

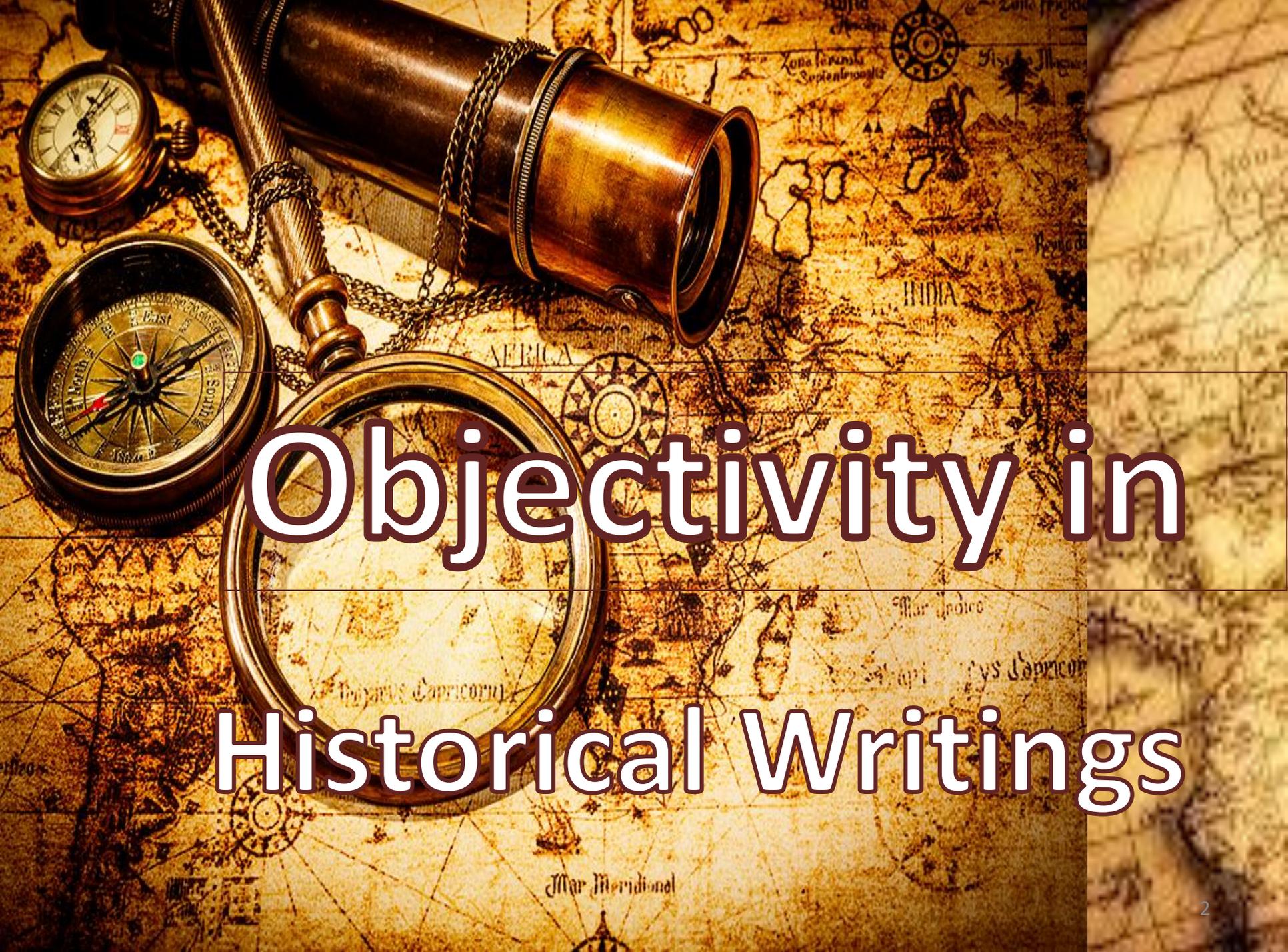
SUBJECT : HISTORIOGRAPHY

Objectivity in Historical writings

Rev. Dr. M. Arockiasamy Xavier SJ

Dept. of History

St. Joseph's College (Autonomous)

A vintage brass telescope, pocket watch, and compass resting on an antique map. The map features various geographical labels such as 'AMERICA', 'INDIA', 'Mar Indico', 'Zona torrens Septentrionalis', and 'Mar Meridional'. The scene is set against a warm, golden-brown background with a grid of latitude and longitude lines.

