism. Bentham believed that natural science had witnessed its Bacon, the protagonist of empirical observation, and also its Newton, the discoverer of the laws of motion. However the human world had witnessed only its Bacon, in Helvetius; Bentham himself aspired to be

<sup>37</sup> Alfred Cobban, *In Search of Humanity: The Role of the Enlightenment in Modern History*, Jonathan Cape, London 1960, p. 29.

<sup>38</sup> Quoted in J.B. Bury, *The Idea of Progress*, Dover Publications, New York 1955 (reprint), p. 54.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 40-1.

its Newton. The 'law' that he discovered was the grand principle of pleasure and pain, which explained social developments of the past and promised to ensure the greatest happiness of the greatest number in future through state action primarily in the spheres of legislation and education. In utilitarianism, incidentally, we see ethics being divorced from theology as a part of the process of secularization of life and thought under the impact, essentially, of modern science.

This impact became visible in historical thinking as well. Emanuel Kant, for instance, was looking for Keplers and Newtons in the field of history. He postulates the idea that the plans of nature are to the historian what laws of nature are to the scientist. If a Kepler could detect a plan in human history, a Newton could explain its necessity. Kant himself thought that the purpose of nature in creating man was the development of moral freedom, and the course of human history could be conceived as the working out of this development. History for Kant became progress towards rationality, even though its motivating force was human irrationality. Nature desires discord to fulfil its purpose in spite of man's desire for concord. Nature compels man to leave ease and throw himself into 'toils and labours' so as to discover the means 'to rise above them'.<sup>40</sup> Not long after Kant, Hegel published his better known *Philosophy of History* in which movement towards freedom is ensured by 'the cunning of reason' through historical developments which take place not accidentally but of necessity. Marx claimed to have discovered 'the economic law of motion of modern society' Auguste Comte claimed to found a new science called sociology which was meant to discover causal connections between historical facts in order to formulate laws of society analogous to the laws of nature. Many a historian and a philosopher remained busy in discovering the causes of historical events and the laws which governed them, whether metaphysical, mechanical, biological, psychological or economic.<sup>41</sup> All such 'philosophies' tended to be more or less deterministic in their conception of historical change.

What happened to Cleopatra's nose in this process? Paradoxically, the historians of the Enlightenment which was aimed at secularizing human life and thought, are believed to have given respectability to chance or accident in their explanations of historical change. It has been observed that Voltaire became increasingly obsessed with the role of chance in history and the dominance of petty causes, 'what has been called the Cleopatra's nose theory of history'.<sup>42</sup> Even the greatest of the Enlightenment historians, Edward Gibbon, could observe that 'an acrimonious humour falling on a single fibre of one man may prevent or suspend the misery of nations'.<sup>43</sup> It is significant to note, however that whereas Pascal invoked Cleopatra's nose or chance in support of the belief in Providence, the historians of the Enlightenment invoked chance to under

<sup>40</sup> Quoted in R.G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, p. 101.

<sup>41</sup> E.H. Carr, *What is History?*, p. 88.

<sup>42</sup> Alfred Cobban, *In Search of Humanity*, p. 110.

<sup>43</sup> Quoted in E.H. Carr, *What is History?*, p. 98.

mine that belief. They tried to account for historical change entirely in rational, natural and human terms. More typical than Voltaire and Gibbon in this regard was Montesquieu who believed that if a particular cause, like the accidental result of a battle, ruined a state, there was a general cause 'which made the downfall of this state ensue from a single battle'.<sup>44</sup>

Marx recognized the occurrence of chance in history, especially in relation to the character of individuals, but did not attach much importance to it. 'This chance itself naturally becomes part of the general trend of development and is compensated by other forms of chance. But acceleration and retardation depend on such 'accidentals', which include the 'chance' character of the individuals who are at the head of a movement at the outset'.<sup>45</sup> By subscribing to any law or laws of social development, and even by equating the human world with the natural, historians and philosophers became less and less inclined to attach any importance to chance. J.B. Bury, notwithstanding his partial revolt against positivism, expressed his well considered view that the unattainable ideal of historical research was 'to explain fully the whole development of human civilization. This is as much a scientific problem as to trace the history of the solar system or of animal life on the earth, though natural and historical sciences deal with very different kinds of data, and employ different methods'.<sup>46</sup> In such a scientific project there could hardly be any role for chance.

#### IV

To ignore Cleopatra's nose is not to explain its existence, or its place in historical causation. This problem could be taken up only in the 20th century when outlook on both science and history changed in significant ways.

According to R.G. Collingwood, historical knowledge began to obtrude on the consciousness of philosophers during the 19th century. To the dominant forms of knowledge in ancient Greece and Rome, medieval Europe, and modern Europe, which respectively were mathematics, theology and science, was now added the fourth: the historical knowledge. The philosophy of history for Collingwood, therefore, was not merely critical or scientific history from which all credulity was banished, as it was for Voltaire; it was not universal or world history as a single process, as it was for Hegel; nor was it the discovery of general laws which were supposed to govern the course of historical events. The philosophy of history for Collingwood came to mean philosophic inquiry into the nature of history as a special form of knowledge.<sup>47</sup> The uniqueness of historical knowledge appeared to spring from the uniqueness of its subject-matter and method. Several other historians and philosophers have given their own expositions of what is history, and a whole range of what Collingwood calls the

<sup>44</sup> Ibid, p. 101.

<sup>45</sup> Loc. cit.

<sup>46</sup> J.B. Bury, *The Ancient Greek Historians*, p. 258.

<sup>47</sup> R.G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, pp. 1-17.

second-order history has come into currency, bringing the problems of historical method and epistemology into much sharper focus.

Our understanding of the matter in the world of nature has undergone a radical change. The Greek thinkers traced the regularity and orderliness in nature to the presence of mind in nature. In the Renaissance view of nature, the Christian belief in a creative and omnipotent God was combined with human experience of designing a machine. On this view, the regularity and orderliness of nature was due to an intelligence outside nature: the matter was devoid of life as well as intelligence. The emergence of biology during the 19th century as a science in its own right raised doubts about the view of nature formed by the physicists. Subsequently, the electronic theory of valency dissolved the old theory of matter, assimilating the chemical properties of matter to the vital qualities of an organism, or even to the moral qualities of a mind. In any case, matter became essentially process or activity. As Collingwood puts it, matter is what it is because it does what it does; its being what it is is the same thing as its doing what it does. Therefore, 'matter is no longer contrasted with mind and life as a realm in which being is independent of acting and logically prior to it, it resembles them as a third realm in which being is at bottom simply acting'.<sup>48</sup>

Furthermore, the conceptions of absolute rest and absolute motion have been replaced by conceptions of relative rest and relative motion. The physicist has now become concerned with one thing's situation or size relatively to another. Far from the past fact being a fact of nature, a scientific fact becomes an event in the world of nature and, therefore, a class of 'historical facts'.<sup>49</sup> Modern cosmology, thus, has come to be based on the analogy between the processes of the natural world as studied by natural scientists and the vicissitudes of human affairs as studied by historians. The centre of their pictures of the natural and the human worlds is occupied by the conception of process, change, development, evolution.

The third important development which has taken place in the 20th century is a new outlook on the status of scientific laws and theories. If the theory of relativity does much more than what the classical theory of gravitation did, besides doing also what the latter did, the progressive character of scientific knowledge is clearly demonstrated. By the same token, however, the relativity of scientific knowledge also becomes evident. It is no longer possible, therefore, to talk of universal, immutable laws which govern the natural world. It is necessary to talk of hypotheses which explain the observed facts and are liable to be modified in the light of fresh empirical data. It is possible to state that a scientist obtains evidence for principles by appealing to empirical material, and he interprets empirical material on the basis of principles. Discoveries are made and fresh knowledge is acquired not by establishing precise and comprehensive laws

<sup>48</sup> R.G. Collingwood, *The Idea of Nature*, Oxford University Press, London 1957 (reprint), p. 148; also pp. 3, 5, 8, 9, 10, 13, 133, & 147.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 152, 153, 176 & 177.

but by enunciating hypotheses which open the way to fresh knowledge. If the historians have abandoned the search for laws governing the human world, the scientists have begun to look upon the role of laws and theories in a different light.

Paradoxically, the historian's search for autonomy for his discipline has brought out the broad similarity as well as the difference between his activity and that of the natural scientist or the biologist. The historian does not directly observe the phenomenon he studies, but he does go by evidence that can be examined in the present. Consequently, his evidence like that of the scientist is empirical though his knowledge of the past is inferential. The historian makes use of generalizations in his interpretation of the past, and his interpretation is liable to be modified in the light of fresh empirical evidence. Thus, on the whole, the historian goes about his craft with the counterparts of the scientist's 'observation', 'hypothesis', and 'verification'. Historical knowledge, consequently, is progressive and, therefore, relative. It is not useless either. 'The knowledge, the detailed knowledge of the past cannot, of course, lead us, historians, to an infallible prediction of what will take place tomorrow or the day after, but it can and must serve to a better understanding of *the present*. And a good understanding of the present is one of the best guarantees of a wise treatment of this present with a view to the things which the future will bring us'.<sup>50</sup>

## V

Finally, to place chance in the framework of historical explanation we may relate it to the historians' understanding of causation and determinism in the 20th century.

