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TRUTH, HISTORY AND NARRATION: A POLEMICAL APPROACH

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#### I] ABSTRACT:

The interplay between truth, history and narration has long been a subject of philosophical and historiographical debate. Truth is often seen as universal, objective and absolute while history is constructed through subjective human narrative. This research paper critically examines how historical narratives shape and distort truth, exploring perspectives from classical and modern historians and philosophers. Using a polemical approach, it interrogates the epistemological foundations of history, the role of ideology and the tension between factual accuracy and interpretative storytelling. Drawing from Indian and Western philosophical traditions, this paper argues that history is not merely a passive record of past events but an active construction influenced by political, cultural and epistemic biases.

**II] KEY WORDS:** Truth, Epistemology, Narration, Historiography, Discourse, Discursive Practices, Subaltern Historiography etc.

# **III] INTRODUCTION:**

Truth, history and narration are interconnected yet distinct concepts. Truth is often considered universal and unchanging, whereas history is a constructed representation of past events. Narration, in turn, is the medium through which history is recorded and interpreted. The question arises whether history reflect objective truth, or whether it is a subjective narration shaped by power and ideology. This paper adopts a polemical stance, challenging the conventional assumption that history is a neutral recounting of facts. Instead, it explores how history is shaped by human agency, selective memory, and political interests.

#### IV] OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY:

- 1] To understand the concepts like truth, history and narration
- 2] To illustrate historiography with diverse polemical perspectives
- 3] To interpret modern viewpoint of historiography

### **V] POLEMICAL INTERPRETATION:**

Traditional historiography assumes that history is a discipline aimed at uncovering the factual events. The traditional view proposes history should be written as it actually happened. Greek historian Herodotus' seminal treatise, *Histories* emphasize the importance of sources, investigation and attempt

to understand the causes and consequences of events rather than simply recounting them. While he was not always rigorous in verifying the truth of every account. Herodotus acknowledge the complexity of history and the variety of interpretations that could arise from different witnesses. One of the key aspect of Herodotus's historiography is his inclusion of both human agency and the role of divine intervention in shaping historical events. He believe that both the actions of individuals and the will of gods play essential roles in the unfolding of history. This combination of the divine and human factors in his narratives reflects the worldview of the ancient Greeks, where gods and fate were considered integral parts of the human experience. He included myths and divine interventions in his historical accounts.

Thucydides and Hesiod are both significant figures in ancient Greek intellectual history, but they had different approaches to writing about the past. Their contributions to historiography and historical thought are foundational in understanding the evolution of history as a discipline. Thucydides, an Athenian historian and general, is best known for his work *History of the Peloponnesian War*. The book is chronicles to the conflict between Athens and Sparta. His contribution to historiography is significant for several reasons. Unlike his predecessor, Herodotus, Thucydides seeks to eliminate the supernatural elements like god and divinity from historical explanation. Thucydides emphasize a rational and empirical approach. He relies on eyewitness accounts, speeches and rigorous analysis of political and military events. He seeks to provide an unbiased, factual account, avoiding supernatural explanations. He introduces the idea of historical causation, distinguishing between immediate and underlying causes of events. Thucydides' work is a foundational text for political realism. He analyzes power struggles, human nature, and realpolitik, setting the stage for modern political and historical analysis. His rigorous methodology, reliance on evidence, and cause-effect analysis lay the groundwork for modern historiography.

Hesiod was an early Greek poet whose works *Theogony* and *Works and Days* provide insights into Greek mythology, cosmology, and social values. Though not a historian in the modern sense, his contributions to historical thought are significant. Hesiod's *Theogony* recounts the genealogy of the gods and the origins of the cosmos. While not factual history, it reflects how early Greeks understood their past through divine genealogies and mythic narratives. *Works and Days* provides an account of peasant life, justice, and morality, offering a valuable glimpse into the socio-economic conditions of early Greece. This text serves as an early example of historical literature dealing with everyday life and moral instruction. Hesiod presents didactic and ethical history where history as a moral lesson, teaching about justice and the struggle between good and evil. This approach influenced later Greek thinkers who integrated ethics into historical writing. His poetry preserved cultural memory and transmitted Greek traditions, customs and worldview which played a role in shaping historical consciousness in ancient Greece.

Thucydides lay the foundation for objective historical writing, whereas Hesiod contributes to the preservation of mythological and socio-cultural history. Together, they represent two essential streams in the evolution of Greek historical thought: one analytical and factual and the other poetic and didactic.

