

USING SOURCES IN HISTORY TEACHING

Seema S.Ojha

History is constructed by people who study the past. It is created through working on both primary and secondary sources that historians use to learn about people, events, and everyday life in the past. Just like detectives, historians look at clues, sift through evidence, and make their own interpretations. Historical knowledge is, therefore, the outcome of a process of enquiry. During last century, the teaching of history has changed considerably. The use of sources, viz. textual, visual, and oral, in school classrooms in many parts of the world has already become an essential part of teaching history. However, in India, it is only a recent phenomenon. Introducing students to primary sources and making them a regular part of classroom lessons help students develop critical thinking and deductive reasoning skills. These will be useful throughout their lives. This paper highlights the benefits of using primary source materials in a history classroom and provides the teacher, with practical suggestions and examples of how to do this.

KEYWORDS: Sources, Primary Sources, Secondary Sources, Reading a Source, Interpreting an Inscription, School History

INTRODUCTION

The first step to help students study any subject is to determine what we want them to know and how they can do so. Educationists maintain diverse views about these questions and particularly in relation to history as a subject. One such view includes the following three things: a) Knowledge of historical facts, themes and ideas; b) Historical reasoning (ability to analyse, synthesize, and evaluate historical evidence); and c) Communication of historical knowledge and reasoning to a wider audience (NCERT, 2014).

Seema S.Ojha ✉
Assistant Professor, Department of Education in Social Sciences,
National Council of Educational Research and Training (NCERT), New Delhi
Email:seema.ojha@gmail.com

Although other groups may use different terminology, it is clear that students of history need to know and understand historical events and concepts. They should also be able to apply different skills that are commonly used in the study of history. Unfortunately, knowledge and skill discussion in this context is often carried forward posing the two as different. Therefore, history is generally taught as a collection of facts woven into a narrative and rarely do we encourage our students to investigate and interpret those facts. Truth be told, if students do not acquire and use skills to interrogate historical information, they cannot have historical knowledge. That is why we need to move away from teaching history as 'given' and allow them to construct their own knowledge by following a more vivid and creative method of teaching.

Teaching history with sources provides the basis for such a creative engagement with the subject in classroom situation (NCERT, 2014). The focus in classrooms in many parts of the world has already moved to using both primary and secondary sources instead of only using school textbooks. However, in India it is only a recent phenomenon. Nevertheless, this welcome change has made teaching and learning of the subject much more useful and productive.

WHAT DO WE MEAN BY SOURCES?

The sources are the traces left behind by past events and human activities. The events and activities of history are no longer realities, though they once actually happened; traces left by them make these events and activities real (NCERT, 1970, p.67). A historian works directly upon these 'traces' (i.e. sources) and through them he works upon the events. He/she reconstructs a systematic and logical account of the past by collecting, selecting and reading different types of sources critically. History deals with a variety of sources and are classified in different ways. One classification is -

- a) Archaeological sources
- b) Literary sources
- c) Oral traditions

Another and more common classification is: Primary sources and Secondary sources

Primary Sources

A primary source is a document or physical object which was written or created during or relatively close to the historical period being studied but primary sources can also include autobiographies, memoirs, and oral histories recorded later by author or eyewitnesses who experienced the period or event

under study (NCERT, 2014). Some types of primary sources include: archaeological artefacts such as inscriptions, literary texts, coins, cave art, pottery, jewellery, clothing, diaries, speeches, manuscripts, letters, interviews, news film footage, autobiographies, official records, poetry, drama, novels, music, art, furniture, buildings etc.

Secondary Sources

A secondary source is a second hand account about people, events, subjects or places that is not based on direct observation. Secondary sources analyse, synthesize, interpret, or evaluate primary sources, add commentary to primary sources in the context of the particular information, idea, event, or period under study (NCERT, 2014). Types of secondary sources include: textbooks, magazine articles, histories, criticisms, commentaries, biographies and encyclopaedias.

WHAT'S THE USE OF PRIMARY SOURCES?