The modern historians differ from their less sophisticated predecessors in being much more conscious of the number and variety of the *dramatis personae* as well as the social dimension of action.<sup>51</sup> They use causal relationship 'as a tool of historical knowledge', to understand change in history.<sup>52</sup> In historical reasoning, the most constant and general antecedents remain merely implicit. More specific antecedents, if they have a certain permanence, form what is conveniently called 'the conditions'. The most specific, the one which somehow represents the differentiating element in the compound of generative elements, is accorded the name of 'cause'.<sup>53</sup> The specific causes are seen in their interrelationships with 'the deeper forces' or the relatively more stable antecedents like the influence of ideas, religious beliefs, social institutions, economic factors,

<sup>50</sup> G.J. Renier, *History its Purpose and Method*, George Allen & Unwin, London 1961 (reprint), p. 225.

<sup>51</sup> W.H. Walsh, *An Introduction to Philosophy of History*, Hutchinson & Co, London 1984 (reprint), pp. 202-4.

<sup>52</sup> Marc Bloch, *The Historian's Craft*, Manchester University Press, Manchester 1954, p. 190.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 191-2.



technological developments, and, above all, the physical environment.<sup>54</sup> Overrating any single social force or giving undue importance to the immediate cause or exaggerating the individual motivation not only seriously misrepresents the problem of causes, it also fails to explain the course of events. Thus, while dealing in a multiplicity of causes, the historian also tries to establish some hierarchy of causes because every historical explanation revolves round the question of priority of causes. The causes determine the historian's interpretation of the historical process, and his interpretation determines his selection and marshalling of the causes.<sup>55</sup> In fact, different interpretations may represent different kinds of causal explanations.

To attach greater importance to causation and less and less to chance does not imply that the historians think more and more in deterministic terms. Notwithstanding the philosophical import of the deterministic thesis as a 'general regulative principle' aiding 'objective enquiry into the various conditions determining the existence of human traits and actions',<sup>56</sup> to the historian 'determinism' is the belief that everything that happens has a cause or causes, and could not have happened differently unless something in the cause or causes had also been different. All human actions are both free and determined according to the point of view from which we consider them. Historians do not assume that events are inevitable before they have taken place. Out of the alternatives open to the actors, the historians try to understand why a specific choice was actually made. There can be no incompatibility between the axiomatic free will of the individual and 'determinism' unless we choose to treat voluntary actions as causeless.<sup>57</sup>

The more serious the view of causation, the less important becomes the role of chance: 'If a kingdom can collapse because of a missing nail, the state of the kingdom and not the history of the nail should engage the historian's attention'.<sup>58</sup> On this view, chance or accident is not a total absence of causal relationship or a happening which is merely unpredictable or incomprehensible. 'Accidents' and 'chance coincidences' do occur: 'It is unnecessarily discourteous to Cleopatra's beauty that Antony's infatuation had no cause'.<sup>59</sup> Nor is it satisfactory to assume that accidents cancel out one another so that their effect on the course of history remains marginal. The chance in history represents a sequence of cause and effect which clashes with the sequence which the historian is primarily concerned to investigate. The 'accidental' sequence does not belong

<sup>54</sup> Carl G. Gustavson, *A Preface to History*, McGraw Hill Book Company, New York 1955, p. 62.

<sup>55</sup> See E.H. Carr, *What is History?*, pp. 87-108.

<sup>56</sup> Ernest Nagel, *The Structure of Science : Problems in the Logic of Scientific Explanation*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London 1961, pp. 605-6.

<sup>57</sup> E.H. Carr, *What is History?*, pp. 91-8.

<sup>58</sup> Louis Gottschalk, *Understanding History*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York 1969 (2nd edn.), p. 223.

<sup>59</sup> E.H. Carr, *What is History?*, pp. 98-9.

to the historian's hierarchy of significant causes: it does not enter into any rational interpretation of history. The accidental sequence is rejected not because it is not a sequence of cause and effect, but because it is insignificant and, therefore, irrelevant. 'The historian can do nothing with it; is not amenable to rational interpretation, and has no meaning either for the past or the present'.<sup>60</sup> Rational causes lead to fruitful generalizations: accidental causes cannot be generalized. The dual and reciprocal function of history is to promote our understanding of the past in the light of the present and of the present in the light of the past. 'Anything which, like Antony's infatuation with Cleopatra's nose, fails to contribute to this dual purpose is from the point of view of the historian dead and barren'.<sup>61</sup>

## VI

In the light of this brief account of the treatment of historical causation with special reference to chance, it may be suggested that the views which historians, philosophers and scientists form of causation are intimately linked up with their worldviews. The ancient Greeks felt concerned with causes but without subjecting historical change to rigorous analysis. On the whole, they brought in human, natural and institutional elements to account for historical change. However, they did not eliminate altogether the idea of external interference in human affairs. Consequently, they saw in historical change not only the unknown or the incalculable but also something inscrutable. Human affairs, somehow, did not appear to them to be a 'natural' phenomenon. It is in this context that they refer to Fate, Fortune, Destiny or Chance.

The problem of chance versus determinism was more seriously raised by European thinkers during the 17th century under the impact of, or in reaction to, the rise of modern science and technology. For two hundred years then, chance was losing ground to deterministic ideas, slowly but surely. Chance increasingly went un-noticed, or it was ignored. No serious attempt was made, therefore, to understand its status in relation to causation.

Only in the 20th century the problem has been confronted seriously. The existence or occurrence of chance is recognized, and its causal character is not denied. However, it does not enter into historical explanation because of its irrelevance or insignificance for the purpose. What is important to note in this connection is the implication that a causal sequence that is regarded as irrelevant today is not necessarily condemned to remain irrelevant for all times. On this view, there is no need to be discourteous to Cleopatra, much less to consign her to everlasting oblivion. But she is bound to hover on the periphery of historical explanation.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid, p. 105.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid, p. 108.

# Chance and Determinism in History

RAVINDER KUMAR

The nature of the historical process, as it relates to 'chance' and 'determinism' in shaping the history of humankind, is a subject of perennial debate among philosophers of history no less than among historians themselves. Were the epochal events of history – the overthrow of Carthage by Rome, or the repulsion of Arab invasions by the Franks in the early medieval centuries, or the discovery of America by Columbus, or coming nearer our own times, the vivisection of British India into India and Pakistan – inevitable? Or did they flow from a fortuitous combination of factors whose location in different configurations would have led to wholly different consequences? Such questions can, in turn, be resolved into more manageable yet equally significant questions. If the course of events as they actually transpire is inevitable, then what are the underlying factors responsible for such a state of affairs? As is well known, there is among historians and philosophers a considerable difference of opinion on such questions. Scholars influenced by idealistic social theory dwell upon one set of motivations as the determinants of social events; while others, drawing upon materialist theories, turn to an entirely different matrix of causation. Needless to say, both these schools of thought, namely, the idealists and the materialists, differ fundamentally from those scholars who turn to fortuitous factors as the basis of the historical process.

In this essay, I propose to look upon the concepts of chance and determinism as they shape the historical process. It would perhaps be legitimate to suggest that the critique emerging from such an exploration would apply equally to the social sciences as a whole; for history is a discipline which has an empirical orientation, on the one hand, and a reflective content, on the other. I further believe that any attempt to answer the questions which triggered off this exploration will inevitably lead one to ask questions about the basic character of the discipline under consideration. It is, in this context, valid to suggest that the historian is primarily interested in the construction and reconstruction of the past. This seems a trite if not a banal definition. Yet such a definition of history would appeal to all scholars as a basic definition, irrespective of their attachment to different social theories.

Given our definition of history as a discipline involved in the reconstruction of the past, it should be possible to pose a series of questions whose answers may help locate the place of chance and determinism in the historical process. What is this past that the historian is seeking to reconstruct? What, moreover, is the nature of the historical process? How are historical and philosophical reflection related to each other? Is there any connection between chance and determinism – the two concepts around which this essay is drawn – and the notion of praxis, which refers to the role of conscious human action in the shaping of his-

tory? Through dwelling on these questions we may throw some light upon the role which chance and determinism play in shaping human history.

## I

If the historian is above all seeking to reconstruct the past of a society, then it is appropriate to dwell a little upon what we mean by such reconstruction. It is widely believed that historians can reconstruct the past of a society in a number of ways. Moreover, the differences between such divergent reconstructions of the past are not uniform in their character and implications. Some of these perceptions can be aggregated to provide an overview of the past which is more comprehensive than the constituents on which it rests. Wherever this is possible, it can be safely inferred that these constituents rest upon a common discourse. At the same time, there are reconstructions of the past which we derived from altogether different discourses; and are for that reason incapable of being integrated into a deeper comprehension of the historical process. Indeed, histories resting upon different discourses have radically different implications for the present and for the future.