The Greek philosopher, Aristotle in his seminal treatise *Poetics*, compares history with literature which is based on mythological allusions. He proposes history is based on facts and particulars. His understanding of history is rooted in his broader views on empirical knowledge and the nature of reality. Historical facts are events that could be grounded in the experience and observation of particular circumstances. He was more interested in understanding specific occurrences in human history, political events and the working of nature rather than abstract and idealized concepts. He believes that history tells what has happened and literature represents what would happen. According to him, myth or literature is idealized forms of art which imitate human nature with universal truth. Myths, for Aristotle, often convey moral lessons and deep truths about the human condition. For example, the tragic hero in Greek drama may be an individual who suffers because of a flaw or a series of events that unfold according to fate, but this suffering reflects *universal themes* of pride, ambition, and downfall. These themes are not limited to a specific time or place but are timeless and applicable to

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all human beings. Aristotle's approach to myth and its relationship to truth is rooted in his belief that myths can convey moral or universal truths, even if they are not literally true or factual in a historical sense. Myths are allegories, symbolic representations of truths that transcend the particulars of any given society or historical moment. While mythological events might not have happened as described, the moral lessons and universal themes embedded within them offer deep insights into human nature and the world. For example, the myth of Oedipus, as told in the famous tragedy by Sophocles, presents a story of fate, family, and identity. Although it may not be a factual historical event, Aristotle recognize that the underlying themes of pride and the inescapability of fate held universal truths. These truths could be applied to individuals in any time or place, making myth an important means of conveying lessons that extended beyond mere historical events. Aristotle's views on historical fact and the universal truth of literature and myth reflect his broader philosophical commitment to empirical observation and the search for universal principles. While he recognizes history as the domain of particular facts and events, he also acknowledges that literature, especially through myth and drama, provide a unique means of exploring the universal aspects of human experience. In sum, Aristotle's views on historiography are deeply informed by his broader philosophical system.

Machiavelli, an Italian Renaissance political philosopher, is best known for his work *The Prince*, but his *History of Florence* is also an important contribution to historiography. Machiavelli separated history from morality and religion. He focuses on political and military history, offering a practical approach to understanding political power. His works combine historical narrative with political theory, emphasizing the role of individual leaders and their decisions in shaping historical outcomes. Machiavelli's historiography is pragmatic, often focusing on the lessons that history could provide for contemporary politics, and it reflects a more secular, human-centered view of history.

Voltaire was one of the leading figures of the Enlightenment, had a profound influence on philosophical historiography. Voltaire's historiography is strongly secular and philosophical, aligned with his broader Enlightenment belief in reason, progress, and skepticism toward religious authority. He believes that the historian's task is not simply to record events but to interpret them in a way that reveal the causes behind them and provided moral or practical lessons. In his historical works, Voltaire often looks for the larger philosophical and social implications of the events he described, attempting to show how reason, liberty, and tolerance could improve society. His rejection of religious explanations for history led him to embrace a more rational, human-centered approach to historical writing. His view is human beings as capable of shaping their own destiny through reason, and he saw the study of history as a means of understanding the forces that shaped human society. Voltaire is particularly interested in the progress of civilization, emphasizing the importance of reason and human agency over divine fate. In this sense, his historiography is a reflection of his belief in the potential for human beings to create a more enlightened and just world. For Voltaire, history is a tool for moral and intellectual improvement. He believes that the study of the past should offer lessons for contemporary society, guiding future generations toward better governance and more enlightened values. This moralistic view of history is evident in many of his works, where he seeks to demonstrate how human folly, superstition, and religious intolerance led to suffering and conflict. In contrast, he advocates for rational governance, tolerance, and the promotion of civil liberties as essential to societal progress. Voltaire's influence on historiography is significant, particularly for his emphasis on secularism, reason, and moral critique in historical writing. His works mark a departure from the traditional, often religiously influenced, histories of his time. By placing greater importance on the social, political, and intellectual forces shaping historical events, Voltaire contributes to the development of a more critical, analytical, and human-centered approach to history.

Karl Marx's historical materialism is one of the most influential theories of history. Marx believes that material conditions and class struggles were the primary drivers of historical change. His works, like *The Communist Manifesto* and *Das Kapital*, lay the foundation for a Marxist interpretation of

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history that emphasizes economic forces, class relations, and the conflict between bourgeois and proletariat.

Nationalist Historiography emphasizes the role of national identity and the struggles of national communities. It often highlights national heroes and struggles for independence.