It is true that many students view History as a series of facts, dates and events usually packaged as a textbook. But an effective use of primary sources can change the way students view their textbooks. Primary sources have a unique capacity to engage students in the study of the past (Maloy & LaRoche, 2010, p.53). They could learn about the past by reading their textbook or listening to lectures of their teachers. But working with original historical sources is far more interesting than reading from a textbook or listening to a lecture (Smuts, 2007, p.9). Primary Sources provide tangible links to the past that help students build personal connections to history. They are an effective way to communicate the look, feel, and spirit of a different time. Reading and analysing primary sources will help students in piecing together the puzzle of the past. This process of investigation is commonly referred to as a disciplined inquiry or historical inquiry (Torrez & Waring, 2009, p.79). This process is also called 'doing history' (Smuts, 2007, p.1).

Primary sources allow students to participate in the process of history rather than passively accept conclusions drawn by others. It enables students to begin to have a dialogue with the past and pose questions such as what made them do it or how could they do that? (NCERT, 2012, p.78). It also gives them an opportunity to debate with teachers and classmates about interpretation of sources. This makes the teaching of the subject not only useful to students but also converts the entire teaching process into a living and joyful experience. When students are called upon to analyse sources, they imbibe several skills which range from inquiry, evaluation and problem solving to exercising judgment and synthesizing apparent contradictions in postulations that

extend beyond the classroom (NCERT, 2014). While advocating the use of sources, it must not be misunderstood that the aim is to convert the school children into full-fledged historians. The objectives are quite limited and are stated below (NCERT, 1970, p.67):

Specific Objectives:

The specific objectives of the study are:

- To enable the students to develop critical thinking by using the sources and weighing historical evidence.
- To enable the students to form their own independent judgement by critically and analytically studying the sources.
- To develop skills of collecting data, sifting the relevant, organizing them and interpreting them.
- To create proper atmosphere so as to make the people and events of bygone times more real to students.
- To stimulate the imagination of the students for reconstructing the past.
- To foster interest in the study of history.

HELPING STUDENTS READ PASSAGES FROM PRIMARY SOURCES

We need to remember that the aim of working with historical sources is to guide learners in the process of creating a usable sense of the past (Smuts, 2007, p.9). But making students do even the simplest interpretation and observation for this purpose we need to familiarize them with the regular practice of this important exercise (Gunning, 1978). For this we need to cultivate in students a habit to ask as many questions as they can to a source. Besides, if teachers facilitate students in interpreting/observing some of the textual and visual sources in detail, gradually students will start reading and looking at things critically and will realize an important point intrinsic to history as a subject, that any account of an event, no matter how impartially presented, is essentially subjective. Once students become familiar with such guided exercises consisting of general questions we can move forward to complex interpretation and analysis exercises gradually. There are different ways to interpret different kinds of sources but there are some general important questions to ask about historical sources as illustrated in Figure 1 (Smuts, 2007, p.8). You will need to think about these questions when you also use other sources.

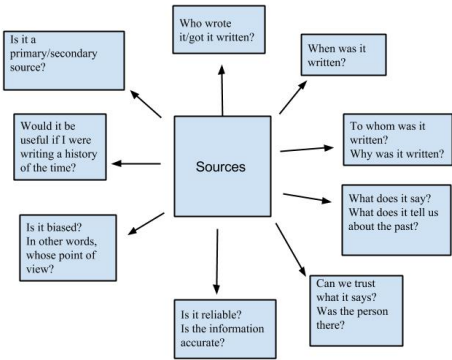


Figure 1. General Important Questions to Ask About Historical Sources.

The questions around the source help you to understand and use the information in the source. For instance, take the example of a coin. All of us know that it is an important source of history. But questions like what is it made of, where was it found, what was its denomination, when was it issued, who issued it, and what symbols does it carry impart an altogether different meaning and context to the coin and thereby make it an important historical source (NCERT, 2014). And carrying the research forward, as newer and newer questions are asked of the same source, there is every possibility that new answers will lead to different conclusions about the period when the coin had been issued. Like a practicing historian who examines sources in this way teachers and students studying history in schools can also question all kinds of sources and nurture critical engagement with the subject.