Let me, at this juncture, illustrate what is being suggested here. The discipline of history, as it stands today, crystallized in the liberal climate of the European system of Nation-States, in the first half of the 19th century.<sup>1</sup> This, of course, is not to assert that history does not have a pre-history to its modern form and content. Nevertheless, the discipline of history also crystallized in an era in which the intellectual dominance of the natural sciences stimulated in the humanist a desire to achieve, in his own domain, the rigour of understanding which the natural sciences believed (erroneously, as it turned out later) they had acquired. Such intellectual considerations dominated historical writing in the West and in India till very recently.<sup>2</sup>

Over the past few decades, however, the liberal mode of historical reconstruction, which was active for more than a century in exploring the past of humankind, has widened as well as deepened its conceptual horizons. This has largely come about through relevant growth in social theory; as it has also come about through a sharpening of the analytical tools and the hermeneutic devices available to the historian. The liberal historian of our times seeks to ask questions on a much wider range of issues than he had done hitherto. He simultaneously reaches out to a growing mass of social theory to undergird his efforts. All this has resulted in the proliferation of specialized history: like economic history; or agrarian history; or working class history; or women's history, to mention only the most prominent species of specialized history.

The insights provided by such segmented explorations are in most cases capable of being drawn into a factually rich and analytically sensitive under-

<sup>1</sup> See G.P. Gooch, *History and Historians in the Nineteenth Century*, London 1967, pp. 77-122.

<sup>2</sup> The influence of positivism on the 19th century pioneers of history is very well brought out by Peter Geyl in his book, *Debates With Historians*, London 1970. Also see in this connection, W.H. McWell, *Essays in the Liberal Interpretation of History*, Chicago 1967, particularly Lord Acton's 'Letter to Contributors to the Cambridge Modern History' in this volume.

standing of the past. Hence the assertion made earlier in this essay, that those pasts of a society, which lie ensconced in a common discourse, are capable of being drawn into an overarching historiography of great richness. Indeed, this relationship between general history and specialized history highlights the incremental increases in the state of our knowledge about the past of humanity.

Nevertheless, when we dwell upon the possibility of drawing the multiple pasts of a society into an overarching historical understanding, then it is also necessary to remember that there exist perceptions of the past which cannot be drawn into such an understanding. We need not go beyond the social and intellectual history of India to illustrate this proposition. In the cultural texts of Indian civilization, sacred or profane, the past is reflected in a manner altogether different from the manner in which it is reflected in the texts created by the liberal societies of Europe. To start with, time, as perceived in Indian texts, is not strung along a linear and calibrated axis, marking out one event from another. Instead, such texts either reflect a circular notion of time; or they reflect a notion of time which is fuzzy when it touches upon happenings in the remote past. Within such a discourse, moreover, past events are recorded in a symbolic language which can be decoded by modern social theory; yet cannot be fully drawn into perceptions of the past flowing out of the liberal worldview.

A few more observations about the multiple pasts of a society are appropriate here. What is the significance of these diverse pasts, some of which are lodged in a single discursive system, while others belong to different worlds of discourse? This is a question to which there is no simple answer. However, even in a brief essay it would be valid to focus upon the phenomenon of multiple pasts in order to tease out its ideological implications. The reconstruction of the past, it is often observed, has nothing to do with the actual past of a society. Indeed, nobody knows better than the historian how dead is the past of an individual, or a national community, or a civilization. The real value of such historical reconstruction lies in the present; since the reconstruction is available as a resource for stimulating social and political action in a specific direction. Hence, the belief that all history is contemporary history. Furthermore, it should be clear that different historical interpretations of the past are in fact the basis of different ideologies and systems of social action. Such interpretations, therefore, provide the basis of different reconstructions of society in the future.<sup>3</sup>

## II

While dwelling upon the theme of historical reconstruction, we have on more than one occasion also touched upon the character of the historical process. The very use of the term process, in this context, refers to a connected flow of events, from the past to the present, held together by a chain of cause and effect across time. However, the precise linkage between events to generate the flow of

<sup>3</sup> See Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (tr. A.M. Sheridan Smith), London 1974. For a general introduction to this seminal thinker, see Alan Sheridan, *Michel Foucault, the Will to Truth*, London 1980.

history is something which is interpreted in different ways by different historians; and needs to be spelt out here.

There are, of course, scholars who altogether deny the existence of any relationship of cause and effect between the past and the present; and who, therefore, also deny the possibility of exploring any overall structure of causation in the historical process. Such historians – they are often pejoratively described as antiquarians – subscribe to the view that history is a meaningless pattern; and it is, therefore, futile to seek any connecting thread between the past and the present. The intellectual labour of ‘antiquarians’ is often directed towards creating a narrative around specific events which are devoid of any philosophical content. Most amateurishly written history is really antiquarian in character, even though its authors are often unaware of the negative philosophical implications of their scholarship.

In describing the antiquarian, we have been guilty of creating a man of straw, if only to highlight the superficiality of his intellectual labour. Indeed, professional historians rarely, if ever, subscribe to the facile notions of their activity spelt out above. Instead, implicit if not explicit, in serious historical narratives is the assumption that events across time and space are connected with each other by a relationship of cause and effect. Beyond this assumption, however, scholars differ radically from each other in their understanding of historical causation; and also of the character of the logical ties which bind events and impart significance to historical narratives. There are historians, for instance, who believe that the prime motors of the social process are men of epic stature whose initiatives substantially, if not wholly, explain why things happen the way they happen. As against this, there are scholars who subscribe to the view that the real basis of social causation lies in the ideas which inspire men to act in particular ways. Yet others believe that the historical process can be recapitulated only through aggregating the actions of ‘faces in the crowd’; and that history can be constructed only from the social agony and aspirations of innumerable faceless men who make up the fabric of society. Finally, a large number of scholars are of the opinion that the clue to history lies in a comprehension of those factors of production which generate the wealth that sustains society.

The assumption that causal relationships provide the basis of the historical process informs the intellectual labour of the vast majority of historians. It would, therefore, be appropriate to dwell upon the philosophical implications of this assumption. If, indeed, there is a logical structure of causation in the historical process, then the study of the past becomes vital to a proper understanding of the present. Indeed, such a view of history also affects theory and practice in other disciplines of the social sciences. For the validity of this assumption requires that the social sciences, as a whole, be firmly anchored to a historical understanding of the present; and partake fully of the findings of history as the launching pad of their intellectual labour. Perhaps the relationship between history and the social sciences, in this context, is represented best of all

by advocates of the Annales School, who draw upon different social science disciplines at the same time as they feed their findings into these disciplines.<sup>4</sup>

It would be valid to assume that most historians, more or less, subscribe to the philosophical assumptions sketched out above. However, there is yet another category of scholarship which carries the notion of logical causation as the basis of the historical process to its logical (or even absurd) extreme. Such scholarship, and here we refer to one of the two notions which triggered off our exploration, is informed with the belief that it is possible to discern an overall pattern in history which can be prophetic and scientific at one and the same time. Some of the attempts at creating universal history stem from such logic. However, vulgar Marxist and religious historiography are better examples of deterministic history.

It is unnecessary to dwell too long on a teleological view of the historical process for the simple reason that few scholars actually subscribe to such a view.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the distinction between the 'cause-and-effect' view and the 'teleological' view may not be as sharp as we have made it out to be. It is, for instance, relatively easy for scholars subscribing to the view that history is built around a chain of cause and effect to slip into teleological heresies. By this very logic, a sensitive historian, even when ensconced in teleological theory, often keeps the prophetic aspects of his worldview in the background; and, in fact, does no more than bring the fabric of deterministic causation which informs him into the centre of his analytical narrative. The prophet in such an historian often comes out only towards the very end of a narrative; and the prophecy is invariably so presented as to offer the illusion of springing naturally from the empirical data informing the narrative.

### III

Our portrayal of the space occupied by antiquarianism, causal linkages and teleology in the historical process leads us to explore the relationship between history and the more speculative disciplines within the social sciences. It should be clear from what has already been said that history itself rests substantially upon reflection and speculative generalizations. Indeed, as argued by so many historians, prominent among them E.H. Carr, the scholarly reconstruction of the past is possible only when the historical mind is informed by some social theory.<sup>6</sup> Perhaps the medieval belief that nature abhors a vacuum is particularly true of the historian's mind; and whether he is aware of it or not, the historian does in fact draw upon social theory the moment he attempts to construct past events and happenings in a coherent narrative.

Although I agree with the view put forth by Carr, it would be appropriate to dwell also upon the flaws in his perception of history. Thus while it is true that

<sup>4</sup> See F. Furet, 'Beyond The Annales', *Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 55, September 1983.

<sup>5</sup> Isaiah Berlin, 'The Concept of Scientific History', *History and Theory*, Vol. I, No. 1, 1960, pp. 1-31.

<sup>6</sup> This argument is put forth in a popular form by E.H. Carr, *What is History?*, London 1961. Also see, William Dray, *Laws and Explanation in History*, Oxford 1957.

social theory necessarily informs the historian in his task, it is equally true that the historical narrative enjoys a considerable measure of autonomy. Indeed, once the historian enters the empirical domain, after defining the parameters of his enquiry, he is rigorously guided by the data which he unearths through the inductive process; and his enquiry acquires a momentum capable of transcending the speculative vision that guided him at the commencement. It would be no exaggeration to assert that such an act of 'liberation' from theory is essential to the business of creating a sensitive account of the past. We would also suggest that such empirical constructions, with an autonomy of their own are, in turn, the raw materials of novel grand theory. What I would like to define as the 'creative tension' between history and theory, therefore, lies at the very roots of the development of the social sciences, on the one hand, and the growth of our historical understanding, on the other. Such a nexus between theory as the preliminary basis of empirical explorations; and empirical explorations, in turn, providing the basis for theorization; in fact sums up in its full vigour the contemporary humanist enterprise.