Thomas Carlyle is perhaps most famous for his **great man theory of history**, which posits that history is shaped primarily by the actions and leadership of great individuals. According to Carlyle, extraordinary figures like heroes, leaders, and visionaries drive the course of history through their chivalry, personal qualities, actions and decisions. In his work On Heroes, Hero-Worship and the Heroic in History, Carlyle argues that individuals like Napoleon Bonaparte, Martin Luther, Shakespeare, and **John Knox** are the key heroes in shaping historical change. He viewed these individuals as the driving forces of social and political transformation, whose talents and capabilities had a disproportionate effect on the course of events. Carlyle's writings elevate the idea of **hero worship**, seeing the great men of history as embodiments of essential human qualities. For him, heroes are not only exceptional in their personal abilities but also possess a kind of divine or mystical inspiration that made them stand above ordinary people. Carlyle believes that history was not simply a series of events and facts, but also a moral narrative. His writings are often infused with a sense of the moral purpose behind historical events, and he views historical figures as moral agents who played roles in shaping the destiny of nations. Carlyle's historiography places immense emphasis on the individual rather than social or economic forces. In his works, he often chose to focus on a small number of significant individuals, narrating their lives in a manner that highlighted their heroic qualities. This style is not objective in the modern sense, but rather subjective, drawing on a romanticized and narrative-driven portrayal of history. Carlyle's style has been seen as a precursor to the modern biographical genre in historical writing. Carlyle is deeply influenced by **Romanticism**, a movement that valued emotion, individualism, and the sublime. This influence can be seen in his emphasis on the passionate lives of historical figures and the belief that history could not be reduced to cold, rational analysis.

Antonio Gramsci was an Italian Marxist philosopher whose ideas about power, culture and ideology have a significant impact on historiography. His work is central in understanding cultural hegemony and power structure. Gramsci's central contribution to historiography is the concept of **cultural hegemony**. His main standpoint is that the ruling class maintains control not just through political or economic power, but through the control of **ideological** and **cultural** institutions. These institutions like schools, media and the church, shape public opinion and align the interests of the masses with those of the ruling elite, thus making the dominance of the ruling class seem natural and inevitable. This allows the elite to maintain power without the need for coercion. Gramsci's theories on the role of ideology and the importance of **organic intellectuals** have a significant influence on **Subaltern Studies**, a field pioneered by scholars like **Ranajit Guha**, **Partha Chatterjee** and **Gayatri Spivak**. Subaltern Studies seeks to write history from the perspective of marginalized or oppressed groups, counteracting traditional histories that often neglect their experiences.

Dr. Ambedkar's **subaltern historiography** is rooted in his effort to **reclaim history** for the **Dalit** and **oppressed communities**. Traditional Indian history, as presented by Brahminical scholars, often omitted or misrepresented the experiences of Dalits, who were marginalized in society and denied access to education, political rights, and social justice. Ambedkar made the subversion of ancient Indian history. His narrative version is alternative and counter narrative to Vedic, Puranic views of Indian culture and history. His seminal book, *Who were the Shudras?* traces back the racial history of *Shudras* in India. Dr. Ambedkar officially demolishes the authority of Vedic traditional views about social structure. Dr. Ambedkar's rejects the superiority of Aryan theory of the subaltern. He says, "Aryan Samajists have done great mischief in making the Hindu society a stationary society by preaching that Vedas are eternal... infallible." (Who Were the Shudras? p. xvii).

Ambedkar's work *Revolution and Counter Revolution in India* is an alternative version of Indian history. It is a subversion of Ancient traditional history. This is necessary to unconventional to Vedic and Puranic clarification of Indian history. His book *Revolution and Counter Revolution* is a treatise to subaltern history. Indian history is written in the perspective of Brahminic or Vedic hierarchy of

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knowledge. Ambedkar's narrative supports the oppressed and marginalized. He reinterprets the history for social metamorphosis in favour of the Dalits and outcastes. This is complete demolition of the orthodox systems of ancient and medieval India. Ambedkar says that Buddhism is revolutionary to orthodox Hindu religion. It is not the religious revolution but also social and political revolution. This is a counter-narration he proposes in his treatise. (Revolution and Counter Revolution, p. 153).