This can be exemplified through the excerpt given in Figure 2 (NCERT, 2005, p.79).

Ashoka's Inscription describing the Kalinga war

This is what Ashoka declared in one of his inscriptions:
"Eight years after becoming king I conquered Kalinga.
About a lakh and a half people were captured. And more than a lakh of people were killed.
This filled me with sorrow. Why?
Whenever an independent land is conquered, lakhs of people die, and many are taken prisoner. Brahmins and monks also die.
People who are kind to their relatives and friends, to their slaves and servants die, or lose their loved ones.
That is why I am sad, and have decided to observe *dhamma*, and to teach others about it as well.
I believe that winning people over through *dhamma* is much better than conquering them through force.
I am inscribing this message for the future, so that my son and grandson after me should not think about war.
Instead, they should try to think about how to spread *dhamma*."
How did the Kalinga war bring about a change in Ashoka's attitude towards war?
(*'Dhamma'* is the Prakrit word for the Sanskrit term *'Dharma'*).

Figure 2. An Excerpt from an Ashokan Inscription Appearing in Class VI History Textbook Our Pasts I.

You have already seen a diagram of general questions. Now we will see what can be gauged by posing those general questions to this particular source excerpt.

Identify the type of source?

Is it a letter, an inscription, a newspaper article, or a photograph?

Different kinds of sources need to be considered differently. For example Asoka's description of Kalinga war may be different from any other contemporary source. As we know the above source is an excerpt from an inscription inscribed by Ashoka. Inscriptions are irrefutable source materials for the reconstructions of Indian history as it contributes to the understanding of the political, social, religious and cultural aspects of our past. Inscriptions are virtually permanent records and are generally situated where they were originally placed. Changes and additions made to them can usually be detected without great difficulty. Most inscriptions carry dates; others are dated on the basis of the palaeography or styles of writing.

Who wrote it/got it written?

Is it an eyewitness, someone involved in events described or someone writing about what they've heard or researched?

Knowing something about the person who created the source can help you to determine the angle or perspective the source is likely to convey, whether the author is likely to have any bias or not and whether this source can be considered credible. As we can see the excerpt is from an inscription which was inscribed by Ashoka.

When was it written?

At the time of events described or later?

Knowing when the source was written may help you to put it in to a historical perspective. From inscription we know that Ashoka defeated and conquered Kalinga when 8 years elapsed since his coronation (Ashok's accession to the throne in 273 BCE and formal coronation in 269 BCE). The conquest, therefore took place in his 13th regnal year, i.e. 261 BCE. This inscription was written somewhere after that.

To whom was it written? Why was it written?

Why did Ashoka chose the Kalinga war for detailed description? Did he write this source as a private document or was it intended for others to view? If so who was that intended audience? What reaction did he expect from them? Was he just narrating or recording events which took place or trying to persuade people to a particular point of view? What is your reaction after reading his description of the event? The four decade long reign of Ashoka witnessed only one military campaign and conquest, that of Kalinga. It is clear

from the excerpt that the massacre perpetrated during the Kalinga war left deep impressions on Ashoka and though victorious, he was full of remorse (Chakravarti, 2014, p.247). As a result, he decided to get his ideas inscribed in an inscription for his future generations as well as for people in general to keep them away from war.

What does it say? what does it tell about the past?

What historical event/issue/personality is it describing? Identify images, symbols, characters? What are the key words and what do they mean? What is it about?

Some sources may actually provide us with valuable factual information about what happened in the past. After you read Ashoka's description try and find out what information in the source can be ascertained as a fact.

It tells us that Kings fought wars and annexed other areas and that wars affect everyone in the land be it Brahmins, monks or general people. In the process of war lakhs of people die and many are taken as prisoners also. It also tells about the repentance of a king Ashoka who after seeing a lot of bloodshed decided not to wage war anymore and decided to work for 'dhamma' instead. The Prakrit term 'dhamma' is the same as Sanskrit 'dharma'. Ashoka's dhamma was a very broad based code of social and ethical conducts that he placed before all his subjects (Chakravarti, 2014, p.269).

