On Matters of Historical Method

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This paper aims at adding to the previous discussion on matters of historical method.[1] The matters are concerned with the "objects" or aims of the North East India History Association as enshrined in its Constitution, i.e. the —

> Promotion and encouragement of the **scientific study** [emphasis added] of the History of North East India, viz. Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura, and the adjoining areas historically connected with the region[.][2]

The Constitution further lays down the condition that —

> All papers intended for reading at a session of the Association shall embody either **some original piece of research or a new interpretation of facts** [emphasis added].[3]

To appreciate the full import of the NEIHA's stated intentions, however, it would be in the fitness of things to take the readers back in time to trace the beginnings and development of history writing and to locate the circumstances under which the discipline of History in the modern context began insisting on *scientific inquiry* and *objective interpretation of facts* as essential features of the historical method. The purpose is to acquaint the younger members of the Association, particularly those who have just — or will have in the near future — embarked on research work with these matters. This is because these matters of historical method (although now regarded as belonging to the stock of common knowledge among many of those engaged in historical research) have not really been studied with the aim of grasping the assumptions and logic contained therein. Only then would it be appropriate to make comments on their practical application — or lack of it — to studies on Northeast India insofar as they are reflected in the contributions to the NEIHA publications. This is not to suggest, though, that there will be any survey of the available literature on northeast India by way of providing illustrations in this paper. It is rather to be hoped that researchers in the region would take up that exercise, proceeding from

the introduction here to the different strands of historiography within a general chronological sequence.

As students of History must know, the genesis of 'scientific inquiry' as we understand it today can be traced back with a degree of certainty only to the era of the 'Enlightenment' in Europe during the eighteenth century. This period stood about (a) one and a half millennia away from the date ascribed to the 'father of history', i.e. the Greek historian Herodotus (484-425 B.C.); and (b) a century later than the scientific revolution in Europe often approximating the premium put on the experimental method as the hallmark of the natural sciences,[4] and on logic and epistemology of the pure science (traditionally, 'unaided reason') or philosophy.[5]

Herodotus is credited with the beginnings of *historical inquiry* because he pioneered the attempt to give a factually supported account of *why* the Greeks and the Persians had fought with each other almost a generation before his own (499-479 B.C.). His well-known work *Historie*[6] — literally translated as "inquiry", or "a search for the rational explanation and understanding of phenomena"[7] — implied that only a learned man (= *histor* in the classical Greek language, i.e. in the sense of a man qualified enough to adjudicate in legal matters, who was capable of separating the true from the false by interrogating the witnesses involved in the matters) undertook such work. The *Historie* was pieced together based on critical study of the facts derived from the Persian, Phoenician and Greek versions of the causes of the Greco-Persian conflicts, supplemented / complemented by the evidence of the-then available epigraphic records, archival material, official chronicles, and whatever information Herodotus was able to garner from various locations in the course of his investigation into that event. His stated goal was to record and account for that event and to trace back the evolution of the Greek identities and the seeds of their conflict with the Persians to the more distant past by relying on his own knowledge culled from 'the facts' of both written records and oral traditions[8] **without passing judgement on their truth or falsity** [emphasis added]. He sought to achieve his goal by looking at the past from a new perspective drawing on this hitherto untried method of organizing the-then extant evidence not seen in poetry or philosophy. In Herodotus' opinion, poetry and philosophy (although both were regarded as important branches of knowledge by the-then contemporary Greek citizens) had not quite succeeded in drawing a correct

picture of human societies in their given social contexts or in times of crisis or change; rather, in placing undue emphasis on oratories they subserved the interest and taste of the politically powerful, 'aristocratic' section of society. Herodotus realized the need to take a non-philosophical (and correspondingly non-rhetorical or non-manipulative), non-partisan approach to history writing and to include in his narrative people and places both 'great' and 'small', Greek as well as non-Greek because, as he put it, "... in this world nobody remains prosperous for long." Apparently his history was aimed at appealing to a larger audience and enabling people in his own time to draw lessons from it. Notwithstanding these novel methods that Herodotus introduced to history writing, however, the end product was not quite 'scientific', 'objective' or 'secular': his discussion and conclusions on the subject matter and aspects related to it were influenced by the-then prevalent belief in the 'circular wheel of fate' that (supposedly) governed causality. Like many of his contemporaries he believed that:

- events / processes followed a cyclical / recurrent pattern;
- historical events could be attributed to human activities;
- retribution was bound to follow injury;
- every human being was born with a flawed character that overlay the circular wheel of fate.