The intervention of empirical research between different levels of theoretical reflection is a pre-condition for the growth of our understanding of the human condition because of the difference between formal logic and historical logic. Indeed, the concept of historical logic is a notion which I would like to introduce, anyway, at this juncture. The term 'formal logic' needs no explanation, since it refers to the inferential processes whereby inductive and deductive conclusions are drawn within philosophical discourse. If human beings were perfectly rational and devoid of sentiments like love, hate, envy, frustration or anger, then it would be fully valid to apply formal logic to an understanding of their behaviour.<sup>7</sup> However, whatever may have been our views about human behaviour earlier, the discovery of the 'unconscious' and its reflection in social interaction and human motivation has revealed a dark space within the psyche that makes it difficult for us to look upon man as a fully rational being. If the individual is partially irrational; then this is also true of communities and societies constituted through the aggregation of individuals. For this reason, the social behaviour of individuals and human communities across time and space does not fully conform to the demands of formal logic. For the same reason, formal logic is no substitute for historical logic; and we need to draw upon a concrete sequence of events into a framework of analysis before a generalization can be displaced by a more fruitful generalization. History is thus derived from the speculative social sciences, and in turn it generates new social theory.

#### IV

Our examination of the past(s) of a society, of the nature of the historical process, and of the relationship between the reflective and the empirical social sciences provides a fitting context for the consideration of the role which chance

<sup>7</sup> W.H. Walsh, 'The Limits of Scientific History', in *Historical Studies III* (ed. James Hogan), London 1961, pp. 45-57.



and determinism play in shaping the history of human society. While we are dwelling upon these two notions, so crucial to any evaluation of the place of the social sciences in understanding and shaping human destiny, it would also be appropriate to introduce the concept of 'praxis', with which, too, we are concerned in the overall humanist project.

It should be clear from what has already been suggested that most scholars do not look upon the historical process as something shaped by chance or by fortuitous elements. Nor do most scholars take a deterministic view of the evolution of human history. Just as history is not an arbitrary process; similarly, it is difficult to accept the view that the destiny of humanity can be discerned through the location of some crucial factor (or combination of factors) which has/have shaped human history so far; and shall determine its course in the years which lie ahead.

There are a variety of reasons why the two positions, as baldly stated above, do not find any measure of acceptance in the scholarly community. So far as causation through chance is concerned, the entire corpus of knowledge in the humanistic domain tends to rule out so frivolous, and in some respects alarming, a view of the configuration of societies in the past and in the present; or their likely configuration in the future. Indeed, even though the social sciences never claim those certainties to understanding, which periodically manifest themselves in the natural sciences, there is available to the humanist scholar a growing and substantive body of generalizations and insights about social behaviour and historical phenomena. Such generalizations and insights point to a historical trajectory totally removed from those notions of arbitrariness and whimsicality which the 'chance' view of historical causation sustains.

The concept of determinism in history poses problems of an altogether different nature. As indicated above, a majority of scholars perceive in the historical process a sequence of cause and effect which relates the past to the present through an explanatory mechanism. At first blush, such an understanding of the historical process would suggest the possibility of framing laws of social development which would enable us to 'predict' the future. Nevertheless, there are numerous reasons why our understanding of historical trends, and of that historical (as distinct from formal) logic which holds events in a chain of sequential happenings, does not necessarily lead to determinism and the possibility of framing social laws capable of prediction.

The 'unpredictability' of the future of humanity rests upon a number of factors. In the first instance, as already emphasized, the actions of individuals who make up social communities, and partially provide the basis of the historical process, are not designed solely on the basis of rational considerations. It is, therefore, impossible to predict how human actors, individually or collectively, would behave in specific conditions and in particular situations. Indeed, the experience of the past offers no reliable clues as to how the same individual, or the same collection of individuals, might behave in the future, in what would necessarily be a novel set of conditions. It is, therefore, as difficult to tease out

of past happenings rigorous laws of social behaviour as it is difficult to apply such laws to the prediction of future events.

Over and above the partial irrationality of the social actor, we have, in any attempt to predict human behaviour, also to contend with the consequences of the growth of knowledge. To start with, such growth of knowledge often takes place in directions impossible to anticipate. Moreover, the growth of knowledge acts in a dual fashion. It enables us to arrive at a better understanding of events and processes, past and present. At the same time, it has a feedback effect upon the human actor; and the increase in understanding conferred by such knowledge leads to substantive changes in the behaviour of individuals and social communities.

Our argument can be readily illustrated. The growth of Marxist theory, for instance, placed at the disposal of political actors, both of the exploiting and the exploited classes, a new understanding of the social mechanisms of capitalist society. Inevitably, therefore, Marxist theory transformed the political consciousness of the ruling classes as well as of those classes over whom the latter ruled. The growth of such consciousness among different sections of society, whether they were rich and propertied, or the 'wretched of the earth', was itself consequential of developments which invalidated the prophetic elements in Marxist theory. It would, for this reason, be no exaggeration to assert that the emergence of 'capitalism with a human face' – a most durable form of capitalism – was thus a direct consequence of the growth of radical theory. Indeed, such transformative theory has played a crucial role in the development of liberal societies in the 20th century. It also follows from our illustration that since the growth of social theory is difficult to predict, and since theory influences human behaviour, it is impossible to predict the course of historical events.<sup>8</sup>

Where, then, does the historian stand in the perennial debate concerning chance and determinism as concepts relevant to the historical process? Perhaps the only way to answer this question is to break down human societies, as they are located in their social and material environment, into concrete and related sectors, whose transformation is governed by similar, or roughly similar, rules of causation. At the very foundations of the social order, lies the world of ecology, shaped by material factors like the landscape, or the climate, or natural endowments of one sort and another. The close connection between man and the material environment is acknowledged as much in the natural as in the social sciences. Here we touch upon a domain very close to the natural sciences in the manner in which causation and transformation can be understood. While determinism is too unsubtle a guide to the comprehension of any process of cause and effect, it would be legitimate to suggest that the material environment which interacts so decisively with social processes, can be understood, and its variation in various contingencies predicted, with a reasonable measure of certainty.

<sup>8</sup> Ernest Nagel, 'Determinism in History', in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol. 20, No. 3, 1960. Also see C.G. Hempel, 'The Function of General Laws in History', in *Theories of History* (ed. Patrick Gardiner), Glencoe 1959, pp. 344-56.

Beyond the ecological domain lie social factors of an entirely different complexion. We refer here to enduring structures of society or politics, or the systems of thought or of generating wealth; which constitute the essential ingredients of the ever-changing drama of human history. Such factors are much less susceptible to deterministic analysis than the ecological systems which sustain human communities. But even if these durable structures resist deterministic analysis, it is, nevertheless, true that their analysis reveals insights and even long term secular trends of great intellectual power. For this reason, the second genre of historical reality with which we are concerned here, lends itself to fairly rigorous analysis.

The third and last domain of flux and causation in history takes us to a wholly different set of considerations. We refer here to individual action, to the conscious or unconscious decisions of human actors, and to the way in which they influence the social process. Perhaps 'chance' operates in history, if it operates at all, through the constellation of factors which can be drawn into this domain. It is not only that man is not a fully rational animal. The partial rationality of man is an argument which has already been drawn into consideration at the second level of historical causation. What we are referring to here is the question of individual disposition and temperament which can never be fully socially determined; or rigorously expressed as a statistical reality. We refer also in this context, to social situations of great fluidity, where actions and initiatives taken by epic (or not so epic) actors, may tilt the balance in favour of one course of development or another. The third domain of historical causation thus introduces a substantial measure of chance in the course of social events. This domain can be studied with considerable rigour retrospectively; since the idiosyncracies of the past are available to the scholar as concrete events to be drawn into his narrative. But they render prediction, which is directly related to determinism, a business very difficult to accomplish.

Taken altogether, therefore, the three levels of historical causation spelt out in this essay hold out the prospect of a fairly rigorous understanding of what has happened in the past. For those very reasons, our understanding of the present, too, can be rich in content and texture. But the future remains an open book; partly shaped by factors and motivations which lie within our ken; but partly shaped, also, by the fortuitous play of chance in the thoughts and actions of men.

# Historical Causation

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Every science is a search for truth through successive approximations. With its development also develops its reflective side dealing with its nature, object, method and value. Vitality and consistency of a discipline depend, among other things, upon the intensity of reflection by its own practitioners addressing themselves to the special problems arising out of its growth.<sup>1</sup> Concerned with the processes of historical thinking, and distinct from the actual course of historical events, 'critical philosophy of history' evolved in response to the proliferation of historical studies during the 19th century.<sup>2</sup> It addressed itself to the categories in which the historian seeks to comprehend and interpret his material and the pre-suppositions that underlie his procedures. The philosophy of history in the 20th century has increasingly reflected on the contemporary analytical trends and the relations of history with other sciences, particularly its bearing on historical explanation and autonomy of history.