Can we trust what it says? Was the person there?

It is important to know about how Ashoka was connected to the historical context of the source. Understanding how Ashoka fit into the historical context can help you to think more critically about what he had to say. As we know that the inscription is about the conquest of Kalinga by Ashoka and his repentance thereafter. Addressing people in the first person Ashoka in this inscription is expressing his remorse for unleashing terrible violence against Kalinga. Since this is Ashoka's own edict where he is saying what he himself experienced it appears to be trustworthy and genuine than any other later textual account of the same event.

Is it reliable? Is the information accurate?

It is important to know that many a times things that are presented as fact may not always be accurate. One might consider verifying the facts presented in the source by reading other contemporary works. How would you decide whether Ashoka's accounting of facts is accurate? We find mention of Mauryan ruler Ashoka in later literary accounts like Puranas, Buddhist and Jaina accounts etc. However, Ashoka's inscriptions have a greater advantage in relation to other type of sources because these are contemporary and

provenance and dating of these records are firmly specific and reliable(Chakravarti, 2014, p.236).

Is it biased? In other words whose point of view?

Since inscriptions are first-hand accounts they often convey one person's point of view and therefore is likely to contain a fair bit of opinion. Can you identify those sections of the source which seem to be Ashoka's opinion on the war? Do you think Ashoka is trying to persuade people to a particular point of view? Is it a detached, balanced account? Is it biased either for or against the issue?

As we know that in the said inscription Ashoka is sharing what he himself felt. Ashoka appears to be unbiased because here he is deploring war not in defeat but after a victory. He genuinely seems to have felt the horrors of war and now he is trying to persuade people to keep them away from such wars. In the course he talks about dhamma which is nothing but the moral and ethical principles common to all religions. So it can be considered a balanced and unbiased account.

Would it be useful if I were writing a history of the time?

How useful is this inscription for a historian researching the time of Ashoka?

Anybody who is interested in knowing Ashoka and his time, this will be the most important source to consult. Archaeological materials are more securely datable than the literary ones and therefore, often used with greater reliance by historians (Chakravarti, 2014, p.235). However, the meaningful understanding of any period cannot be attempted by the use of a single type of source to the exclusion of others. Source work needs to be practiced and reinforced in classrooms throughout the year. While working with older students we can go beyond general questions and increase the complexity of questions. This can be exemplified by the excerpt given in Figure 3 (NCERT, 2007, p.13).

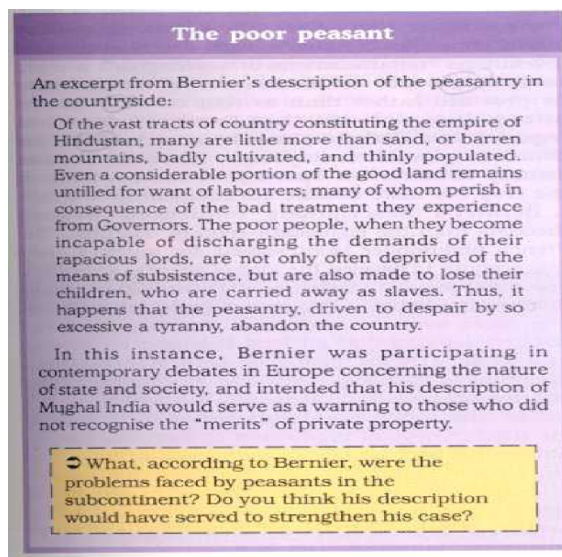


Figure 3. An Excerpt From Bernier's Description Appearing in Class XII History Textbook, Themes In Indian History, Part II.

Identify the source-What is the nature of the source?

