

SOURCES OF HISTORY

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INTRODUCTION

A historian is concerned with the recreation of the significant features of the past with the help of numerous fragmentary evidences, usually called the sources. The necessary material is not to be found in book alone. It can as well be available in archaeological, epigraphic and numismatic materials. All the material which has a direct bearing or can be of any assistance in constructing the history of a particular period, are termed as his sources.

The historical sources can be of two types— Primary and Secondary. A primary source is the testimony of an eye witness or mechanical device which was present at the time of the occurrence of an event. A **primary source** is closest to the event, person, idea, or period that you are studying.

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It is the job of the historian to convert the difficult primary sources into a coherent, intelligible secondary sources. No historian, who has not himself worked in primary source materials, can be regarded as a competent historian.

The secondary source on the other hand is the testimony of someone who was not present at the time of occurrence of the event, but discuss and analyze primary sources; they're called secondary sources because they are at least one step removed from the primary source.

The book written by a historian is a 'secondary source', on which a large number of people, interested in problem with which it deals, rely. The secondary source is also of great historical importance to the historians. A historian embarking on some topic of research should master all the existing secondary material(books and articles of other historians). In short, the secondary source is itself dependent on primary sources.

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Drawing a distinction between primary and secondary sources *Prof. Marwick* says :

“ The primary source is the raw material, more meaningful to the expert historians than to the layman; the secondary source is the coherent work of history, article, dissertation or book, in which both the intelligent layman and the historian who is venturing upon a new research topic, or keeping in touch with new discoveries in his chosen field or seeking to widen his general historical knowledge, will look for what they want.”

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A primary source may contain a secondary data. For example a communiqué written by a general may be for most part a primary source, but most of the details contained in the communiqué may be secondary because most of the information provided by the communiqué may come from his subordinates. Similarly the newspapers are usually considered primary source, but the information provided by the newspapers is not all based on primary sources. For example, certain incidents reported by the paper may be such which the correspondent saw or in which he actually took part, while certain other information may be based on 'official sources' or sources usually considered reliable. It can be said that the sources, whether they are primary or secondary, are important to the historian because they contain primary particulars.

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Sources that are even further removed (e.g., because they synthesize and describe material from secondary sources) are called **tertiary sources**. An encyclopedia article or a Wikipedia entry would be considered tertiary sources.

Are there exceptions?

Absolutely! Sometimes what we think of as secondary sources become primary sources, depending on how you are using them. For example, if you are analyzing how literary scholars from the 1950s talked about women's literature, you would be using scholarly articles and books from that period as primary sources. Whether a source is primary or secondary depends on what you are analyzing.

PRIMARY SOURCES

1. CONTEMPORARY RECORDS:- ‘A contemporary record’ according to Gottschalk is “ a document intended to convey instructions regarding a transaction or to aid the memory of the person immediately involved in the transaction.”

The instruction document may be in the form of an appointment notification, a command in the battle-field, a direction from foreign office to the ambassador, etc. Usually such documents have little chance of deceit or error. However, it is absolutely essential to ascertain their authenticity before accepting their contents.

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The business and legal papers like bills, journals, orders, lease, wills, tax records give an insight into the working of the legal papers are highly reliable because they are prepared by highly qualified and expert people and there is no motive or dectet.

Generally the prominent persons maintain personal note books and private memoranda for their day to day use. These note books and memoranda are a credible source of history because they are very close to the events with which they deal and are non- prejudicial.

2. CONFIDENTIAL REPORTS:- The confidential reports are not intended for the general audience and are less reliable than the

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Contemporary records. Usually they are written after the event to create a particular impression . The military and diplomatic dispatches are an example of this sort of reports.

3. PUBLIC REPORTS:- The Public Reports as distinguished from Confidential Reports, are meant for general public and are less reliable. Generally there are three types of public reports, and each possesses a different degree of reliability.

(a) Newspaper reports and dispatches:- The newspaper reports and dispatches are very reliable because the gap between the event and its recording is very short. The reliability of a dispatch depends upon the agency from which it originates and the newspaper in which it is published.

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(b) Memoirs and autobiographies:- This source of history is not very reliable even though it is written for the large reading public. Most of the memoirs and autobiographies are written towards the close of life, when the memory of the author is fading, and are therefore, untrustworthy. For example when Winston Churchill published his memoirs of the Second World War, protests were lodged by Americans, Belgian and French that he had not done full justice to the facts. There is also a possibility that the memoirs may be written by some 'ghost-writer'.

(c) The official or authorized histories:- The histories of the activities of a government or business house, are also an important

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kind of public reports. Usually such histories are based on full official records. In India historians were engaged to write about the history of freedom struggle. Although these official historians avoid propaganda and avoid deliberate misrepresentation, they must be taken with caution. They are likely to suppress embracing, and incriminating information.

4. *The Questionnaires:-* The Questionnaires are the recent method of eliciting information and opinion on a particular issue. The Questionnaires enables to uncover a lot of reliable information, provided it has been properly drafted and the confidential relationship between the interviewer and the respondent is assured.

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5. *Government Documents*:- Numerous government documents are compiled, which are source of vital importance to the historians. For example the government compiles statistics about fiscal, census, and vital matters which can be made use of by the historians. But properly speaking these compilations do not constitute a primary source because they have been compiled by persons who are many steps removed from the actual observation. Yet it cannot be denied that these reports are of first hand importance.

6. *Public Opinion*:- The public opinion as expressed in the editorial, speeches, pamphlets, letters to editor, and public opinion polls are another important source available to the historian.

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But the authenticity of this must be corroborated by other evidence because the public opinion may not be always reliable.

7. **Literature:-** The literature of an age or generation can also be a source for the period in which it was written. It provides the historian with an understanding of some local conditions, and social customs etc. However, Prof. Marwick has taken the view that a historian should not entirely depend for information on the literary works unless it can be confirmed by other sources.

8. **Folklores and Proverbs:-** The folklores, which tell us the stories of legendary heroes are also an important source of history in as much as they tell us about the aspirations, superstitions and customs of the people among whom the stories developed . The example is the stories of Allah –Uddal the heroes of Rajputana in India. To make use of these folklores the historian should also be able to distinguish between the legendary and authentic elements.

CONCLUSION

Both primary and secondary sources are used by historians for historical reconstruction of the past. The primary sources can be of great help to the historian if he has acquired thorough knowledge of the background through the study of secondary sources. On the basis of this basic knowledge he can fit in the contemporary documents at relevant places and can even correct the secondary account.