Stephen Greenblatt is a prominent literary theorist and historian, best known for his contributions to the field of **New Historicism**. New Historicism is a critical approach that seeks to understand literature and culture in relation to the historical conditions in which they were produced. Greenblatt's historiographical approach emphasizes the interconnection between text and context, suggesting that the meaning of any literary work cannot be fully understood without considering the historical, political, and cultural conditions that produced it. His historiographical approach challenges traditional, linear views of history by highlighting the dynamic interaction between literature and history. New Historicism, as developed by Greenblatt, rejects the notion of a fixed, objective history that exists independently of the texts produced in any given era. Instead, he advocates for a history of culture, where literature and historical events are inextricably linked. Greenblatt's concept of power is deeply influenced by Michel Foucault's theories of power, knowledge, and discourse. Like Foucault, Greenblatt views power as diffused throughout society and not confined to the actions of a single ruler or group. For him, power operates through cultural practices, institutions, and beliefs, and literature is a site where these power dynamics can be analyzed and understood. For Greenblatt, history is always about context. He encourages scholars to look at not just the **literary text**, but also the **historical conditions** under which it was produced, distributed, and received. **Contextualization** is central to Greenblatt's approach. He emphasizes the need to **immerse** literary works in their cultural and historical context to fully understand their meaning and significance. This involves considering the political, social, religious, and economic forces at play when a work was written. Rather than treating historical documents or literary texts as isolated objects, Greenblatt advocates for a comprehensive examination of the context in which cultural products emerge.

Michel Foucault, a French philosopher and poststructuralist, argues that **history is not a simple, objective recounting of past events** but rather the product of specific **discourses** (systems of knowledge and language) that structure and define how we understand the past. History, for Foucault, is **constructed through the lens of power**: the way history is told and interpreted depends on who holds power and what ideologies dominate at a given time. Traditional historiography often assumes that history is a straightforward recording of events that unfolds linearly, either in a **progressive** or **teleological** manner. Foucault, in contrast, viewed history as more fragmented, contingent and shaped by **specific historical circumstances**.

Foucault's focus on **discourse** as a form of social power is a major element of his historiography. In his works, Foucault examines the development of **discursive practices**. Knowledge is an instrument of power, and power also shapes what is regarded as knowledge. In Foucault's terms, power operates through **discourses**, and the production of knowledge is part of these broader mechanisms of power. Discourses determine what can be said, thought, or done and thus shape social reality. Foucault examined how *regimes of truth*, the dominant ways of thinking or knowing, are established in society. These regimes determine what is accepted as true and are maintained by various institutions such as the state, academia, religion, and media.

Foucault's concept of the 'archaeology of knowledge' refers to a method for studying the historical conditions of knowledge and the *discursive practices* that define various periods. Foucault is interested in how knowledge systems such as medicine, psychology, or the law evolve over time and shape social norms and behaviors. Archaeology is a methodological approach that investigates the underlying structures and rules that govern the production of knowledge within specific historical periods. Instead of focusing on the development of specific ideas or individuals, archaeology focuses on the historical conditions that allowed certain types of knowledge to emerge. Foucault argues that knowledge is not neutral or objective but is always connected to power relations. The production of

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knowledge is shaped by **social institutions**, **dominant ideologies** and **historical contexts**, and it serves the interests of particular groups in society.

Foucault's **genealogy** is another important approach that radically changes how historians understand history. Genealogy is Foucault's historical method, influenced by Nietzsche, which investigates the **origins of ideas**, practices, and institutions not through a linear, progressive view but by examining their **contingency** and **power relations**. Genealogy traces the **historical development** of ideas, practices, and institutions, focusing on how they have evolved through **struggles for power**. Instead of searching for origins or teleological development, genealogy looks at how different historical forces have shaped what we now accept as truth or knowledge.

Ultimately, this paper asserts that **truth in history** is never singular but is always mediated by the narratives through which we interpret and understand the past. Therefore, historians must embrace a critical, self-reflexive approach that questions both the narratives they inherit and the power relations that shape them.

# VI] CONCLUSION:

In conclusion, the interplay between **truth**, **history** and **narration** is a complex and multifaceted issue, one that has profound implications for the way we understand the past and its representation. Through a polemical approach, this paper has examined how history is not merely a neutral recounting of events but a product of **narrative construction** that is shaped by **power dynamics**, **cultural contexts** and **ideological forces**. The works of theorists like **Foucault**, **Gramsci** and **Greenblatt** highlight that historical narratives are never objective but are embedded with the **values** and **biases** of those who create them. The **truth** of history, then, becomes a contested space, where multiple interpretations and counter-narratives emerge in response to dominant historical discourses. The act of narration is not passive; it is a **political** and **ideological** exercise that actively shapes our understanding of what is remembered and forgotten. In this context, the historian's role is not simply to uncover facts, but to critically engage with the power structures that influence the construction of historical knowledge.

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