Objectivity in Historical Writings

- **History is a living subject** not because of the debates it has created in the recent past in many countries but because it involves
“a continuous process of interaction between historian and his facts, an unending dialogue between the present and the past.”
- E.H. Carr, *What is History ?*
- **History is a scientific presentation of sequence of significant events of the past.**

- The word history comes from the Greek term '*Istoria*' means **collection of information of significant events of the past obtained as the result of scientific enquiry.**
- Sources (evidences) are the basis to construct history.
- Any historical writing has three parts :
 - **Event (past)**
 - **Knowledge about the past (Facts / Sources)**
 - **Interpreting & presenting the facts**

The aim of history is to
GET TO THE TRUTH
for the duty of a historian
is to present what actually
had happened in the past.

“ History is a Science no less no more”

- John B. Bury

History is Science



Science means : Knowledge about the structure and behaviour of the natural and physical world based on facts that can be proved by experiments

A scientist verifies his / her conclusions through repeated experimentation.



A historian comes somewhat closer to it **through corroboration of several sources** so that he/ she can check the veracity of one reference with another. History pursues it by indirect observation viz. through eye witnesses or through others who have heard of it or by other methods.



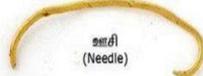
செத்தாள்
(Button)



வளையம்
(Ring)



தொங்குடிகள்
(Pendent)



சூரி
(Needle)



மணி
(Bead)



மணி
(Bead)



தகடு
(Plate)



Some questions arise in our mind :

- **Is scientific history possible ?**
- **Is it possible to present the past as it actually happened?**
- **Is history constructed?**
- **If so, is it in the minds of historians or in the events that had happened ?**
- **Is it possible to construct an objective history ?**
- **What do we mean by objectivity in history ?**

Meaning of Objectivity

- Objectivity means mental state or quality of being objective; it also **means external reality** . Objective is derived from the word 'object' which is a **reality external to mind**. Therefore is not mere thought, invention, intention, imagination, feeling , sensitivity etc., all which are personal to the mind, inward and subjective. – Prof. Subramanian

What is Objectivity ?



- By objectivity, we mean dispassionate, disinterested and scientific treatment of all events which would be depicted by a historian as if he was a judge pronouncing his verdict in the most impartial way without any fear or favour.

- Mamta Agarwal

- *“ Historical objectivity is a characteristic of modern scientific method of historical writing”*

Dr. J. Chobe

- **“To know objectivity well , it is necessary that we must know the difference between general history and research in history. In fact objectivity is the expression of history. **We can save objectivity by giving supremacy to facts”** - Butterfield**