For these reasons Herodotus did not totally rule out the role of the gods / goddesses in the affairs of human beings. After all he had to rationalize why human beings had no control over the worldly phenomena. But he wasted no time trying to explain the workings of the gods / goddesses, other than that providence did not take kindly to *hubris*, i.e. pride in one's achievement, which 'flaw' was singled out as the root-cause of the fall of a man — and, by extension, that of a place — from the pedestal of whatever greatness may have been attained. It was left to his younger contemporary Thucydides (460-400 B.C.) to come up with certain *universal* and *constant* laws or principles underlying the significant (individual) events (in this case, the Peloponnesian War, 431-404 B.C.),[9] and to identify *the causes that invariably produce the same results*, subject to the development of parallel circumstances at any given point of time. Thucydides followed most of the methods ascribed to Herodotus, and shared the same belief in the concept of time and the pattern of events. But he built up further on critically analyzing the facts he had gathered from the various sources that he could verify based on

his own experiences and observations: His goal was to make his narrative as 'objective' as possible within the framework of the 'great war' that he regarded as the most important happening of the-then most recent past, in which he had been involved as a participant.[10] Unlike Herodotus, Thucydides did not believe in looking back to the distant past to locate the seeds of internal strife among the Greeks or in deviating from (what he regarded as) the essentials of the narrative. As far as he was concerned the central theme of his study was the role of the individuals who had been instrumental in influencing politically catalytic decisions — good or bad — that in turn had a bearing on the course of the Peloponnesian War. And he fixed responsibility for whatever had happened squarely on human activities, not divine will. For instance, he attributed the non-popularity of Athens among the city-states of his time to the nature of power that she exercised to consolidate and perpetuate her self-interest to the disadvantage of the other city-states. Apparently the message that he wanted to convey to the reader of his history of the Peloponnesian War was this: power is oppressive and evokes a negative response from the oppressed, because every state 'acts in its own self-interest'. His work therefore exhibited a truly secular approach and seemingly dispassionate perspective for the first time in history writing. But there was a fundamental problem in his writing: other than his persistence with the idea of the recurrent pattern of events, this could be attributed to his view that history was *only* about politics and the state.[11] Not surprisingly, this conviction accounted for Thucydides' falling into the quagmire of the 'grand narrative' pulled in by the force of the deeds of 'great men'; unlike Herodotus he was dismissive of the roles of 'ordinary' people / places in history. To that extent his assertion of producing an objective history was confined to the narrow framework of reconstructing the sequence of events from diverse accounts ascribed to the select few, i.e. the men in positions of authority to the exclusion of everybody else, and showed his lack of openness to other things bearing on everyday life that his evidence might have revealed. In the ultimate analysis Thucydides' primary concern was with determining the fact of actions stemming from political expediency. Nothing else mattered.

The Roman history writers of the 'classical era' carried on the elements of historiography particularly attributed to Thucydides in terms of both themes and techniques. To these they added certain rules and codes to ensure that the writer would give a 'truthful' account of the historical events. Towards that end they made it mandatory for the history

writer to (a) be particular about fidelity to the sources and to the chronology and geographical context of the deeds of the rulers; (b) pay attention to details of the subject matter regarding the causes, patterns and effects of the noteworthy events with the focus on the 'great deeds' and the misdeeds — to find out whether the actions had stemmed from chance or from strength / weakness of character. Furthermore they insisted on the use of *rhetoric* (i.e. elegant, persuasive speaking or writing) to *influence* the audience. In that sense their writings often betrayed undue preference for certain individual characters to others. This type of history is best illustrated in *The Annals* authored by Cornelius Tacitus (c. A.D.55-117).[12] But it was in the concept of time and the purpose of writing history that the Romans brought about a change in their historiography. Ironically this became prominent in the writings dating from the fourth century, which were ascribed to the early Christians.[13] Christian historiography stimulated the development of the *universalistic concept* and was marked by the *teleological approach*: This was in keeping with the doctrine that everything in the world (i.e. the natural processes and all other phenomena in the universe) originates from divine will and is moving towards a goal or is designed according to some predetermined purpose. The focus was on the origins and diffusion of humankind in the world and subsequently on how the rulers executed political action according to divine plan. In effect Christian historiography saw the *blending of theology and history* in the nature of a grand linear narrative drawing on the evidence of the 'holy Scripture' (which the writers believed was infallible) and that of other **complementary** [emphasis added] written documents that were of relevance to the particular subjects under study. And increasingly over the next ten – twelve centuries history remained rhetorical, even synonymous with a religious *polemic account*. For example, Protestant historians claimed that their faith originated even before the rise of medieval 'heretics' and well before Martin Luther. They also traced the 'corruption' of the Roman Catholic Church to a period not long after its establishment. Catholic historians, on their part, traced the genesis of their faith to more ancient times. Such polemic accounts particularly dominated history writing in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.[14] This was the period when protracted sectarian conflicts had taken place between Catholics and Protestants, and created the need to defend — and to provide a history for — their faith and confer it with authority each against the other under the influence of the Reformation. The main objective was to write (what

