



PERCEPTION OF THE PAST: INVESTIGATING STUDENTS ENGAGEMENT WITH HISTORY

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ABSTRACT :

Like any other parts of India, students in the educational institutions in both rural and urban areas of Assam show less interest in the discipline of history. Besides, majority of the parents of school going children are also not interested in this subject than any other branches of social sciences and humanities. Unlike the earlier decades, the number of students enrolling in history in various schools and colleges has gradually declined. Last year, a circular published by the Directorate of Higher Education of the Assam government, notifying future amalgamation of colleges having a smaller number of enrollments, raised concerns not only over the existence of many colleges, but also over the teachers who teach subjects like history in such institution. If the government implements this directive, those educational institutions and the subjects taught there, will be vanished from the higher education scenario. From personal observation, teaching experience as history teacher and by conducting limited survey, an attempt has been made in this paper to find out the solution to these issues. This paper focuses mainly on meaning of history, what contents it covers, and the perspectives of students and parents towards it.

The methodology followed in this study is historical and analytical. Attempt has been made to make the work objective as far as possible. Both primary and secondary sources have been used in the preparation of this work.

Keywords: History, Past, Perception, Educational Institutions.

I. Introduction:

The discipline of History, like any other traditional subjects, came to occupy an important place in the curriculum of the formal education developed in the line of Western ideas in India during the colonial period. This trend seems to have continued in the post-independence period. However, in recent times, there has been a gradual decline in the importance of such traditional subjects as compared to technical and vocational education. At the school level, when



students are asked to opt for elective subjects other than the compulsory ones, most are found to be reluctant to take History as their subject of study. A large number of students who opt, do not seem to study it seriously and sincerely. The issues continue in higher educational institutions also. As a result, only a few students become successful at the end of their career.

II. Objectives of the Study: The objectives in this study are –

- a) To examine students' perceptions and attitudes towards History as an academic discipline in schools and higher educational institutions.
- b) To identify the major factors responsible for students' declining interest and engagement in the study of History.
- c) To suggest effective pedagogical and institutional measures for enhancing students' interest and engagement in History education.

III. Methodology:

The present study adopts a qualitative and descriptive research design to examine students' perceptions and engagement with History as an academic discipline. Both primary and secondary sources of data have been used. Primary data were collected through classroom observations, informal interviews, and interactions with students, parents, and teachers from selected educational institutions in Assam. The study also incorporates the researcher's teaching experience and field observations to understand prevailing attitudes towards History. Secondary data were gathered from books, scholarly journals, research articles, government reports, and policy documents related to History education and historiography. The collected information was analysed using the descriptive and analytical method, with emphasis on identifying students' perceptions, misconceptions, influencing factors, and possible measures to enhance interest and engagement in History. The findings are interpreted objectively to provide meaningful insights into the current status of History education.



IV. Analysis and Discussion:

Greece, one of the oldest civilizations of the world, is known to have started the systematic study, discussion and writing of history. Herodotus, a Greek scholar of the 5th century BC, was its pioneer (Ali,2021), and was thus later called the 'father of history' by the Roman philosopher Cicero. Later on, the Arabs who came in contact with the Greeks, spread the tradition to Europe and other parts of the world. The English word 'history' is derived from the Greek word '*Istoria*' which means 'inquiry, research, exploration or information' (Shreedharan,2022). Thus, the meaningful definition of history can be said to have associated with this word. As synonyms for the English word 'History', the words '*Itihas*' or '*Buranji*' are used extensively in Assamese, although their literal and etymological meanings are different. The word '*Itihas*' is derived from the Sanskrit '*Itihasa*' which means 'thus it verily happened.' Again, the term '*Buranji*' was first used by the Ahoms, to refer to the chronicles written by them. The literal meaning of this Tai-Ahom word is 'store of knowledge for the ignorant' (Gogoi, 1986).

The formal education developed under the colonial auspices is serving traditionally the needs of the knowledge seeking Indians for last two centuries. It has partially lost its importance in present education system or has become outdated because of its adaptability with changing environment. That is why different attitude of the people including teachers and students towards this subject is observed by history enthusiasts. As a history teacher, this author has faced this type of experiences over the past fifteen years of career. Some information along these lines has also been accumulated through partial survey conducted among students and ordinary people, especially in Majuli, Jorhat and Biswanath districts of Assam. Followings are some of the negative reactions and thoughts found out after such experiments.

ALL THE PAST IS NOT HISTORY:

Many students and educated people have the assumption that all the events of the past is history or subject matter of History. An experiment on this topic was conducted last year (Konwar, 2025) among nearly sixty-five students who were newly enrolled in the History Department of Jengraimukh College, a higher education institution in Majuli district. In reply, more than fifty students responded that past events are called history. This is not true at all. The most common actions or events that occur in our everyday life are not considered to be part of



the study of history. Only those past events that have influenced human life, society and culture are included in history. History is the systematic reconstruction of past events based on facts (Carr, 2018). If the all the past were history, there would be no end to it. Apparently, it is not only impossible to reconstruct all happenings of the past, but also unnecessary. It is not an easy task for a historian to reconstruct the past merely with the help of evidence. Just as a doctor who relies on various tests to diagnose a patient's disease, a historian also has to study information from different angles to be sure of the time, context and cause of past events. (Tamuly, 2005) For a historian, facts are scattered and abundance. He needs to extracts the necessary and reliable facts and with their help reconstructs the past.