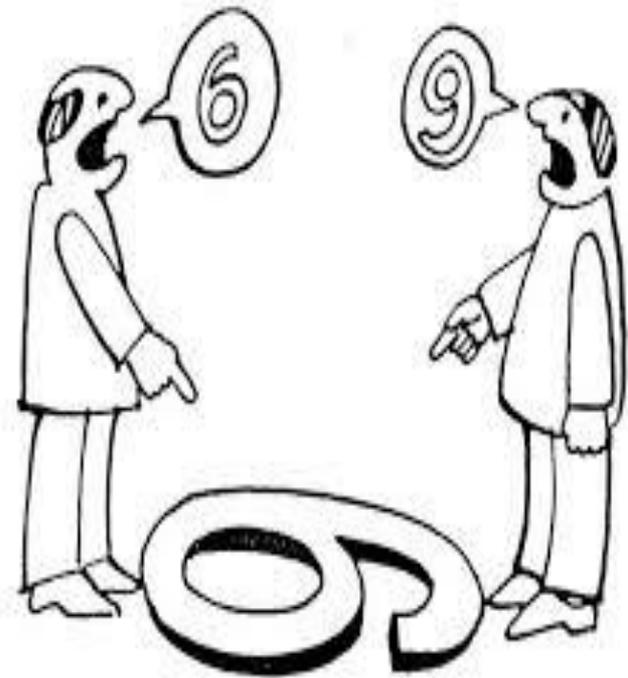
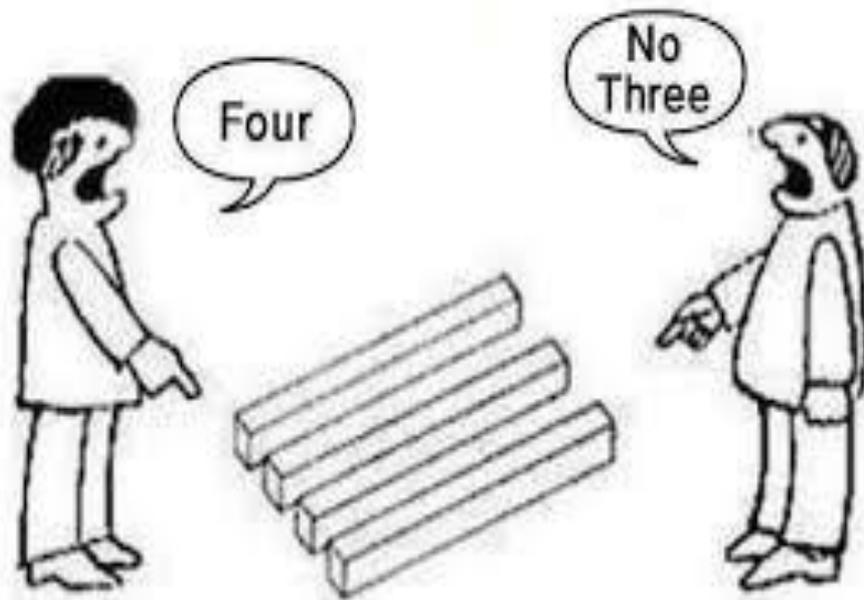
NEED FOR OBJECTIVITY

Objectivity in historical writing is of vital necessity on different grounds.

- 1) To understand the real history only when it is written objectively. As a historian writes the history of his fellow human beings, he becomes a social agent.
- 2) To reveal the truth as it is, for the truth derived by it should be capable of experimentation.
- 3) To prove itself reliable, so that its authenticity should be beyond doubt.

Interpreting the Facts

It is really confusing!!!



ESSENTIALS OF OBJECTIVITY

To emerge as a successful historian, it is essential to cultivate the habits of objectivity, criticism, analysis and balanced approach.

Certain factors can contribute to objectivity.

- (1) To possess curiosity to gather the information from all possible sources. Historical data are furnished by archaeological or literary sources, that are found at different places and at times in several languages. It is necessary to collect all these data for the purpose of writing a work.

(2) The historian should possess a critical spirit for a scientific analysis. He / she should master the details, compare the evidences, apply criticism and evaluate them for writing.

(3) He is to cultivate a historical sense, so that he can see a character, event or trend in its real setting.

(4) In the process of writing he is to display an ability not to allow his subjective considerations to blur his vision. He should bestow adequate care upon factual verification, should evaluate each situation and character on merit and should write what really happened.

The generalisations and conclusions that he / she forms, are to be supported by sufficient data and based upon balanced approach.

OBJECTIVITY IN HISTORICAL WRITING

Objectivity in historical writing is of capital importance for the growth of historical studies on healthy lines. Until recent times the explanation for historical developments was sought not from an objective search for truth in history but from other points of view mythology, theology, philosophy and ideology.

Objectivity contributed to critical study of history and objective writing which in turn helped in the emergence of history as a scientific and independent branch of knowledge.

Historical objectivity stands for what is true and the real. It implies the state of being free from personal bias and sentimental approach and the state of not being one sided, personal and partial. Being what is real, it will be the same, who ever writes it.

Subjective history on the other hand is subject to the bias of a person, who writes it. This will be different from writer to writer for it varies according to the bias of a person concerned. While truth plays the decisive role in objective history, prejudice in subjective history.