they believed were) 'true' stories about the past *from the perspectives of their individual faiths* and in the process build up as much documentary evidence as was possible towards that end. Apparently they believed that the huge quantity of evidence they piled up would act as a fortified wall against both adversaries and detractors! Clearly, history was pressed into the service of the practitioner's trade. It was a paradox that Christianity — rived from within by sectarian conflicts and therefore subjectively biased — should have developed the methods of using such enormous evidentiary support towards 'establishing' the 'truth' about the past and that about God. The methods were to have abiding influence on subsequent writings including historiography.

On another plane the Catholic-Protestant conflicts had been marked by violence on such a scale as to defy the basic tenets of Christianity that had sprung from the ideas of love and goodwill among 'children' or followers of the same 'true God' (they regarded all other objects of worship as 'false gods'). The result was the growing doubts among some members of the two Christian denominations (and other sects that arose in the wake of the Protestant Reformation) about the 'truth' of their faith that recognized the existence of only one 'true God' — yet in whose Name the violence had been unleashed. Added to this pervasive feeling of unease and uncertainty was the realization that there had been cultures in far-off lands outside Europe (such as India, China, and parts of the Americas) that had not only been much older and far more advanced than any hitherto known European cultures, but had also developed ethical codes higher than even those of eighteenth century European societies. This, despite the fact that those advanced cultures had not known anything about the (Christian God's) 'revelation' in the Bible or the teachings of Jesus. Some among the Christians began to doubt that they had indeed understood the truth about religion. Such knowledge and questioning stemmed from the 'world explorations', particularly from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries onward, and the access to written documents ascribed to 'antiquity', some of them predating the earliest Greek and Roman writings by several centuries.

The age of exploration (and the subsequent beginnings and development of capitalism in the following centuries) witnessed new inquiries into the histories and cultures of various communities around the world. Such inquiries set great store by *scientific study* that followed two procedures: (a) that of gathering as many facts as possible and then comparing them and classifying them: (b) that of drawing broad

generalizations on the instances, parallels and variations that would enable the formulation of a general theory to account for them. The more perceptive among the researchers in various 'non-sciences' disciplines felt the need to adopt the method of 'scientific explanations' — as were being fruitfully pursued in the natural and physical sciences — to account for the emergence and development of societies and cultures up to their own times. Such scientific explanations arose from the search for general theories that did not need to appeal to the concept of providence (unlike certain historical writings ascribed to 'classical' Greece and Rome) or divine revelations (typical of the historiography particularly attributed to followers of Judaism and Christianity). It was in this context that eighteenth century Europe had (supposedly) finally arrived at the threshold of 'enlightenment' in various fields of learning, including those pertaining to cultural studies.

To dilate on the points in the last paragraph, the eighteenth century stood out from the preceding centuries in that it witnessed significant historical developments radiating from the direction of the-then established 'nation-states' of the Western world to the 'Old World' (i.e. in Asia and Africa). Eventually it also marked the spread of capitalism on such a scale as to enable the emergence of a 'world order' hitherto unknown. In this context the Western world played the role of defining international relations riding on the waves of the economic compulsions by and large stimulated by the 'Industrial Revolution' initiated in England and impacting societies and economies in other parts of Europe; this in turn bred Western imperialism in the non-European world.[15] It resulted in colonialism in some parts of the latter world: In course of locating the raw materials and markets required for feeding the industries and disposing of the machine-manufactured commodities respectively, some European nation-states established colonies in various parts of the world. Such a development heralded the Westerners' extension of administrative control over those areas and the resultant need to train ('native') personnel in the art of administration, as much as introduce them to the imperialistic version of historical inquiry.[16] A parallel development was the diffusion of Christian missionary activities in various parts of Asia, Africa and the Americas.[17] The activities of the administrators and the missionaries converged on the matter of 'enlightening' the peoples inhabiting different parts of the world. But their motives and methods were not always the same: (a) the former wanted to superimpose the 'modern' socio-political systems of the Western model on the ruled (generally through various

degrees of 'arm-twisting') and to ram home the 'advantages' that would accrue from the machinery of State control and 'modern' ideas; (b) the latter wanted to spread the message of the Gospel (by non-violent means) among the 'pagans' so as to 'rescue' their souls from 'damnation' that was supposedly the fate of all non-believers in Jesus, 'Son of God.' Both regarded education as the key to the 'civilizing' process.

