
Exploring Herodotus: In a new aspects**Shamik Basu**Link : <https://bit.ly/48ZMG5A>

Abstract : Herodotus is known as the 'Father of History'. However, many factors resulted in people believing that his history was inaccurate and his life's work 'The Histories' is misleading people about the accuracy of the events that happened. As a result, there formed both Pro-Herodotean and Anti-Herodotean school of scholars, whose tussle for victory is noteworthy in the history of mankind.

Key-Words : Herodotus, Thucydides, historiography, sources

History is a much well known and followed academic discipline studied for a pretty long time. However, the information was neither always correct nor reliable. The idea behind the study of History was once given by the genius Herodotus. Herodotus was born in the cosmopolitan city of Halicarnassus, near Ionia in 5th Century BCE. Mainly two distinctive cultures were there in Halicarnassus during the time, Persian Culture in the east and Greek Culture in the west. Herodotus was exiled at the age of thirty-two. He went on many voyages, especially sea voyages like in Phoenicia, Egypt, Susa, Cyrene and the Greek City-States on the Black Sea. These voyages were the most significant chapters of his life and became the spine of his literary activities. He thus came to be known as the 'Father of History' and subsequently wrote a famous book 'The Histories'. In its introduction, he says that the purpose of this book is to save for future generations the great deeds of the Greeks and Persians and lay bare the causes for which they waged war. The book was written in nine parts, each dedicated to nine muses¹. Possibly he was not the one to dedicate the book to nine muses; the scholars during Alexander did it. The immense horizon of the book makes it nothing less than a 'universal history'. However, the question of the relationship between 'accurate history' and 'good history' always lies in the works of Herodotus. That is why; he is often called as the 'Father of lies'. Some say he was a plagiarist and a creator of false and deceiving facts which made him a creator of lies.

History comes from the word 'Historia' meaning inquiry. Herodotus lived in an age when the scholarship and intellect of a person could be presented through oral presentation. He used his eyes, ability to judge and talent of inquiry to write his book. Herodotean writing was rather a simple one unlike his contemporaries. 'The Histories' was based on three aspects -- Ethnology, Constitutional Studies and War History. War History is referred to the Greco-Persian Conflict². But it was neither the sole subject matter of the book nor it was glorified much. J.S Evans opined that Herodotus eschewed the glorification of war. Part 6,7,8 and 9 of the book referred to the conflict. He ended 'The Histories' by saying how Ionia got free from the Persian domination and torture. Herodotus's writing was not only limited to Greece. He tried to present a world known, wandered, analysed and studied by his own perspective. Writing about the events far-off places reported to him at second or third hand source was his style. His observation power was surprising that was evident in the description of events in his book. He had a curiosity in knowing how things happened. Rational explanations, influence of climate and geographical factors could be seen in Herodotus's work. Other than these, some interesting ingredients in his book are worth mentioning, such as the presence and importance of paranormal and unnatural