“ I would not care whether truth is pleasant or unpleasant and in consonance with or opposed to current views. I would not mind the least whether the truth is or is not a blow to the glory of my country. If necessary, I shall bear in patience the ridicule the slander of friends and society for the sake of preaching truth. But still **I shall seek truth, understand truth and accept truth**”.

- Jadunath Sarkar, the Father Modern Scientific Historiography in India.

QUALITIES OF A HISTORIAN



“A historian ought to be exact, sincere, and impartial; free from passion, unbiased by interest, fear, resentment, or affection; and faithful to the truth which is the mother of history, the preserver of great actions, the enemy of oblivion, the witness of the past and the director of the future. In short he must have an open mind, though it may not be an empty mind, and readiness to examine all evidences even though it is spurious”

-Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar,
Writings and Speeches, Vol. VII

BIAS AND SUBJECTIVITY

Despite the importance of objectivity for history, it is not always followed. An interpretation that is accepted as true by one generation is considered as out of date by another. This is because what is written is related to the tastes, prejudices, customs and commitment of the writer.

Subjectivity



Objectivity



Subjectivity



OBJECTIVE
REALITY

SUBJECTIVE
INTERPRETATION



“When one writes, he is present in his work with his **whole personality**, with his **temperament**, with his **reason** and with his **group consciousness**.”

– G.M. Trevelyan

A historian, before he or she begins to write history, is the product of history. The thought of the historian, as of other human beings, is moulded by the environment of the time and place. Historian, being an individual, is also a product of history and society.



Before you study the historian, study
his historical and social background.

- E.H. Carr

A historian is a social being, a product of physical and social environment. It is natural that the two factors, time and place, have an impact on his writings.

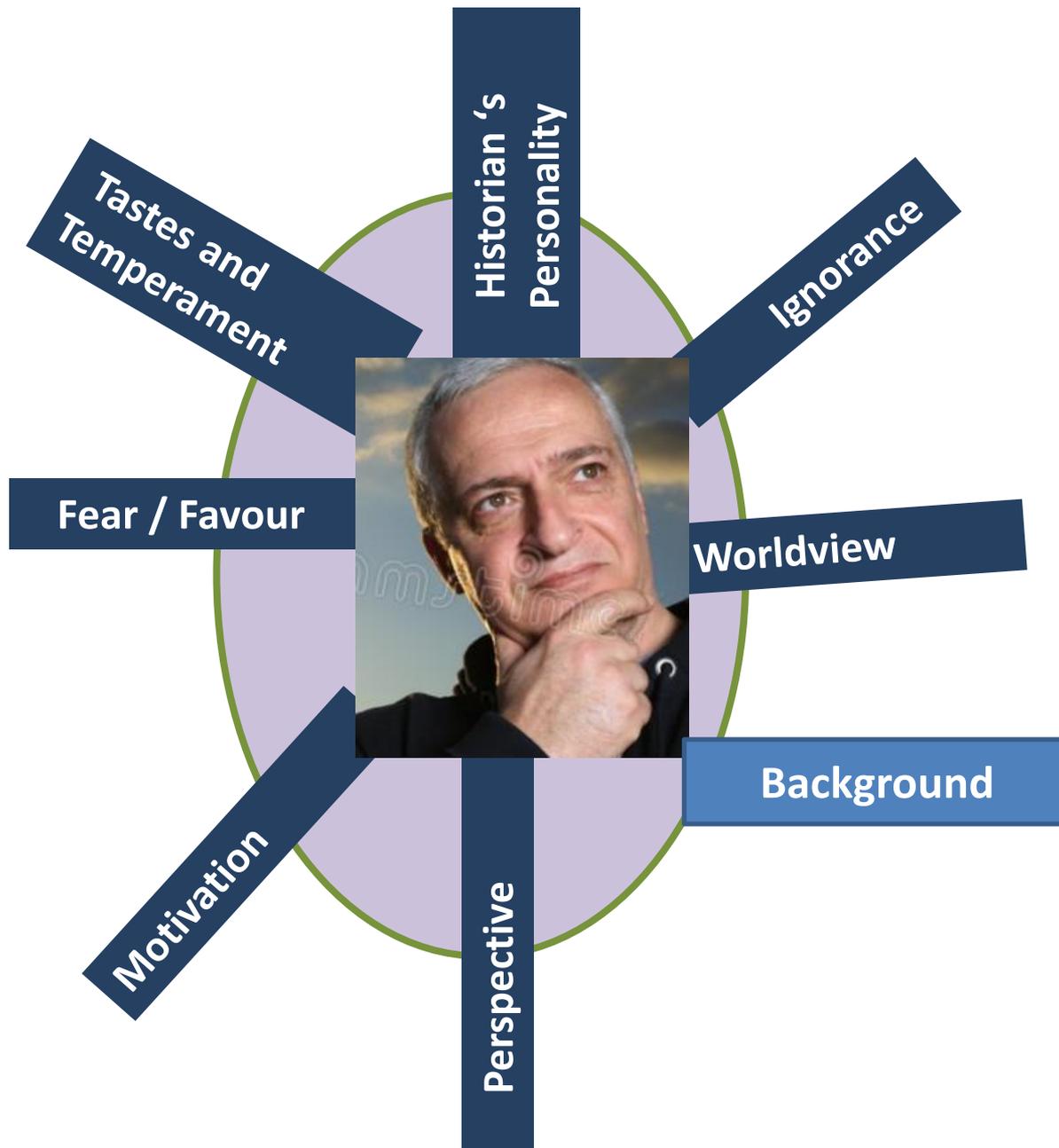
The present can and does influence one's knowledge of the past.