On the academic front one direct result of the Westerners' fanning out to different parts of the globe was their exposure to myriad types of geological formations, climatic conditions, flora and fauna, social organizations, cultural levels and the attendant religious beliefs and practices. They had to familiarize themselves with all the diverse natural and cultural phenomena to be better equipped to meet the exigencies of administration and make optimum use of resources. Thus the 'world explorations' — courtesy the Western traders, explorers and missionaries — and the subsequent phase of imperialism stimulated new inquiry into various fields of learning. The Westerners found it necessary to gather, collate, organize and analyze whatever facts were available to strengthen their position in the new 'world order', as also to disseminate knowledge from the 'modern' perspective as generally understood during that period. Such knowledge was linked to the long strides that had been made possible in several academic disciplines, not only the natural and physical sciences (as mentioned earlier), but also new disciplines such as archaeology [the work of exploration and excavation and the subsequent study of the physical remains of earlier cultures and civilizations], philology [the comparative study of related languages], ethnography [the *descriptive* study of a given society or culture based on what it is or stands for], and ethnology [the *scientific* study of a given society or culture in its entirety, based on the kind of principled approach that rested on the premise of a general truth or assumption from which to argue, characteristic of science].[18] The last two had just been created in some of the institutions of higher academics in Europe and were eventually superseded by the establishment of the disciplines of anthropology [the analytical study of the origins and characteristics of human beings and their cultures / societies], and sociology [the scientific study of the nature, structure and workings of the human society]. What happened in Europe had rippling effects on non-European societies and economies, and contributed to certain broad developments in the field of higher academic pursuits.[19]

It was against this background of the evolving academic climate that historians too adopted new critical methods for 'scientific' inquiry.

The exercise was taken up when they were able to work from *a large quantity of facts* than had been open to their predecessors. Initially the bulk of such facts was by and large derived from the materials of philology.[20] The writers believed that language provided the key to unlocking the secrets of the nature and working of societies and cultures at the universal level in two ways:

(a) by enabling a scholar to assess a document from its 'internal characteristics' and so develop certain criteria about what made up 'truth' in it: not surprisingly the discussions focused on *epistemology* or the philosophical concern with the nature of knowing how the self, world and language were to be understood in relation to one another;[21]

(b) by establishing the fact that language changed between one period and the other: this implied that culture likewise changed and it was not always about the lives of rulers, but, more importantly, it was also about those of the general population, whose language contributed to the making of 'culture'.

Language and culture therefore were worked into history in a manner that surpassed the methods ascribed to Herodotus. The writers believed that language provided pointers to how people using a common tongue viewed the world. This saw the merger of language and culture as corollaries to documentary analysis that marked the beginnings of the break from regarding history as much more than just chronicling political events or a form of literary art (contrary to the trends ascribed to Thucydides and the early Roman historians), while also professing to follow the method of dispassionately analyzing the evidence. Details pertaining to the earlier societies and cultures of a particular area under study facilitated the attempt to *reconstruct new images of the past*, to make the bygone era more 'humanly' accessible. Chronology played a significant role in historical reconstruction, which — after the Renaissance — was no longer about what a person composed, but about what he or she did under the influence of definite methods for 'work and investigation'.[22]

The themes that were of major concern to the thinkers of the age of Enlightenment rested on the premises of 'reason, nature, [hu]man[kind].' The histories of that age were by and large philosophical in nature, fuelled as they were by the quest to answer the 'grand' question about humankind and its existence. The writers' conclusions about the past,

coloured as they were (figuratively speaking) by the notion of progressively brighter tones between one period and the next, were positively judgmental: they consigned the past to a rung way below that of the high expectations of their own times. They were inclined to follow the evolutionary approach in trying to understand nature and human society within the framework of a very broad time-span. But, ironically, eighteenth century 'true stories' of past events were increasingly linked to philosophical questions or theoretical abstractions in which some even *rejected the historical detail* owing to the realization that the sources history writers used (a) were the products of authors who catered to the interests of the powerful and the affluent; (b) suffered from inbuilt biases, untruths or falsities only for the purpose of showing the rulers and the rich in a much better light in relation to 'others'. Besides, there were the first convincing findings in the fields of the natural and physical sciences — corroborated by those of archaeology — about the age of the world and the cultural sequences that ran contrary to the assumptions of the Christian theologians on the subject and adhered to by the European history writers.[23] Such writings reflected the authors' attempt to *make history more conscious of select human identities* than their older generation, in keeping with the idea of making history relevant to the themes concerning the Enlightenment thinkers, whose queries (as mentioned earlier) were guided by 'reason' in relation to nature and humankind.