incidents that dominated the other aspects. The role and importance of paranormal is not denied by any historian at any time. But easily accepting them without cross checking means rejecting all logical research methods. For him, writing with the help of these factors was a way of enquiry, not a result. As he travelled to places far and wide, he developed a keen interest in knowing about the peoples' culture, rituals, life style and so on. Voyages made him respect different cultures. He considered 'Nomos' or law to be supreme and called it "King of All". He considered the conflicts to be cultural conflicts. According to him, humans were bound to their culture as they live and love through it. The focus on cultural conflict could well be seen in his book. The independent thinking of Greeks was the base of the development of the study of Greek history. However, there was a lack of unity between them which made it difficult for the historians to study. Herodotus, in his writings presented the apparent disunity overshadowed the basic unity of the Greeks. He wrote about the unity of the people in the nearby Greek colonies too. Another important feature of the Herodotean work is the importance of the role of women in Greek society which contradicts the work of Thucydides, probably his greatest rival and most celebrated critique. In the first three chapters of his book, Herodotus held women responsible for all the problems and sufferings. According to the book, women were bound to mislead men. Greek Tragedy had a noticeable effect in Herodotus's writing. There are mentions of "Hard" and "Soft" culture in his book. Similarly, "Koros" and "Nemesis" had a great importance in his book. Herodotus had an interest towards Egypt as according to him, it was the land of mysteries and amazements. He wrote about some surprising facts e.g. once he mentioned Pyramid's weight. Sometimes he included such stories which readers might not believe owing to their unrealistic nature. The famous Historian Will Durant said that Herodotus's history reminds Edward Gibbon's misleading history that history flourishes on sins of human race, mistakes and misfortune. According to Herodotus, it is the job of a historian to seek the truth. To do this, one must refrain from excessive compliments or excessive criticisms. He ensured that all the information he collected were varied and different from each other. He wrote several interpretations of a single event. For example, during the Persian Wars, Herodotus was a living witness to the great invasion. Yet, he often wrote different versions of the same event. The question arises that was he forced to rely on the oral sources? Although he rarely named his sources, he mentioned Priests as his source. He repeated this so often to show his good relations with the priestly class. The Priests of Greece, Egypt, Babylonia, Africa, Arabia, Carthage, Italy, Palestine, Persia, Phoenicia and Scythia are mentioned. Herodotus, through his simple mentality explained everything but left the decision of reliance upon the readers. Art, Sociology, Geography, narrative dreams, oracles, visions and divine warnings also had a great influence over his book 'The Histories'. There, description of God, according to Herodotus, was a bit negative in nature. He said, God was jealous, vindictive and angry and could not tolerate human pride for many days. According to the book, humans were controlled by Gods. These prove Herodotus to be a fatalist. For these reasons, his history was a vast one from the mysteries of cats in Egypt to the building of Babylonian Wall. In many instances, he had to depend upon hearsay only, but his accuracy proved to be surprising. For example, in Heliopolis he learnt about Ethiopia, whose details are mostly accurate. According to Herodotus, historical process can be reduced to a series of crimes, punishments, counter punishments, over indulgence, jealousy, revenge and reciprocity.

The positive appraisal of Herodotus started from the linguistic evaluation of his book 'The Histories'. Previously the meaning of the title of his book was inquiry. However, in the 4th Century BCE, the meaning evolved to the proper analysis and discussion of the past events. The Hellenistic unity might have been understood by several scholars. However, it was Herodotus who studied the human nature and psychology of his time. There lied his victory. That was why he could write such a masterpiece and landmark book which contained the histories and information on Egypt, Greece and other histories. There might be many misleading information in Herodotus's history, but none of them were illogical. His details might be unrealistic, but not at all false. Specially, after being aware of the Sophists³, his ideology became more logical. In the context of mythologies, he rightfully said that the names of the Olympian

Gods were only the creations of Homer and Hesiod. During those old times, like a social scientist he studied the legends of Dionysius of Syracuse. Dionysius was another devotee of Herodotus. He accepted all of Herodotus's flaws and admired him till the last word of his works and always had the hunger for more. According to him, Herodotus gave history a better beginning with an even better end. One could say that Dionysius had a weakness towards Herodotus as they both belonged to Halicarnassus. However, it was the graceful attitude of Herodotus which attracted Dionysius the most, unlike the robust attitude of Thucydides. Thucydides himself agreed on the fact that war history and constitutional studies are related, therefore accepting the importance of Herodotus. His perspective was way larger than Thucydides which proved the individuality and authenticity of his works. For the context, maximum historians ranked Herodotus above Thucydides. According to Herodotus, the story told by historians must be explained and justified by them. Every good historian must discuss on the contemporary events, in which he succeeded. He wrote that it was his duty to write whatever he heard, although he was bound to believe it. During his voyages, he heard so many things that he could not just register them as true or false. A transition could be seen in his book. From part 2, he was a geographer and ethnographer and from part 7 to 9, he became a full-fledged historian. Herodotus has an immense contribution in forming ideas such as the ideas of historiography. It was because of Herodotus that the Greeks, in the sphere of historiography, could cross all the borders. There were many scholars who were in support of Herodotus such as Thomas de Quincey, Lucian, Bakker and Murray. According to Thomas de Quincey, Herodotus's work was exclusively a history. He disagreed on calling Herodotus Father of Lies as the words 'inquiry' or 'investigation' better suited Herodotus's aims. According to de Quincy, Herodotus had ancient admirers, especially Rhetoricians. Lucian of Samosata believed that it was the duty of the historian to tell the story that actually happened. Therefore, a historian's job was no less than that of a detective. He praised Herodotus for the beautiful and careful arrangement of his information and highlighted his unmatched intellect too. According to Lucian, Thucydides could make an honest and truthful work only after learning from his rival Herodotus's failure. Unlike the people who criticised Herodotus for lacking clear focus, it was Bakker who showed his intellectual development. He was also the father of prose composition and as a narrator, he has never been surpassed. Murray opined that if Herodotus was writing false facts, it was totally unintentional and not deceitful. It can be said that if Thucydides proved the importance of war history, Herodotus proved the importance of oral traditions.