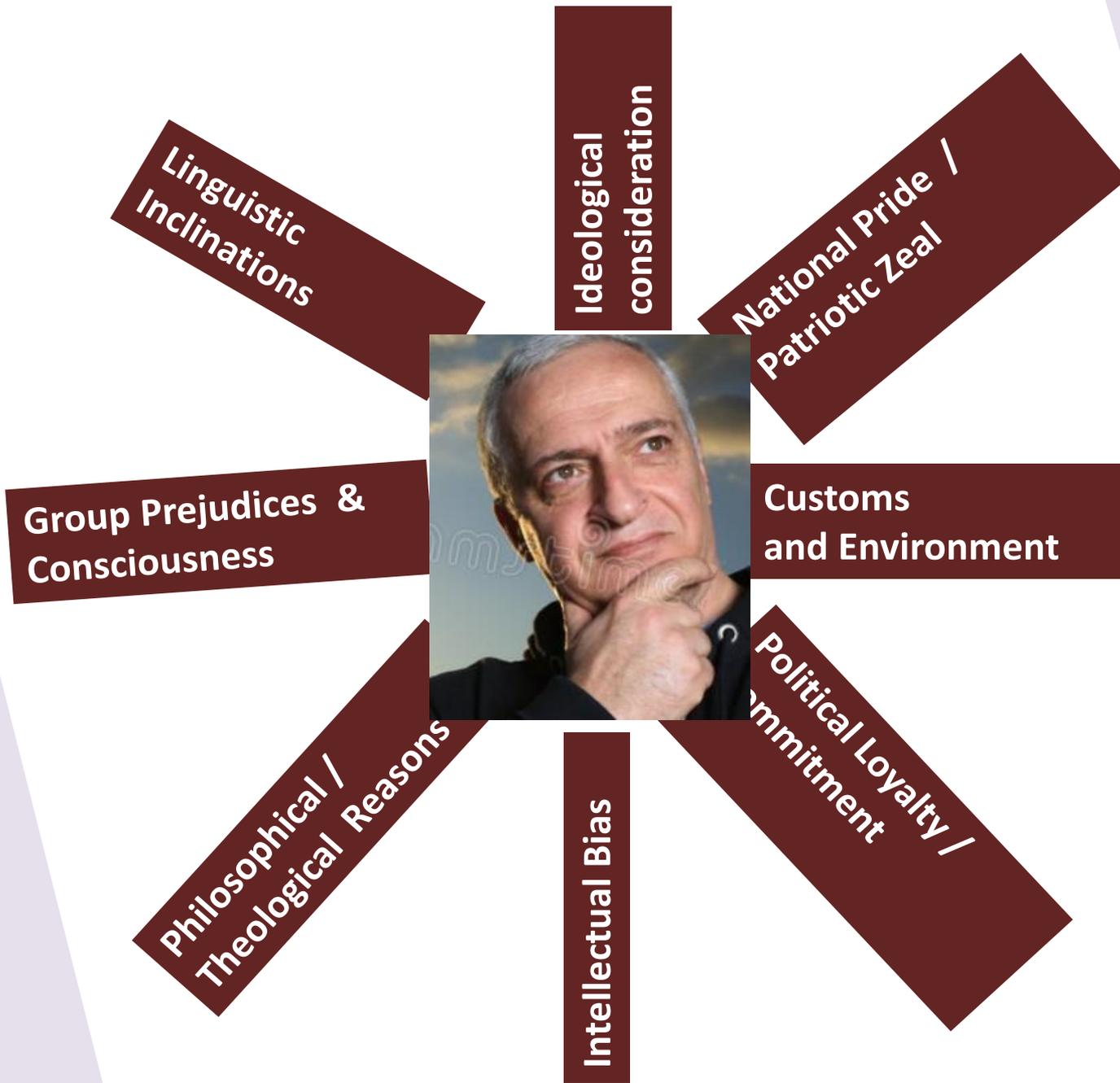
EVERY HISTORIAN has his / her own likes, tastes, aptitude and preferences. An element of subjectivity enters at every step in the process of investigation.

