


TRENDS IN HISTORIOGRAPHY
MODULE I- EVOLUTION OF HISTORY AS A
DISCIPLINE

TOPIC-POSITIVISM AND AUGUSTE COMTE
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AUGUSTE COMTE(1798-1857)

- Positivism took its name from the 19th century French philosopher Auguste Comte's doctrine
- Positivism tell us that human knowledge can not go beyond human experience and that any inquiry into historical phenomenon should be restricted to the scientific mode
- Purpose of historical study was to discover the motives and explain the processes of events through which they have passed
- The positivists felt that the philosophies of history touched historical consciousness at three points, namely the integrity of historical events, the unity of the narration with the document and the imminence of development
- Their main job was to write history which was a reflective process and the re-enactment of the past experience in their own minds

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- Positivism stands for evolving certain general laws governing the course of events, by studying different historical situations
 - Laws could be applied only to general tendencies. It rejected individualism
 - Positivism talked of masses, races, societies
 - Positivism tried to seek out the causes of history, the series of historical forces, the unity of the factors and their dependence upon a supreme cause
 - The positivists consider that ascertaining of facts and framing of laws are the two important aspects of history
 - Facts are immediately ascertained by sensuous perception and laws could be framed through generalizing those facts, by induction method
 - Positivism discards the distinction between nature and history and it tried to bring both more closer, as both history and nature are progressive

- Comte in his two important works, 'The course of positive philosophy' and 'The system of positivistic policy' explained the concept and theory of positivism
- He called history 'Social Physics' and firmly believed that proper understanding of society is possible only through history
- Social Physics is the study of social systems and social phenomena from the perspective of physics
- It is the application of the concepts of physics in social sciences
- Comte argued that it is possible to discover determined laws which govern human society as the world of nature is ruled by physical laws
- He tried to formulate a set of working laws for the interpretation of historical facts.

- The understanding of these laws of society would enable to control the directions of History and also to predict the course of history
- He developed the concept of ‘religion of humanity’, which was to bring men together in a common devotion to justice, charity and benevolence
- He also introduced the concept of ‘Milieu’ meaning environment and its importance to the study of historical events
- Comte stated that the laws of evolution was manifested in history through three stages of thought and life and they were theological, metaphysical and scientific or positive
- In the theological stage, human activity was controlled by supernatural spirit, where man made God in his own image
- In the metaphysical stage, man attributed the events to the operation of natural forces

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- Nature emerged as the potential factor during this stage
 - In the scientific or positive stage, critical philosophy and scientific knowledge explain the phenomena
 - Comte developed what he called ‘religion of humanity’ which was supposed to bring men together in a common devotion to justice, charity and benevolence
 - It provided a new impetus to the study of history
 - Positive approach is criticized for its undue importance given to physical sciences, as historical laws are different from laws of physical sciences