In the 5th Century BCE, there were very less written sources of Greek history which questioned the reliability of 'The Histories'. Like Aristotle, Herodotus's work was of a great horizon which increased the chance of him making more mistakes. This great horizon became one of the strongest points of criticism of Herodotus in the modern era. According to the modern historians, he had an immense weakness towards Athens although he was not born there. The whole Greek history, according to Herodotus, was a play based on God's foresight. His criticisms ranged from mild to intense. There were several attempts to expose him, such as Valerius Pollio's 'Herodotus' Thefts', Aelius Harpocraton's 'On Herodotus' Lies' and Libanius's 'Against Herodotus'. These exposed Herodotus and affected his reputation so that an Anti-Herodotean literature dominated until the late Roman Empire. There were many charges thrown at Herodotus. How could he have so much knowledge of a country he had only lived for a short period? Was he a plagiarist or writer of lies? These charges do have strong claims. There is a strong doubt that he plagiarised his predecessor Eusebius and Scylax of Caryanda who personally saw India and travelled the shores of Indian Ocean and Persian Gulf. Other than that, he wrote on the basis of judicial assessment of orally transmitted stories without scrutinizing. He did not know any other language except Greek; therefore, information of other countries was not at all reliable. Herodotus presented different interpretations of a single event. However, he did not cross check the validity of any information he heard or collected and included in his history, with some of them being very unrealistic.

For example, he wrote that in the zoo of the Persian emperor, there were ants larger than the foxes who dug land and gathered their army. According to Will Durant, despite the great knowledge of

Herodotus, many facts and information were unknown to him. A major drawback of Herodotean history was the easy reliance on second or third hand information. He once heard that Spartans won many battles as they brought the remains of Orestes there. He also had other misconceptions by following foreign sources, such as he thought that Alps was a river. The more he wrote from his experience the less he made mistakes, although several facts of his works were proved right later. Due to the absence of strong rules regarding collection and organization of information, Herodotus faced a disadvantage. It was Ktesias, a doctor of Herodotus's next generation, who called him the 'Father of Lies'. People believed Ktesias when he called Herodotus the 'Father of Lies', but later it was Ktesias himself who was charged as a liar. Despite having limited knowledge, Herodotus wrote about Greece, Egypt, Persia and so on and was proved right in many instances. On the other hand, Ktesias's history was comparatively a more deceiving one. One could easily call a man both 'Father of History' and 'Father of Lies' as there were no ways of checking the validity of both the sources and the information. The two most well-known critique of Herodotus were Thucydides and Plutarch. Thucydides is known as the Father of International Relations and the Father of War studies. He might not directly mention Herodotus in his writings, but it was clearly targeted to Herodotus. He wrote that the absence of romance in his writing might be less attractive, but it was for the benefit of those who wished to get a clear view. This was a clear attempt to criticize Herodotus, just with a spicy flavour of sarcasm. According to Thucydides, the Herodotean approach was unsafe. He said that historians should write about the events contemporary to them. For him, it was important to write about the present events rather than the past. Historians should vouch for what they tell, which Thucydides thought Herodotus lacked. He did not support the history written of distant lands. Moreover, Thucydides thought that fiction is what made Herodotean history a much unreliable and misleading one. It was not clear whether Thucydides was working upon setting higher standards of historiography for the generations that followed, or by his influence tried to restrict historians to a geographical boundary and to their own life and its incidents only. Plutarch was a great Greek philosopher and historian who belonged to the Anti-Herodotean school. In his text 'De Herodoti Malignitate' he criticized Herodotus. According to him, Herodotus was philobarbaros i.e., lover of the Barbarians. He brought together all the charges made against Herodotus, such as excessive sympathy for Barbarians, partiality for Athens, gross injustice to other polis, lack of truthfulness and failure to have balanced judgement. According to Plutarch, the upper social stratum of the so called Classical Greek Age felt uncomfortable with the Herodotean ideals. They disagreed on the fact that Herodotus wrote that not all Greeks were default Heroes. He said that Herodotus presented his history with humour and sarcasm which should not at all be the ideal situation of a good writer. There were several other criticisms as well. Aristotle told he was a storyteller and not a historian. According to Ranke, Herodotean history was nothing but a traveller's romance. Criticisms in modern times included the 19th and 20th Century German scholars who found false and misleading facts in Herodotean history. They disagreed on calling Herodotus a historian. They considered Herodotus's work a travelogue and not history. Despite those stories of Herodotus being false, some of them were proved to be right in the future.