## I

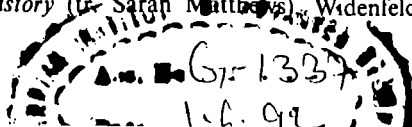
The present discussion focuses on causation as the central problem for the philosophy and methodology of history. To place causation in its context it may first be necessary to begin with a brief comment on the nature of history itself, reflecting by and large the professional consensus today. The subject-matter of history is the whole of the past society in all its complexity and variety, encompassing 'recurrent events as well as individual occurrences, conscious and unconscious realities alike'.<sup>3</sup> Pursuit of this ideal is as much a scientific problem as to trace the history of the solar system or of animal life on the earth, though natural and historical sciences deal with very different kinds of data and employ different methods.

The gap between the ideal and attainment or the inability to know all the truth is as characteristic of history as of other sciences. The history-as-actuality, that is, what actually happened, can never be known in its entirety. Only a part of the actual past is known from the history-as-record, that is, the surviving records, artifacts and other traces from the past. The historian infers the past through a process of selection from the survivals in the present. History-as-science therefore consists of the historian's authentication and interpretation of the available evidence. The historian interested in a particular aspect of the past assembles and sifts all the surviving traces germane to the problem in hand and

<sup>1</sup> R.G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, Oxford University Press, London 1973 (reprint), p. 1; also, *The Idea of Nature*, OUP, London 1957 (reprint), p. 2.

<sup>2</sup> W.H. Walsh, *An Introduction to Philosophy of History*, Hutchinson, London 1984 (reprint), p. 16; also, Antony Flew, *A Dictionary of Philosophy*, Pan Books 1979, pp. 138-9.

<sup>3</sup> Fernand Braudel, *On History* (tr. Sarah Matthews), Widenfeld and Nicolson, London 1980, p. 69.



organizes these in a coherent fashion, filling up the gaps with empathetic understanding and imagination. By trying to answer the basic questions – what, when, where, how and why – the historian attempts to reconstruct the past, combining the certain and the probable with the possible or even the speculative. This imaginative reconstruction of the past remains a working model constantly moving towards the history-as-actuality, simultaneously raising new questions and reducing the existing uncertainties through the discovery of fresh evidence and through fresh interpretations of the existing evidence. History in this sense is a progressive science, ever enlarging its store of facts and ideas, and of successive interpretations subsuming the earlier ones.

The underlying concern of this graduated assembling of the past – from stray facts to occurrences, to events, to trends, to patterns of long term evolution, and to the significant inter-relationships between them – is to study change or the process of ‘becoming’ which is the essence of historical enquiry as the ‘science of men in time’.<sup>4</sup> For the historian ‘everything begins and ends with time’.<sup>5</sup>

Centrality of change in historical studies is as old as the conscious historical writing itself. Writing in the 5th century B.C., the Greek historian Herodotus, who is said to be the ‘father of history’, talks of human life being ‘a revolving wheel’ which ‘never allows the same man to continue long in prosperity’.<sup>6</sup> The concern with change in a given space and time has become particularly marked in the last two centuries. The primary concern of historical studies today is with ‘transformation of things (people, institutions, ideas and so on) from one state to another’.<sup>7</sup> In the analysis of change the historian generally attends to three questions: how did the change originate? by what mechanisms was it produced? and what were its consequences for the pattern or unit undergoing change?<sup>8</sup> Simply put, the whole question of movement and change in history, of comprehending the complexity of human life, requires identification of causes and establishment of their interrelationships through logical reasoning.

## II

Causation assumes that every event or phenomenon results from an antecedent cause. As a general feature of ‘the way the world works’, causation has been termed ‘the cement of the universe’.<sup>9</sup> Since the job of the science is to explain

<sup>4</sup> Marc Bloch, *The Historian's Craft* (tr. Peter Putnam), Manchester University Press, 1954, p. 47; also, *Max Weber: Selections in Translation* (eds. W.G. Runciman and E. Matthews), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1985, p. 112.

<sup>5</sup> Fernand Braudel, ‘History and the Social Sciences: The Longue Duree’, in *French Studies in History* (eds. Maurice Aymard and Harbans Mukhia), Orient Longman, New Delhi 1989, Vol. I, p. 95.

<sup>6</sup> Herodotus, *The Histories* (tr. Arbery de Selincourt), Penguin Books, Harmondsworth 1955 p. 97.

<sup>7</sup> G.R. Elton, *The Practice of History*, Collins-Fontana, Great Britain 1976 (seventh impression), pp. 22-3.

<sup>8</sup> Anthony Smith, *Social Change: Social Theory and Historical Processes*, Longman, London 1976, p. 14.

<sup>9</sup> J.L. Mackie, *The Cement of the Universe: A Study in Causation*, Oxford University Press London 1974, p. 2. Mackie uses the phrase coined by David Hume (*A Treatise of Human Nature*) with an added emphasis and slightly altered import.

the empirical reality, it does so by looking for causes through the collection of facts and through inference. Each causal explanation is a partial and probabilistic view of the extensively and intensively infinite natural and social reality.<sup>10</sup> All sciences remain interested in 'why' and 'because', but the 'genetic sciences', that is, biology, geology and social and psychological sciences, lay particular emphasis on understanding the present in the light of the past.<sup>11</sup> As a basic pre-condition for a critical accounting for change, causation however is the *raison de etre* of history, distinguishing it from antiquarianism on the one hand and metaphysics on the other.

The historians have nevertheless been debating the usefulness of the concept of causation and the appropriateness of the word 'cause', to merit the opprobrium of 'general confusion' from philosophers.<sup>12</sup> One extreme view has been to regard the word 'cause' as over simplified or defective or even meaningless, and to altogether reject its use in written history.<sup>13</sup> Many a time answering 'how things happened' (functional approach) is preferred over 'why things happened' (causal approach), although it is difficult to keep the answers to 'how' and 'why' separate. Even when use of the word 'cause' is acceptable, it is found inadequate to express the refinements from psychology like 'objectives',

<sup>10</sup> Julien Freund, *The Sociology of Max Weber* (tr. Mary Ilford), Penguin University Books, Harmondsworth 1972, pp. 48 & 50.

Some philosophers, however, 'dispute the claim that scientific explanations are all causal': see Peter Achinstein, *The Nature of Explanation*, Oxford University Press, New York 1983, p. 261. Among the types of non-causal explanations mentioned by Achinstein are those of regularity (citing a law), identity (explaining properties) and derivation (simple and complex).

<sup>11</sup> W.B. Gallie, 'Explanations in History and the Genetic Sciences', in *Theories of History* (ed. Patrick Gardiner), The Free Press, New York 1959, pp. 386-402. According to Gallie, 'a characteristic genetic explanation seeks to establish, or atleast helps to indicate, some kind of continuity, between one or a number of temporally prior conditions and a subsequent result': *ibid.*, p. 391.

<sup>12</sup> W.H. Walsh, *An Introduction to Philosophy of History*, p. 199. Patrick Gardiner calls historical explanation 'a curious affair' comparable to 'a game with no clearly formulated rules': *The Nature of Historical Explanation*, Oxford University Press, London 1965 (reprint), p. 99.

Incidentally, because of the 'pernicious confusion' caused by the vocabulary of causality also among philosophers, Bertrand Russell recommends that this 'relic of a bygone age' should be 'expunged' from discussions about the explanation of social action. For a discussion, see J.L. Mackie, *The Cement of the Universe*, pp. 142-59.

<sup>13</sup> For example, in the 1960s, a group of American historians stated in a formal set of 'propositions' regarding the historical studies in the United States that, the concept of causality had 'entered the narrative to such an extent that the writing of history might become mere cataloguing or chronology without it'. They expressed their dissatisfaction also over other 'limitations' of the concept of causality: quoted in Louis Gottschalk, *Understanding History: A Primer of Historical Method*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York 1969 (2nd edn.) p. 235. See also, William H. Dray, *Philosophy of History*, Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey 1964, pp. 41-2.

In one of his early writings, Oakshott refers to 'the defects inseparable from the conception of cause', and advocates its substitution by the 'principle of the unity or continuity of history' for an explanation of historical change: *Experience and its Modes*, quoted in W.H. Walsh, *An Introduction to Philosophy of History*, p. 194. Even in his later writing Oakshott regards the word 'cause' as a 'misnomer', but he no longer recommends its excision from the vocabulary of historical discourse: see Michael Oakshott, *On History and Other Essays*, Basil Blackwell, 1985 reprint - (first published, 1983), p. 88.