Simultaneously, certain writers demonstrated the need to authenticate the truth or falsity of the sources consulted, and to revise the earlier perception of time, with the decisive shift to linear narratives, even though the importance of 'providence' in the quest to explain the causation of historical events persisted in some of the writings.[24] Some writers even tried to merge the documentary detail with the philosophical history in rhetoric style: this was best illustrated by Edward Gibbon (1737-1794), who wrote the history of the Roman Empire from its inception to the mediaeval period in the nature of accumulative narration.[25] The last quarter of the eighteenth century thus saw the beginnings of the *working historian*; thereafter the stage was set for the emergence of History as an important academic discipline alongside literature and philosophy in the non-sciences stream.

Still, it was not until the second half of the nineteenth century that definitive *methods* were introduced to history writing, as the study of history turned truly *professional* or something that one did for a living rather than pursuing it for its own sake. The credit for this turnaround

must go to Leopold von Ranke (1795-1886), better known as the 'father of modern historiography'. Ranke built the *image of the historian* as the meticulous investigator of the written (specifically, archival) documents that were subjected to methods of '*scientific inquiry*' (without distorting the available facts) and '*objective analysis*' shorn of appealing to any divine agency as the instrument of causality.[26] The approach was suspiciously identical with that of Thucydides and the history writers of the post-Thucydides era, except that Ranke did not set his historical account within the framework of either the cyclical or the teleological approach. Rather, he emphasized on the importance of the *linear narrative*. Ranke's legacy to modern historiography is twofold: (a) the model of transmitting the historian's craft by an established scholar to budding scholars — whereby the latter learn the trade by working with the extant sources under the former's guidance; (b) the idea of 'truth' in history writing as something attainable by providing factual support rather than resorting to the methods of purely literary art or theoretical abstractions, something that he seems to have inherited from Christian historiography. His advocacy that *history writers must strictly adhere to the empiricist tradition separating facts and values* marked him out as the first truly *positivist* modern-day historian.[27] In the ultimate analysis, however, Ranke's insistence on the scrutiny and analysis of the evidence of the written (archival) sources — "only to say, how it really was" — put severe constraints on the researcher investigating the extant evidence as far as the search for 'historical truth' was concerned. This was because the documents themselves were *only* about the actions and interests of the very few in positions of authority, influence and affluence. It was these records of important (almost always) *political* events available in the archives that students of history had to work with. This meant that the histories produced by the writers who subscribed to Ranke's methods were representative of the viewpoints and biases of the sources they derived their evidence from. Once again the histories had no room for (a) the 'mundane' affairs of (supposedly) 'ordinary' mortals, or (b) what the writers regarded as 'non-political happenings' of the past. And as History assumed the status of a major academic discipline at the University level where students learnt their trade, it was incumbent on them to familiarize themselves with the methods of history writing in harmony with the prevailing intellectual trends of the day.

It was against the backdrop of events of the late nineteenth century upto the mid-twentieth century that Ranke's historical methods found

widespread acceptance as ***the*** authority on modern historiography. These events had far-reaching consequences especially in those areas that experienced colonialism (including India), a theme that most students of History are by now thoroughly familiar with. The colonial rulers felt obliged to bring the 'natives' within the ambit of the modern political system and to introduce them to 'liberal' Western ideas (supposedly) for 'improving' the latter's overall way of life; they used education as the means of training the 'native' students in the historical methods then prevalent in Europe. That their efforts fructified is borne out by the kind of writings ascribed to various historians of the colonial era. These historians were responsible for transmitting their craft to initiates into the discipline, and the latter in turn spread it to different parts of the country.