Whatever faults Herodotus had, he was the first to have a perspective of human and their psychology in his time. Cicero was the man who called him the 'Father of History'. There were many writers who wrote more than Herodotus. However, unlike them he had a universal perspective. The other historians wrote about their people only. But it was Herodotus, who wrote about places other than Greece, such as Egypt, Assyria, Babylon and Persian and their rituals, history, geography and human psychology. He might not have gone to the depth of the mentality of the foreign people, but was well aware of their existence unlike his contemporary historians. The nature of his sources always raised a problem. His sources were of oral traditions of those who had gone before him. He himself, became a judge and an arbitrator due to the lack of trustworthy sources. His work became based on relative knowledge rather than absolute knowledge. However, the loss of Greek literature made it difficult to prove that he was a plagiarist. After all, he remains and will remain as the greatest source of information

of his time. Arnaldo Momigliano, one of the well-known scholars of historiography, said before Herodotus, he did not find any classical writer. H.E. Barnes looked upon him as the first writer to imply that the task of a historian was to reconstruct the whole past life of a man and was one of the most absorbing story tellers in the entire course of human history. According to historian T.J. Luce, the love for barbarians was nothing but a true and noble quality of Herodotus. As we know that he was the father of prose composition, Stephen Usher said that Herodotus was the one who first assimilated material from the poetic tradition into prose. Victor Ehrenberg disagreed on calling him only a storyteller. Herodotus collected and consolidated all the scattered information into one central theme, with the conflict between west and east being the main focus. The conversion of legend writing into the science of history was a remarkable invention of the 5th Century, and Herodotus was the man who did it. He remained the standard authority of history of Egypt and Babylonia even till the late centuries CE. He was an expert in touring distant lands, handling other languages and writing history from his eyes. In the modern age, Herodotus gained the recognition he deserves. If Thucydides was the reason of the birth of historians such as Xenophon and Sallust, Herodotus was the reason of the emergence of historians like Ktesias, Lucian and Arrian. Herodotus might have been false in different instances, but after analysing history as a discipline, a question always arises that is History honest at all in all time? These are the questions whose answers we will probably never know. So, amidst the numerous contradictory opinions of different school of scholars, it is impossible to judge whether Herodotus was the 'Father of History' or the 'Father of lies'. However, according to me, Herodotus can be called both, after all it is the situation that matters. Herodotus was a genius and probably one of the pioneers of the study known as history. But ultimately, he was a human and humans are bound to make errors. We should always appreciate Herodotus for giving us, the next generations the idea of the so called Classical Greek period.

NOTES:

- 1. Muses:** Muse, in Greco-Roman religion and mythology, any of a group of sister goddesses of ancient origin. Their chief centre of [cult](#) was [Mount Helicon](#) in Boeotia, Greece. They were born in Pieria, at the foot of [Mount Olympus](#).
- 2. Graeco-Persian Conflict:** The Greco-Persian wars were two separate invasions of Greece by Persia in 490 BCE and 480 - 479 BCE. These conflicts were ignited by Greek colonies in Ionia, an area on the western shore of Asia Minor, who rebelled against Persian rule. Athenian involvement in the Ionian Revolt (499 - 493 BCE) and the murder of Persian envoys by Athens and Sparta pushed the Persian king, Darius I to invade Greece.
- 3. Sophists:** The Sophists were orators, public speakers and mouths for hire. They were gifted with speech. They were skilled Rhetoric. They were respected, feared and hated. They challenged, questioned and did not care to arrive at the very best answers. They cared about winning public speaking contests, debates, and lawsuits and in charging fees to teach others how to do as they did.

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