1. Is it a court document, an artefact, an inscription, an oral history account, a personal account, or travel account?

As already stated different kinds of sources need to be considered differently. For example, Bernier's description of the peasantry in the countryside may be different from that found in the documents of the Mughal court in the 17th century. The above source is a personal account by a French traveller called Francois Bernier who came to India in the 17th century C.E. Travel accounts constitute an important category of primary source for historians because they represent the observations and experiences of individuals who visited foreign lands at a particular point of time. They have often provided information about a foreign society which the native inhabitants themselves did not supply either because they did not have the means to do so, or because they did not see fit to record information that they did not recognize as particularly distinctive or interesting. Travel accounts are not just windows to foreign societies but also mirrors that throw light on the values of their own authors, who wittingly have reflected the interests, and concerns of their own societies when recording their observations and experiences in foreign lands. Although they are very useful can we consider them as entirely transparent or reliable? Are they limited to one point of view?

2. Place the document in its historical context by asking questions like:

Who is the author of the source and what do I know about him/her

How does it help? There is some information in the textbook about Bernier, his background and the perspective of his writings. So, having some knowledge about the author of the source will help you to start posing the right questions, such as,

- What is Bernier's perspective?
- Does it make a difference if he is a male or female?
- Does he possess a deep understanding of the land and people under discussion or only a superficial acquaintance?
- To what extent does his religious and cultural background shape the account?
- Do his writings reveal an inherent prejudice against Hindu rituals and customs?

When and where was the source written?

To put any source in to a historical perspective it is important to know when and where the source was written. As you know that Bernier was in India for nearly 12 years from 1656 to 1668 during which period he wrote his accounts. As important as situating the source in time, it is also important to identify the place where the source was written.

What is the purpose of creating the source? Ask and answer these questions. While doing so you can take students along in an open class discussion. Or, this discussion can be held after you have done the exercise yourself.

- Why did Bernier choose the peasantry for detailed description?
- Did he write this source as a private document or was it intended for others to view?
- If so who was that intended audience?
- What reaction did he expect from them?
- Have other contemporary foreign travellers left such accounts?
- In his description of peasantry was Bernier trying to persuade people to a particular point of view?
- What is your reaction after reading his descriptions of the peasantry?

3. How to explore and understand a Source. Exploring a source needs a poser like:

What factual information is conveyed in this source?

Some sources provide us valuable factual information about what happened in the past. After you have read Bernier's description try and find out what information in the source can be ascertained as a fact. Take the students along in this exercise.

Can you together list some information from the source which you consider as fact?

Try to ascertain the following:

- The empire of Hindustan was very vast?
- Some areas did not have much population?
- There were some untilled good lands?

It is also possible that things that are presented as fact may not always be accurate. So consider verifying the facts presented in the source. For this to be done, ask students the following questions:

How would you decide whether Bernier's accounting of facts is accurate?

Tell students to verify Bernier's account by reading the works of other contemporary travellers, official documents, oral traditions etc.

Are any personal opinions conveyed in the source?

Share with students:

Since travel accounts are firsthand accounts they often convey one person's point of view and therefore is likely to contain a fair bit of opinion.

Now ask them:

- Can you identify those sections of the source which seem to be Bernier's opinion on peasantry?
- Does his opinion reflect a European perspective on the peasantry and about Indian countryside in general?
- Does it indicate an increasing negativism in Europe towards India?

What is conveyed unintentionally in this source?

Share with students:

Sometimes travel accounts do not always spell out what its author is thinking. It is up to the reader to fill in the blanks and gauge the author's tone and attitude to make inferences about meanings that are not spelt out.

Now ask them:

Can you draw any inference after reading Bernier's account? Tell the students

some possible inferences which can be drawn, such as:

- People in countryside were not owners of lands.
- Crown ownership of land was harmful.
- Bernier believed in 'private property'.

Is there something which is not said in the source?

Share with students:

Sometimes sources do not convey everything.

Keeping in mind Bernier's own prejudices and perceptions while writing his accounts ask students the following questions:

- Do you think his description gives a fair picture of the condition of peasantry during this period?
- Is there something which Bernier did not feel a need to write about?
- Can you list a few questions which you think remains unanswered? For example,
- Was he talking of the condition of peasantry in general?
- Was it peculiar to a particular region?
- What were the reasons for bad cultivation?
- Why people were not able to discharge the demands?