Thus it was that historians trained in the British and Indian universities pioneered historical research in northeast India as well.[28] The establishment of the Gauhati University strengthened this tradition of history writing in the context of select areas of the region. The products of this premier educational institution eventually occupied teaching posts in the colleges for undergraduate studies; some of them went on to other universities within the region for postgraduate teaching, conducting further research, and supervising research scholars. The more dynamic from their ranks took the lead in establishing the NEIHA in 1979, and it was they who set the tradition they had been brought up in as the bedrock of historical research in northeast India, as is evident from the aims of the Association.[29] It is another matter that the foundation of the NEIHA itself was attributed to the realization that the northeast region hardly figured in the histories of India even three decades after she attained Independence.

It should be obvious from the preceding discussion that the stages in historiography did not necessarily follow a pattern of (what can be described as) methodological improvement or progress from the period of Herodotus to the present day. Nor did all successive generations display the same zeal for *scientifically* exploring ways of establishing certain principles that would have wide-ranging accounting for what happened in the human past. Not even in the nineteenth century had many historians shown visible signs of adopting a stand or stands that would have marked them out as champions of a truly scientific inquiry, notwithstanding (or because of?) Ranke's methods being regarded as something exemplary. In fact Ranke's legacy served the purpose of renewing a lease of life to history writing as merely an enterprise

synonymous with compiling the evidence of the sources that did not involve much mental effort. It was scholars engaged in other disciplines, particularly Anthropology, Economics and Sociology, who introduced assumptions and theories that were to have lasting effects on how scholars in various other disciplines pursued research. For instance, nineteenth century anthropologists strongly advocated the evolutionary ideas that human beings displayed more or less uniform mental capacity to follow certain procedures of reasoning, and that human cultures have been intellectually / socially evolving or improving over time from the 'savage' of the stone age to the 'barbaric' of the 'ancient' / 'medieval' world, and finally to the 'modern' era of trade, science and industry.[30] So did economists try to unravel the interrelationships between the economic and social realities of life, and to study these two dimensions in the context of the material milieu and political affairs in relation to such institutions as family, property, and so on.[31] Sociologists too accepted the notion of social change, but not the idea of a rigid scheme of 'progressive' development in society and culture. They underlined the need to understand most aspects of human behaviour and the available (or non-availability of) individual choices of whatever kind within the given social framework that influences those forms of behaviour and the choices people make.[32] But the theoretical assumption did not immediately attract many adherents and took a long time finding acceptance among researchers in History.

The point here now is whether the research works undertaken in northeast India are representative of *scientific study* or not. Have the writers followed the two broad procedures of the natural sciences as indicated earlier or not? And, is there any indication that they have subscribed to the logic — in the manner of the natural scientist — that the world is *essentially* static and governed by laws whose workings can be unraveled by *scientific inquiry*? If so, how have they reconciled this logic with their preference (if any) for the linear narrative in history? Has the narrative been *descriptive* or *explanatory*, inclusive or exclusive of the broader socio-economic milieu? Have the writers addressed themselves to the problem of what elements went into the making of human nature and culture; or tried to select those *essential* elements overriding 'other' elements? Have they tried to learn anything from the research techniques of other disciplines that could be applied to historical research?

These are questions that at least ought to be raised, and the corresponding problems of historiography duly addressed. This is because

there continues to be a marked preference among many history writers of the region (even at present) for chronicling events rather than understanding them. It is as though they have chosen not to take cognizance of the fact that there have been rapid strides in historiography — Indian and World — especially during the last half a century; and they must have good reasons for shying away from educating themselves in the problems and possibilities of historiography. Unfortunately those reasons remain best known to the writers themselves; but there is no justification for not discussing the methods that have value for historical research and other methods (having zero value) that have been or are being discarded, and so the quest for meaningful inquiry must go on. To begin with, readers can make their own assessments and draw their own conclusions after re-reading the available publications on the histories of northeast India, if they have already been consulting the material in their own interest, or for the purpose of their research works or classroom teaching. They should be able to place the writings within certain broad categories based on the methods and approaches adopted by the writers vis-à-vis the broad range of developments in historiography since the use of writing became a significant mechanism for passing down aspects of traditions, as well as conventional / innovative methods from one period to the next as indicated in the foregoing discussion.