'motives', 'drives' and 'personal influences', because of which it is generally recommended to break the concept of causation down to its component parts such as 'purpose', 'occasion', 'antecedent', 'means' and 'motives'. Some other substitutes offered for the word 'cause' are 'impulses', 'stimuli', 'elements', 'mainsprings', 'roots', 'bases', 'foundations', 'under-currents', 'fountainheads' and 'fertilizing factors'. Despite their distrust of the word 'cause' and attempts at 'camouflaging' causation, historians have not been able to avoid accounting for change.<sup>14</sup>

In fact, the refinements suggested above have not been able to replace the word 'cause' even in its ordinary sense of that 'which produces an effect or result', or that 'from which anything proceeds, and without which it would not exist'.<sup>15</sup> For our present purpose, therefore, it may be more profitable 'to stress what is common to all kinds of causes rather than what separates them'.<sup>16</sup> It may be reasonably safe to treat the word 'cause' as 'a convenient figure of speech' for any one of a number of antecedents identified to explain the consequent, and separated from it by a temporal interval, howsoever slight.<sup>17</sup>

The antecedents studied in terms of single causes are becoming rare in historical writing. Over-emphasis on a single cause often gives it the character of an accidental happening or that of a search of the responsible person (the Latin word *causa* originally meant 'guilt', 'blame' or 'accusation'), hence, a moral judgment, both of which impede historical understanding. Sometimes the immediate cause (or the 'efficient cause' of philosophers) – whether seen in terms of a person or an event effecting a result – is unduly emphasized, overlooking the larger context or the underlying conditions. The immediate cause, in fact, is 'merely a point in a chain of events, trends, influences and forces at which the effect begins to become visible'.<sup>18</sup> The constellation of causes are to be traced

<sup>14</sup> Louis Gottschalk, *Understanding History*, p. 239; also David Hackett Fischer, *Historians' Fallacies: Toward a Logic of Historical Thought*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London 1971, p. 165.

<sup>15</sup> *Webster's New Universal Unabridged Dictionary* (Deluxe 2nd edn.), Dorset & Baber, USA 1983, p. 288.

<sup>16</sup> E.H. Carr, *What is History?*, Penguin Books, England 1972 (seventh reprint), p. 89.

<sup>17</sup> See Jerald Hage and Barbara Foley Meeker, *Social Causality*, Unwin Hyman, Boston 1988, p. 33: 'Causes occur in time prior to their effects and represent some mechanism or process which produce a change. These occur in a complex network of causal links. Types of causal links include direct, indirect, spurious [chance] and conditional, and may also include reciprocal and feedback processes'.

However, Gottschalk maintains that 'some causes need not be antecedent. Influences, for example, may be persistent (as of literature) and even reciprocal (as of one's family); means have to be concurrent if they are instruments by which the cause is effected, and even more so if they are the material out of which a product is made. Aristotle spoke not only of efficient causes but also of formal, material and final causes': *Understanding History*, p. 238.

Max Weber's idea of 'sociological causality' also assumes the establishment of a regular relationship between two phenomena, which need not take the form 'A makes B inevitable', but may take the form 'A is more or less favourable to B': Raymond Aron, *Main Currents in Sociological Thought*, Pelican Books, 1980, Vol. 2, p. 199.

<sup>18</sup> Louis Gottschalk, *Understanding History*, p. 222.

Causation entails an essentially triadic relationship between a cause and its effect and the circumstances in which these occur: Curt John Ducasse, *Causation and the Types of Necessity* (ed. Vincent Tomas), Dover, New York 1969, p. 22.

into the background, which may extend to generations and centuries, because history does not know of the sudden creation of something by an individual or a group at some one moment of time. The subject-matter of history being the past society in totality, historical causation is a complex undertaking, obliging the historian to seek not just a cause or a few causes, but 'causal wave-chains'.<sup>19</sup>

### III

Multiplicity of causes therefore is a methodological necessity for the historian. To account adequately for change he has to place the phenomenon in its multifaceted context taking into account several variables in varied combinations. The ever-expanding store of historical evidence, ideas and interpretations helps the historian to increase and diversify his answers to the question 'why'. However, even if it is assumed in principle that the historian is interested in *all* antecedents, in actual practice he has to guard against indiscriminate pluralism by carefully selecting the *relevant* antecedents, that is, those antecedents which in *his* view have had a bearing on the subject in question, and by weighing one against the other. At the same time, to be able to give a balanced and integrated account of a phenomenon, say religious or economic, the historian proceeds by assuming that its emergence is not necessarily confined to the religious or the economic sphere. The touchstone of relevance could in fact be stretched to include antecedents or underlying conditions from several sectors of life.

Confluence and interaction of multiple causes stemming from different sectors of life, and the effect becoming cause in the process of history, may be illustrated with reference to the emergence and transformation of the Sikh movement or the Sikh community (as distinct from Sikhism as a faith).<sup>20</sup> The historian would begin by placing Guru Nanak's life and teachings and the contemporary socio-religious and political milieu under the Turko-Afghan rule. He would relate Guru Nanak's legacy with the changing circumstances, ideas and motivations of the successor Gurus and the other leading personalities. He would be interested in the social groups responding to Sikhism – the castes, occupations, their relative proportions and distribution in urban and rural areas. The historian would try to see the link between the growing number of the Sikhs and the developing institutional framework and material resources of the *Panth*. However, the social composition of the Sikh community and its concentration in the best cultivated and most populous tracts of the central Punjab (the upper portions of the five *doabs*) would not be intelligible without reference to the special appeal the egalitarian message of Guru Nanak had for the tribal Jats in rural areas, and their adoption of the Persian wheel technology in the inter-fluvial tracts or the *doabs*.

For clues to the political orientation of the Sikh *Panth*, the historian may begin with the compositions of the Gurus, relating these to the growing dissent against the nominated successors of Guru Nanak which was the reverse of their

<sup>19</sup> Marc Bloch, *The Historian's Craft*, p. 194.

<sup>20</sup> This illustration is based on J.S. Grewal's *The Sikhs of the Punjab*, New Cambridge History of India, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1990, pp. 28-81.



growing popularity and prosperity. But the designs of the rival claimants to Guruship who happened to be the sons or grandsons of the Gurus, and who invoked the existing law concerning property and inheritance, did not succeed for sometime. Their access to the local administration and its attempted interference in the affairs of the Gurus was restrained by the general patronage and protection provided by Akbar which enabled the Sikh *Panth* to continue on its path of peaceful evolution. The change of attitude on the part of Akbar's not so catholic successor, Jahangir, encouraged the dissenters and detractors, and emboldened the local administrators in their hostility towards the fifth Guru, Arjan Dev. This led finally to the Guru's martyrdom and the decision of his son and successor, Guru Hargobind, to arm the Sikhs in self-protection. However, this causal chain of internal and external developments converging on the pontificate of the sixth Guru would not be complete without reference to the accidental visit of the rebel Prince Khusrav to Guru Arjan Dev which invoked the wrath of Jahangir and encouraged local hostility. From the arming of some Sikhs by Guru Hargobind to the militarization of the *Panth* by his grandson, the tenth Guru, Gobind Singh, there would be some other internal and external links in the causal chain, in addition to the past legacy.

Causal analysis necessarily proceeds by simplification of the multiplicity of causes. The historian establishes interrelationships between the antecedents, each of which may have a temporal and spatial spread of its own, by introducing distinctions like the precipitant, underlying, accelerating and the contributory causes.<sup>21</sup> Distinctions are also made in terms of long term and short term causes.<sup>22</sup> It is generally not possible to assign crucial responsibility as the 'fundamental' or the 'rockbottom' cause or to find 'first causes of complex social phenomena'.<sup>23</sup> Yet to weigh the relative contribution of different causes the historian sometimes tries to imagine the consequent, with a specific antecedent omitted from the constellation of antecedents to ascertain whether its absence would have changed the course of events. But this exercise remains confined to the historian's mind and it does not imply that the various links in a causal chain or the components in a particular social situation operate independently and are therefore detachable and separately measurable.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>21</sup> The philosophers, however, introduce subtler analytic distinctions like the 'necessary' and 'sufficient' conditions to explain the occurrence of an effect: 'to be sufficient is one thing, to be necessary another thing, and to be both sufficient and necessary yet a third thing: C.J. Ducasse, 'On the Nature and the Observability of Causal Relation', in *Causation and Conditionals* (ed. Ernest Sosa), Oxford University Press, London 1975, p. 115.

<sup>22</sup> For the sake of convenience, Marc Bloch makes a distinction between 'the conditions' as the more specific antecedents 'with certain permanence', and the 'cause' as the most specific antecedent representing 'a differentiating element in the compound of generative influences': *The Historian's Craft*, p. 192.

Fernand Braudel further distinguishes between the most stable, the medium term and the short term antecedents terming them, respectively as the 'structures', 'conjunctures' and 'events': 'History and the Social Sciences: The Longue Duree', pp. 71-80.

<sup>23</sup> Daniel Chirot, 'The Social and Historical Landscape of Marc Bloch', in *Vision and Method in Historical Sociology* (ed. Theda Skocpol), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1984, p. 39.

<sup>24</sup> As an illustration of this mental experiment, reference may be made to the antecedents of the partition of India. To establish the relative weight of antecedents the historian may omit the

The role of individuals likewise is not isolable from their social context. Whether as ordinary human beings or as rebels or charismatic leaders, individuals in history act in their social capacities and as the products of the specific conditions of their age.<sup>25</sup> For example, as a dissident and as a religious leader, Guru Nanak was an outstanding individual who was at once the product of his times and also the agent of conscious historical change. He was a part of the religious fervor created by the *Sants*, *Vaishnava Bhaktas* and the *Jufis*, and yet he was able to go further than these movements and initiate a new religious dispensation, with substantial social content and political overtones, having significant implications for the future. In this sense Guru Nanak was both the representative and the creator of social forces.