HISTORY IS NOT STORY ABOUT THE DEAD:

One years back, another study was conducted on about fifty semi-literate guardians of students from Kakila Chari Ali village in Bishwanath district (Konwar, 2025) to get a proper understanding of their knowledge on subject matter of History. Around half of them responded that History is study about the dead. Not them alone, but a lot of people assume History as a subject which contain the story of the dead of the past. Indeed, History is not about the living or the dead. History is the study of people's past actions, social progress, and the rise and fall of the human civilization. Parents play an important role in choosing the subjects of study of their children in formal education. Children can derive such negative ideas from them. Once it deeply rooted in their mind at a tender age, it will be difficult to remove forever. It is the works of great men that History makes them alive. That is why history is considered as a living document of the civilization and culture of the past.

HISTORY IS NOT JUST ABOUT KINGS AND QUEENS:

Most people think that History is all about kings, his kingdom, war and victory. This is an old concept. Indeed, the subject covers beyond political affairs of a certain kingdom or an empire. Those who are associated with new theories of history are free from this narrow mindset. There was a time when kings, his court, councils, wars, political events, etc. were given importance in writing history. Common people and their activities had no importance in historical accounts. Some of the best-known events of the early modern and subsequent period were capable of bringing about a change in this regard. Remarkable world events like European



renaissance, geographical discoveries, Industrial Revolution, scientific inventions, the French Revolution, etc., widened the scope of the study of history. Karl Marx's theories of class struggle and the historical materialism provide a way to explore history from new perspectives. (Shreedharan, 2022).

IMPORTANCE OF DATES IN HISTORY:

During an NCC EBSB camp in last January, (Konwar, 2026) this author gave a history lesson to a group of about one hundred fifty students who came from different parts of India. During the class, students belonged to arts stream were asked why they liked or disliked History. Many held the view that when explaining answer to history questions, one needs to remember many dates and years, which is not easy for everyone to memorize. As they thought, it is not necessarily essential to mention dates in the sentences while writing the answer to the questions of history in the examination. If the answer is explained properly, dates do not matter. Of course, the chronology of historical events is a valid indicator of the interpretation of any theme of the past. The place and time of an event play an important role in researching and reconstructing history (Majumdar & Srivastava, 2020). These two elements make the subject of history reliable. Determining the time of occurrence of any historical event is the job of the historian, it is not a student's job. Besides, in formal education, there is specific syllabus for the learners. History is not also exceptional. Any answer should be explained within limited words or sentences. It can carry good marks for any student in the examination.

ELABORATIVE ANSWERS:

Some students in the said camp also aware of the fact that answering history questions in examinations requires much elaboration which was one the reasons for their disliking the subject. They held the notion that while answering questions in history exams, one has to explain a lot. This is, according to them, is a difficult task. This is not really true. Such wrong ideas seem to create an adverse impact in the minds of other students and do not want to embrace it as a subject of their study. It has been already mentioned that history and other disciplines have specific syllabus with limited areas of study in formal education. As a branch of social sciences, both methodologies- objectivity and subjectivity are followed in history writing while interpreting the fact and which is the job of a historian (Ali, B. S. (2021). Being a literature, interpretation in



history is unavoidable when reconstructing the past. According to historical methodology, the process of collection and classification facts is done in a scientific way, so history is objective up to this stage. The next step is to reconstruct the past where analysis and interpretation of the selected facts are accomplished. Here subjectivity is seen at this stage. Interpretation may vary from person to person. Discovery of new facts on the same event may derive new interpretation. Therefore, the debate on a small topic seems to be going on endlessly. Whatever the case may be, it is indicative of the prudence of a historian to interpret the past from an unbiased point of view on the basis of facts. A student does not need to explain everything with elaborative answer in the hope scoring high in examination. It is only necessary to write the answer with limited explanation. However, it is desirable to have knowledge of the subject and the ability to describe it briefly. Examiners reward concise, structured, and relevant points rather than long, unstructured paragraphs.

EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITY:

Besides the above reasons, students generally show less interest in history due to limited employment opportunities as well. As a part of the traditional education system, there are certainly fewer job opportunities for history students in compared to current technical and vocational education. This is because of the fact that the curriculum of history, like other branches of social sciences and humanities, was designed to impart knowledge of social values rather than job opportunity.

V. Conclusion:

From the above discussion, it can be summarized that the discipline of history helps facilitate the progress of future society by preserving knowledge of the past. If history textbooks in educational institutions are made simple, illustrated, and intelligible, students will be more attracted to it. If parents and guardians can get rid of their misconceptions about this subject, the number of students willing to study history will increase. Practical knowledge like educational tour to historical sites is essential for history students. Mini museums can be developed in the premise of educational institutions for giving the students better experience of the past. Teaching materials such as maps, globes, charts, smart boards, and projectors make history lessons more effective. If skills-based education can be linked to this subject to make more career-oriented, its



popularity will automatically increase. Till a few decades ago, the discipline was not seen to be professionalized. But due to the effect of globalization and to make it useful in practical life, some of its branches have been given professional orientation. The newly emerging subjects of archaeological history, history of tourism, history of museums, etc. have opened avenues of livelihood and employment opportunities. To conclude, a history degree is not just a study of the past, it is a rigorous training in critical thinking, research, and persuasive communication. Such graduates are uniquely prepared for diverse career paths including law, journalism, public policy, education and administration.

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