As far as the contributions to the *Proceedings of NEIHA* are concerned one can legitimately ask whether the studies have been taken up in the spirit of the NEIHA's stated goal or not. In this connection, it is to be noted that the writings of more than a few among the region's leading historians invariably make references to the clarion call of one of the founding members of the NEIHA (the late Professor H.K.Barpujari) to historians that their sole mission must be to explore the "truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth..."[33] This seems to indicate the historians' acceptance of the statement as some kind of a *mantra* to be borne in mind while history is being written. It is another matter that so far they have made no attempt to enlighten the readers on what the search for 'truth' in historical research is all about. But in the light of developments in historiography as outlined in the foregoing paragraphs, it is obvious that Barpujari's clarion call was just a reaffirmation of Ranke's injunction to the professional historian — "only to say, how it really was". It was a call for firm adherence to the empiricist tradition, a throwback to Ranke's projection of the image of the historian; for nowhere in that injunction is there any mention of the imperative

incumbent on the historian to establish the credibility of the evidence of the archival material — and the methods thereof — or to use the *interpretive techniques* including the comparative model, which methods, incidentally, had become prominent in Indian and World histories produced especially from the second half of the twentieth century. Another point that must also be underscored is this: that apparently Ranke himself had drawn on Thucydides' advocacy to pursue the 'truth' in historical accounts based on verifiable evidence of the available (select) written documents or conventional sources. As such, Ranke's — as well as Barpujari's and his followers'— writings focused on political events about which subject matter the *written records* were maintained in the archives and were accessible to those wanting to make use of the records. The writers said nothing about the likelihood of blanking out large areas of history connected with those events for want of 'documents' that the majority of the population had not left behind in written form. Thus it should be obvious that the writings omitted large portions of the story associated with the events: all because of the historians' over-dependence on the written documents ascribed to only the ruling, affluent factions of the society at large. In other words, the historians have hardly anything to say about how the ruled and the 'non-rich' organized their lives or what their responses to the ruling groups' machinations and control of organizing the resources were like. Needless to say, the search for 'truth' in historical research might be a futile exercise, at any rate, within the currently known techniques of research.

To make one more point: The scientific 'laws of development' accruing from general principles drawing on carefully assembled facts from a wide sample, when applied to the natural sciences might have the advantage of predictability at any given point of time, *all other things being equal.* This is because the object of experimentation and observation is about 'things' and impersonal processes, not human beings or human experiences. But such type of 'cut-and-dried' laws need not necessarily or always be applicable to events and developments in history, because human activities and the dynamics of social organization are riddled with complexities and might defy predictability. This is not to suggest that concepts such as the 'laws of development' have absolutely no value in historical research or that broad principles cannot be worked out on the basis of human experiences. Rather, the challenge for the historian is in making the requisite contextual *interpretations* so as to arrive at the most plausible *meaning* and *implications* of the evidence, to be able

to account for how and why society and culture came about. Only by careful observation based on the study of adequate quantity of facts and judicious use of the comparative method — combined with meaningful application of the relevant conceptual framework relating to the particular area under study — would it be possible for him / her to reformulate problems and possibilities of understanding ideas and institutions (and the corresponding developments thereof) at a given point of time.

Notes and References

1. See Mignonette Momin, "Narration and Explanation: A Note on Historical Method," *Proceedings of North East India History Association* [hereafter *PNEIHA*], 25th Session (Shillong, 2005), pp. 38-48.
2. *PNEIHA*, 1st Session (Shillong, 1981), Appendix I, p.225.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 231.
4. i.e., Sciences related to nature and parts of the physical world not made or altered by human beings, such as botany, zoology, geology, including chemistry and physics, as against physical sciences dealing with the study of inanimate matter, such as astronomy, geology or physics.
5. Broadly speaking, philosophy is concerned with the study of theory and abstractions to the preclusion of their practical applications.
6. Herodotus, *Historie* [= *The Histories*, tr. Aubrey de Selincourt (Baltimore, Penguin, 1954)].
7. Michael Grant, *The Ancient Historians* (New York, 1970), pp. 12f. For a sketchy assessment of Herodotus' methods, see *infra*.
8. For instance, Herodotus had already read Homer's story of the Greco-Persian war in verse, and knew that Homer had centred the origins of the Greek invasion of Troy in his epic *Iliad* round Helen's abduction by the Trojan 'prince' Paris. However, Herodotus' analysis of a Phoenician oral tradition (sourced from the coastal strip of modern-day Lebanon that is believed to have transmitted the written script to the Greeks through trade) led him to two conclusions: (a) that Homer had been aware of that oral tradition but had deliberately overlooked the evidence that would have changed the course of the story of the Trojan war — that, in fact, Helen and Paris had never

reached Troy, because they had been detained in Egypt; (b) that the Phoenician version also exposed the dubious nature of the Persian legends referring to the same topic but telling the story in a manner suited to the needs of Persian imperialistic ambitions in the Aegean world.

9. Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*, tr. J.H.Finley, Jr. (New York, 1951); cf. Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, tr. R.Warner (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1954).