Social forces may be defined as the conscious or even unconscious collective human responses that affect the course of history. The historian is concerned with the social forces, because flow and continuity as well as change and rupture in any society depend to a considerable extent on the operation and interaction of the social forces like political institutions, customs and mores, economic conditions, religious beliefs, ideological orientations, and technological developments.<sup>26</sup> The social forces grow gradually, and they have longer span of life than that of a human being. In fact, once created, they function independently or even in opposition to their creators.<sup>27</sup> The bearing of the physical environment on the subsistence activity of man, particularly in the pre-industrial societies, may also be termed a social force. Human beings cannot easily escape from the weight of their conscious or unconscious adjustments with their geographical setting – its location, soil, climate, water resources, vegetation, animal population and routes – without seriously upsetting ‘a whole slowly established balance’.<sup>28</sup> Thus, the habitat, together with the technological, institutional adamant refusal of the Sikhs to live under ‘perpetual Muslim domination’ from the sequence of the events leading to the partition of the provinces of the Punjab and Bengal in 1947 and find that the situation would perhaps have been different without this particular antecedent. For a discussion, see Indu Banga, ‘The Crisis of Sikh Politics (1940-1947)’, in *Sikh History and Religion in the Twentieth Century* (eds. Joseph T.O’Connell et al.), Centre for South Asian Studies, University of Toronto, Toronto 1988, pp. 233-55.

<sup>25</sup> E.H. Carr, *What is History?*, pp. 52-5.

<sup>26</sup> See Carl G. Gustavson, *A Preface to History*, McGraw Hill Book Company, New York 1955, pp. 55-62; also, Ernest Gellner, *Cause and Meaning in the Social Sciences* (eds. I.C. Jarvie and Joseph Agassi), Routledge & Kegan Paul, London 1973, p. 14: ‘(Human) history is about chaps. It does not follow that its explanations are always in terms of chaps’.

<sup>27</sup> W.H. Walsh, *An Introduction to Philosophy of History*, p. 204. Walsh cites the example of trade unions, but this would be true of most institutions and technological, economic and political developments. The recent happenings in the USSR and Eastern Europe, and the outcome of the agitation against the Mandal Commission recommendations in India are good examples of the social forces operating in direct opposition to the intentions of their creators.

<sup>28</sup> Fernand Braudel, ‘History and the Social Sciences: The Longue Duree’, p. 95. For a discussion of ecology, or adaptive interaction with environment as a causative factor, see Julian Steward, ‘The Concept and Method of Cultural Ecology’, in *High Points in Anthropology* (eds. Paul Bohannon and Mark Glazer), Alfred A. Knopf, New York 1973, pp. 322-32.

The historian is not deterred by C.J. Ducasse’s contention that the environment cannot be taken as a ‘cause’, as ‘cause consists of change in that environment’: ‘Nature and Observability of the Causal Relation’, pp. 116-7.

tional and psychological modes evolved over a long time, almost unobtrusively influences the lives of the individuals in society, even restricting the range of choices open to them.

However, emphasis on the constraining influence of the natural setting and the social dimension of action does not replace or subsume human motivation or deliberate act of 'a conscious and responsible agent'.<sup>29</sup> Rather, historical causation presupposes interaction between personalities and their milieu. Unintended, unplanned change is supplemented by the creative human response and initiative by 'active "selection" by individuals and groups'.<sup>30</sup> 'Mental entities' – motives, desires, intentions, plans and purposes – are thus a 'special form of causation' with which the historian is concerned.<sup>31</sup> Because of the innate complexity and even partial irrationality of human behaviour, he does not think in terms of the 'one dimensional man' with a simple equation with ambition and power (*homo politicus*) or economic interests (*homo economicus*) or religion (*homo religiosus*); it is even more difficult to imagine that man could form so clear an idea of his interests.<sup>32</sup> Therefore, the historian usually looks for the motivational pattern in pluralistic terms, with conscious motives and unconscious drives coexisting and interacting at different levels of priority and intensity; he also makes a distinction between the avowed and the unavowed motives, or the 'good' reasons and the 'real' reasons.<sup>33</sup> He tries to 'grasp' the intention or the 'subjectively intended meaning' by relating the voluntary actions to the available information about the human actors and their existential and ideational contexts.<sup>34</sup> The historian works on the assumption that the motive-sets are not inalterably fixed in a living individual: like human life, human mind too is a process. He may try to arrest the psychic process for analytical purposes, but he remains alert about the possible changes in personalities, ideas and attitudes: individuals for him are intellectually and psychologically *not* the same in different times, places and circumstances.<sup>35</sup>

The historian has sometimes to deal with antecedents which had influenced or even deflected the course of events, but which cannot be fitted into a rational and meaningful exposition of causation. Such antecedents are variously labelled as 'abnormal' or 'accidental' happenings or 'chance coincidences' attributable

<sup>29</sup> R.G. Collingwood, *An Essay in Metaphysics*, quoted in J.S. Grewal, 'R.G. Collingwood's View of History', in *Philosophical Theory and Social Reality* (ed. Ravinder Kumar), Allied, New Delhi 1984, p. 76, n. 10.

<sup>30</sup> Anthony Smith, *Social Change*, p. 129.

<sup>31</sup> Patrick Gardiner, *The Nature of Historical Explanation*, p. 115.

<sup>32</sup> Marc Bloch, *The Historian's Craft*, pp. 194-5; also, David Hackett Fischer, *Historians' Fallacies*, p. 200.

<sup>33</sup> Louis Gottschalk, *Understanding History*, p. 242.

<sup>34</sup> See Max Weber: *Selections in Translation* (eds. Runciman and Matthews), p. 12; also, Quentin Skinner, '“Social Meaning” and the Explanation of Social Action' in *The Philosophy of History* (ed. Patrick Gardiner), Oxford University Press, London 1974, pp. 106-26; and Patrick Gardiner, *The Nature of Historical Explanation*, pp. 114-39.

Gardiner, a philosopher, and Skinner, a historian, however, maintain that the voluntary human actions are not always reducible to cause-effect relationship.

<sup>35</sup> See David Hackett Fischer, *Historians' Fallacies*, p. 203.

'only to the most casual causes'.<sup>36</sup> To the well known examples of such happenings in world history subsumed under the rubric of 'Cleopatra's nose',<sup>37</sup> one may add the explanations given in terms of 'chance incidents' or 'providential' causes for the defeat of the Rajputs against the Turks. Even 800 years after the event one may find historians still wondering, almost wistfully, how 'chance accidents changed the fate of war', and that why 'it was always in favour of the Turks!'<sup>38</sup> Such writings, incidentally, not only reveal an arrested process of the secularization of consciousness, but also represent ideologically that section of Indian historians who have not been able to accept Muslims as part of the Indian social reality.

However, in the context of causation, the historian's concern with such happenings is limited. It is not that the so-called accidental or providential happenings did not have causes or that they did not influence the particular historical situations, but one cannot apply these to other periods and places. For example, one possibly cannot explain the causes of the subsequent victory of the Mughals or the Marathas or the British in terms of sudden snowing and hailstorm or non-coming of the tide or the elephants running amok – the 'providential' causes invoked to explain the victory of the Turks. In other words, accidental causes cannot be treated as significant happenings because of their inability to throw any light on the character of the particular causal sequence. Chance happenings remain irrelevant for establishing significant or 'an effectively productive relationship between the antecedent conditions and the consequent results',<sup>39</sup> which is essential for arriving at generalizations, and without which historical enquiry relapses into antiquarianism.

#### IV

Generalization is built into the collection and interpretation of facts and their explanation in causal terms. It is a broad interpretative synthesis of the significant antecedents and their bearing on the consequent in the continuing historical process of development or decay. As the final result of one enquiry generalization becomes the starting point for further investigation in a similar

<sup>36</sup> E.H. Carr, *What is History?*, p. 98.

<sup>37</sup> For some instances, *ibid*, 98-9; and Louis Gottschalk, *Understanding History*, p. 222.

<sup>38</sup> See A.B. Pandey, *Early Medieval India*, Central Book Depot, Allahabad 1965 (2nd edn.), p. 40: 'The victory of the Turks, among other reasons, was also brought about by chance and good luck. In 986 Jayapala had to accept a humiliating treaty because a sudden snowing and hailstorm had caused havoc in his ranks. It is from here that the morale of his troops began to go down. If this evil fate had instead overtaken Subuktagin's army, none knows what would have been the subsequent history of the two peoples. Similarly, sudden flight of Ganda Chandela, running amok of the elephant of Anandpala's son, non-coming of the tide while Mahmud's army was wading through the shallows of Rann of Cutch, an arrow piercing the eye of Jayachandra, etc., are instances where chance accidents changed the fate of war and it is remarkable that it was always in favour of the Turks'.