The different processes involved in historical writing give considerable scope for subjectivity. Thus the subjective element comes **into play in the selection of a subject for writing.** When a subject is chosen, he is to collect the data, needed for writing. Here a double process of subjectivity is involved. Finally, the historian being a judge, he is to weigh the pros and cons and pass his verdict over situations and characters.

Subjectivity arises out of different forms of prejudice, which often overlap each other. Mostly, they are partisan attitude, ideological consideration, political commitment and group prejudice. Ideological consideration has its origin in a conviction in a particular line of thinking like the theological, philosophical and materialistic. Political commitment is due to personal loyalty or political obligation. Group prejudice can be religious, racial and national.

Among the other factors that contribute to the writing of subjective history are ignorance, fear and motivation. Inaccessibility to the source material and inability to study the relevant data are likely to keep the historian ignorant of even major developments. Motivation can be due to a desire to advance self-interests : economic motivation to get money and goods, political motivation to gain power and psychological motivation to promote a cause.





CONCLUSION

Can a historian get the **complete image of the past** with the help of the sources available to him?

Only a part of what was **observed** in the past was **remembered**, only a part of what was remembered was **recorded**; only a part of what was recorded has **survived**; only a part of what was survived has come to the **historian's attention**; only a part of what has come to their attention is **credible has been grasped**; and only a part of what has been grasped can be **expounded or narrated** by the historian. - Gottschalf

History came to be recognised as a science. It means to **analyse critically all sources** (evidences) of the past events in which a historian is interested.

History is not written by ‘copying out the testimony of the best sources, but by coming to ‘your own conclusions’. Collingwood asserts: Evidence is evidence only when some one contemplates it historically; otherwise it is merely a predicted fact, historically dump. It follows that **historical knowledge can only grow out of historical thinking which is an original and fundamental activity of human mind.**

- **In short, the modern conception of history as an autonomous science, characterised by a past-present continuum, rests completely on the process of criticism (looks at the sources objectively, analysing them objectively before synthesising and presenting.)**

OBJECTIVITY REQUIRED IN FIVE AREAS.

- ✓ Selection of the topic
- ✓ Collection of the sources
- ✓ Choosing of the Sources
- ✓ Interpretation of the historical facts
- ✓ Presentation or Final synthesis (writing)

- Since history is science, historians should aim at presenting the facts with accuracy
- As historian is a social being (subject himself) objectivity is **not possible totally as in science**
- Historian needs to collect and exhaust all available sources on the topic.
- Constantly scrutinize one's thoughts while writing and presenting it
- “If history is to fulfil the task of holding up a mirror to the past, a historian should be as objective as possible.” - Shiek Ali

“Discern the truth in everything, by
whomsoever spoken, this is wisdom.”

Thirukural (423).

THANK YOU