10. Thucydides had been one of the ten Athenian generals (elected in 424 B.C.) who had spearheaded the fight against the Spartans and their allies in northern Greece. See, among other works, that of D.B.Nagle, *The Ancient World* (2nd edn. 1989, New Jersey), pp.134, 157.

11. *Ibid.*, p.157.

12. See Tacitus, *The Annals*, in L.Casson (ed. and tr.), *Masterpieces of World Literature: Classical Age* (Dell, 1965).

13. *e.g.*, Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*; Orosius, *History against the Pagans*. For details, see J.W.Thompson *et al* (eds.), *A History of Historical Writing from Earliest Times to the End of the Seventeenth Century* (reprint 1969, California), pp.126, 128; R.G.Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (revised edn. 1994, New York), pp.49f.

14. *Ibid.*, p.46.

15. These points have been discussed in sufficient detail in the textbooks prescribed for the higher secondary schools, and the undergraduate and postgraduate levels; hence citing references would be an exercise in redundancy.

16. *Ibid.*

17. Missionary activities in the wake of Western imperialism have not been integrated into (modern) 'world history' on the same footing as the administrative / political developments have been.

18. For a useful exposition on these points see J.W.Burrow, *Evolution and Society* (Cambridge, 1970), pp.234f.

19. *Infra*.

20. In the Indian context a telling example of this trend is to be found in the writings of F.Max Muller, especially in his book, *Introduction to the Science of Religion* (New York, 1872), pp.8-12.

21. In fact, between the 16th and 19th centuries, most philosophers focused on the relation of the self and the world. See, among other writings, those of Francis Bacon (1561-1626), Rene Descartes (1596-1650), John Locke (1632-1704), David Hume (1711-1776), Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), and G.W.F.Hegel (1770-1831).

22. For furher reading, see A.Momigliano, *Studies in Historiography* (London, 1966); Cf. P.Burke, *The Renaissance Sense of the Past* (London, 1969); see also, P.H.Reill, *The German Enlightenment and the Rise of Historicism* (Berkeley, 1975).

23. Many Christian theologians of that period had worked out the probable age of the world based on their interpretation of the *Bible* as depicted in the Genesis and the Exodus: They concluded that the world upto their own times was about 6000 years old. But researches in geology and archaeology provided clinching evidence to show that the age of the world must have been greater, in fact several hundreds of years over.

24. For discussion on this point, see John Tosh, *The Pursuit of History* (2nd edn. 1991, London).

25. Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, ed J.Bury (London, 1896-1900).

26. Leopold von Ranke, *The Theory and Practice of History*, ed. G.G Iggers & Konrad von Moltke (New York, 1973); idem, *The Secret of World History: Selected Writings on the Art and Science of History*, ed. R.Wines (New York, 1981).

27. Ranke's positivist approach rested on the premise of hardcore empiricism. This is not to be confused with the 'positivist philosophy' of his contemporary, the French philosopher and social scientist Auguste Comte (1798-1857). Comte's philosophy was modeled on the lines of the natural sciences, but it addressed itself to the question of scientific realism rather than empiricism. See Comte's six-volume *Cours de philosophie positive* (1830-1842) [=*Course in Positivist Philosophy*, tr.].

28. Among the few writings on northeast India specifically dealing with aspects of historiography, see especially Manorama Sharma's contributions to the *PNEIHA*; idem, *History and History Writing in North East India* (New Delhi, 1998), especially pp. 16-18.

29. *Supra*, 2n. for the reference. For the beginnings of the NEIHA, see Imdad Hussain, "The Foundation of NEIHA and its First Session: A Personal Account", in *PNEIHA*, 25th [Silver Jubilee] Session (Shillong, 2005), pp.401-406.

30. The best known exponents were E.B.Tylor, *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Language, Art, and Custom*, 2 volumes (London, 1871; 4th revised edn. 1903, London); J.G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough:* 3 volumes (London, 1890-1915; abridged version, 1922, Cambridge).

31. For the earliest comprehensive work on economic theory encompassing politics, the modes of production and stages of society, see Karl Marx, *Das Kapital* [=*Capital* (English trans.)], ed. F. Engels, 3 volumes (London, 1867-1890).

32. The person most closely associated with the beginnings of modern Sociology is Emile Durkheim. See his pioneering works: *The Division of Labour in Society* (1893), tr. J.W.Swain (New york, 1912); *The Rules of Sociological Method* (1895), tr. S.A.Solovay & J.H.Mueller (Chicago, 1938).

33. *Supra*, 29n.