<sup>39</sup> Peter Caws, *The Philosophy of Science: A Systematic Account*, D. Van Norstrand Company, Princeton, New Jersey 1965, p. 300.

problem and for comparative purposes.<sup>40</sup> To illustrate, reference may be made to the causes of the decline of the Mughal empire. Today, it is explained mainly in terms of the collapse of the *jagirdari* system and the agrarian uprisings which were accompanied by the administrative breakdown and financial crisis and underpinned by the economic and technological stagnation.<sup>41</sup> In addition, though in a relatively minor way, decline of the empire is attributed to the decline in the prestige of the monarchy, wars of succession, factional court politics, the ideological resurgence of the Marathas and the Sikhs and the establishment of direct Mughal rule over the Deccan. The cumulative result of these developments is believed to have led to the military weakness of the Mughal empire and its inability to withstand internal and external challenges.<sup>41</sup> This synthesis of political, economic, institutional, ideological, technological and military causes, even though questioned by some historians,<sup>42</sup> eminently meets the yardstick of historical significance: it is amenable to rational explanation and generalization applicable to other historical situations. However, until a few decades ago, it was fairly common to explain the decline of the Mughal empire in terms of personalities, like Aurangzeb's bigotry, Muhammad Shah's debauchery, Shivaji's valour or, for that matter, Nadir Shah's might and the Abdali's persistence. But such an explanation gives not only an exceedingly partial view of the historical reality, it is also incapable of causal synthesis and wider application, for example, to the decline of the Mauryan or the Tughlaq empire.

The validity of the soundest of historical generalizations nevertheless remains limited. The historian chooses to work under the self-imposed restraints of the availability, authentication and meaning of evidence, and concern for the unique, the exceptional and even the defeated; he cannot brush the accidents and the contradictions under the carpet. He analyses each historical situation in its own right, assessing the changing social atmosphere from place to place and generation to generation, also taking into account differential temporality of historical structures. The tenuous relationship between the human free will and the social forces also presents a standing challenge for historical causation. Even when the social forces and the habitat curb the human initiative, human beings do not remain passive and their reactions do not necessarily move in the same or the anticipated direction. Generalization about historical causation is therefore apt to prove singularly inadequate when applied to particular situations

<sup>40</sup> See Louis Gottschalk, 'Categories of Historical Generalization', in *Generalization in the Writing of History* (ed. Louis Gottschalk), The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1963, pp. 113-29; W.H. Walsh, 'Colligatory Concepts in History', in *The Philosophy of History* (ed. Patrick Gardiner), pp. 127-44; and Marc Bloch, 'A Contribution Towards a Comparative History of European Societies', in *French Studies in History* (eds. Aymard and Mukhia), Vol. I, pp. 35-68.

<sup>41</sup> For example, Satish Chandra, *Parties and Politics at the Mughal Court, 1707-1740*, People's Publishing House, New Delhi 1972 (2nd edn.) pp. 256-68; Irfan Habib, *The Agrarian System of Mughal India*, Asia Publishing House, Bombay 1963, pp. 317-51; and M. Athar Ali, *The Mughal Nobility Under Aurangzeb*, Asia, Bombay 1970 (reprint), pp. 169-74.

<sup>42</sup> For example, M.N. Pearson, J.F. Richards and Peter Hardy in 'Symposium: Decline of the Mughal Empire', *Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. XXXV, No. 2 (February 1976), pp. 221-63. See also, Muzaffar Alam, *The Crisis of Empire in Mughal North India: Awadh and the Punjab, 1707-48*, Oxford University Press, Delhi 1986, pp. 1-55.

and individuals. At best, it is an attempt at a tentative rational explanation, a hypothesis 'subject to rapid corrections as more data or more valid points of view dictate correction'.<sup>43</sup>

In other words, there is no scope in history to assume that human affairs are governed by any inexorable laws or universally applicable theories. Even Marx, who is supposed to have constructed such a theory of social change, clarified his position in one of his letters in 1877: for understanding events occurring in 'different historical milieu' one could not possibly use 'as one's master key a general historico-philosophical theory, the supreme virtue of which consists in being supra-historical'.<sup>44</sup> Today, the physical scientists also think in terms of statistical probability of occurrences; their laws at best are regarded as 'accepted generalizations' and statements of tendency, incapable of predicting unique cases.<sup>45</sup> In fact, there have been radical shifts in the scientists' vision and they are talking of paradigm changes, plurality of standards and their social and historical conditioning.<sup>46</sup> Therefore, notwithstanding the arguments advanced by some philosophers in support of the 'deterministic principle' and 'the general laws',<sup>47</sup> the historian is not standing far apart from his fellow scientists when he refuses to accept any explanation *a priori*. As Marc Bloch, a distinguished practitioner of the craft, says, 'in history, as elsewhere, the causes cannot be assumed. They are to be looked for'.<sup>48</sup>

There are thus no predetermined outcomes for the historian. He does not regard the antecedent past as 'an incubator' in which subsequent historical events are 'hatched'.<sup>49</sup> For him 'nothing in history is inevitable except in the formal sense that, for it to have happened otherwise, the antecedent causes would have had to be different'.<sup>50</sup> Therefore, determinism in the sense of laws

<sup>43</sup> Louis Gottschalk, *Understanding History*, p. 276.

<sup>44</sup> Quoted in David McLellan, *Marx*, Fontana/Collins, 1975 p. 48. See also, E.J. Hobsbawm, 'Karl Marx's Contribution to Historiography', in *Ideology in Social Science* (ed. Robin Blackburn), Fontana/Collins 1975 (reprint), pp. 265-83.

<sup>45</sup> Scientists no longer think in terms of immutable or invariable laws: Peter Caws, *The Philosophy of Science*, p. 83. The laws and theories of physics are 'frequently idealizations, approximations, and simplifications': Anthony O. Hear, *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Science*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1989, p. 125.

<sup>46</sup> See Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, International Encyclopedia of Unified Science, 1966 (sixth impression) Vol. II, No. 2, pp. 1-9; and *The Essential Tension: Selected Studies in Scientific Tradition and Change*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1977, pp. 21-30 and 127-77; also, Roger Trigg, *Understanding Social Science*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford 1985, pp. 7-20.

<sup>47</sup> Respectively, Ernest Nagel, 'Determinism in History', in *The Philosophy of History* (ed. Patrick Gardiner), pp. 187-215; and Carl G. Hempel, *Aspects of Scientific Explanation and Other Essays in the Philosophy of Science*, The Free Press, New York 1965, pp. 231-43.

Warner Leinfellner, a supporter of the law-explanation-orthodoxy in classical physics, recognizes the need of freeing historical sciences from 'the danger of automatization and mechanical decidability by covering laws': 'Historical Time and a New Conception of the Historical Sciences', in *Methodological Unity of Science* (ed. Mario Bunge), D. Reidel Publishing Co., Dordrecht 1983, p. 212.

<sup>48</sup> *The Historian's Craft*, p. 197.

<sup>49</sup> Michael Oakshott, *On History and Other Essays*, p. 65.

<sup>50</sup> E.H. Carr, *What is History?*, p. 96.

guiding human action or events being pre-determined and thus predictable, is not a problem for the historian. He proceeds on the assumption that purposive human action is both free and causally determined, that human freedom and moral responsibility are not incompatible with causation, that all events have causes which can in principle be known, and that the knowledge of rationally explicable causes could serve as 'general guides for future action', but not for making specific predictions.<sup>51</sup>

## V

With the growing concern of history with numbers – with in fact the totality of human experience – and with the proliferation of data, historical reconstruction has become an infinitely more complex undertaking. There is therefore a growing tendency among historians to replace their unconscious assumptions and latent generalizations by a conscious synthesis of empirical findings with social theory.<sup>52</sup> Theory as a set of logically coherent propositions with a suggestive potential is used as a framework of explanation. It plays 'a crucial role in giving content and form to the historian's work'.<sup>53</sup> Theory serves as a pointer to new kinds of source materials, provides meaning to particular facts, and sharpens the historian's insights into their inter-relationships, enabling him to classify and interpret facts, to anticipate new evidence and to imaginatively fill up the gaps in his information. Theory assists the historian in the identification and ordering of antecedents and the appreciation of their relative efficacy. He can enrich his explanation with the theories, concepts and insights drawn from the other human sciences which study man in society from their respective perspectives. A conscious use of theory treating it as means to an end may guard the historian against uncritical borrowings from the allied disciplines. It can even enable him to construct his own theory base – his own concepts and models as analytical tools – with which to measure and explain the changing reality in specific contexts and ages.<sup>54</sup> A constructive orientation to the allied sciences which is central to the idea of 'a new historical science' may thus strengthen history as a

<sup>51</sup> Ibid, p. 69.

Even though the historian shuns specific predictions, his particular training in establishing causal sequences and his insights into the historical processes equip him to have a better understanding of the present and make shrewd guesses about the future: see G.J. Renner, *History: Its Purpose and Method*, George Allen & Unwin, London 1961 (reprint), p. 225.

<sup>52</sup> David M. Potter, 'Explicit Data and Implicit Assumptions in Historical Studies', in *Generalization in the Writing of History* (ed. Louis Gottschalk), pp. 178-94.

<sup>53</sup> Ravinder Kumar, 'Reflections on the Nature of Social Reality', in *Philosophical Theory and Social Reality* (ed. Ravinder Kumar), p. 52.

<sup>54</sup> See S.C. Misra, 'The Medieval Reality: An Approach', General Presidential Address, *Indian History Congress*, 42nd Session, Bodh Gaya 1981, pp. 1-15.

Conscious use of theory is particularly evident in the Indian historical studies of ecological adaptation, historical geography, demography, modes of production, agrarian society, urbanization, state-formation, social classes and institutions, social and political movements, cultural and ideological reorientations, mentalities and emotional life, and social mobility and social change.