Tell students:

Thinking about what seems to be missing in the source can help them determine the motivation of the author and the perspective from which he was writing.

What is surprising or interesting about the source?

Once the students have a fair idea as to what is there or not there in a source ask them:

- What do you find interesting or surprising about the source?
- Did you learn something more than what you knew earlier?
- What were the details which caught your attention or interest?
- Does Bernier's perspective surprise you?

4. Analysing the source – A partnership activity to be undertaken with students.

- How does Bernier convey information and make his point?

It is important to not only think about what has been said in the source but how has it been conveyed by the author? What strategies did Bernier use to convey information? Was it a sympathetic account? Was it an attempt to improve the condition of the peasantry?

How is the time described in the source different from your own time?

Bernier's account will enable the students to form an idea of the time. To do so they will have to address the following questions:

- What was the world of people of this time like?
- Was the situation of peasants described in this source witnessed by others also at that time?
- How different is the world you live in?
- Do you think peasants face such situation today?
- Imagine the situation faced and described by a peasant. Would her/his account be different from that of Bernier?
- If you were to face such a situation how and what would you convey in your account?

What do students believe and disbelieve in Bernier's account? This has to be worked out by addressing the following questions.

- Does anything in Bernier's account seem unbelievable or exaggerated?
- What elements in this source do you consider as credible and believable?
- What are your reasons for accepting some evidence as evidence and rejecting other evidence?
- How different is Bernier's account from other contemporary sources or other foreign traveller's?
- Does this source seem to fit with interpretations presented in different secondary works and in your textbook?
- How have various historians interpreted Bernier's writings on India and his travels through the subcontinent?

CONCLUSION

The study of primary sources is crucial to the study of history because they are the foundation of historical knowledge. They provide tangible links to the past that help students build personal connections to history. So far as teaching-learning of history in schools in India is concerned a teacher needs to pay

attention to how the historians work. In other words, we need to cultivate those competencies by which historians locate and use primary and secondary sources for writing history since school itself. Reading, interpreting and evaluating sources allows students to learn, test and apply important analytical skills that extend beyond the classroom. Furthermore, sources help in transacting a specified curriculum in a creative and analytical way. And this makes the teaching of the subject not only useful to students but also converts the entire teaching process into a living and joyful experience. By working with primary sources in an effective manner students are enabled to understand their subject better and also to use evidence to reach conclusions about issues that face them as citizens in their life outside the school.

REFERENCES

- Chakravarti, R. (2014). The Mauryas. In Dilip K. Chakrabarti & Makkhan Lal (Eds.), *History of Ancient India. The texts, political history and administration till C.200 BC. Vol.III.* (pp.231-275). New Delhi: Vivekananda Foundation.
- Dennis G. (1978). *The teaching of history*. Croom Helm.
- Maloy, R.W., & LaRoche, I. (2010). Student-centred teaching methods in the history classroom: Ideas, issues and insights for new teachers. *Social Studies Research & Practice*. 5 (3), 46-61.
- National Council of Educational Research and Training. (2012). *Manual for in-service education of teachers and teacher educators of History (higher secondary stage)*. Retrieved from www.ncert.nic.in.
- National Council of Educational Research and Training. (2015). *Dictionary in History for school children*. Unpublished manuscript.
- National Council of Educational Research and Training. (2014). *A Textbook on Pedagogy of Social Sciences*. Unpublished manuscript.
- National Council of Educational Research and Training. (2005). *Our pasts I, History textbook for class VI*. New Delhi: NCERT.
- National Council of Educational Research and Training. (2007). *Themes in Indian History Part I. History textbook for class XII*. New Delhi: NCERT.
- National Council of Educational Research and Training. (1970). *History teaching in secondary schools: A handbook for History teachers*. New Delhi: NCERT.
- Smuts, E. (2007). Create a usable sense of the past: Working with sources. *Yesterday & Today*, 1, 102-122.
- Torrez, C. F., & Waring, S. M. (2009). Elementary school students, artefacts and primary sources: Learning to engage in historical inquiry. *Social Studies Research & Practice*, 4(2), 79-86.