The Perils of Reversing the Past

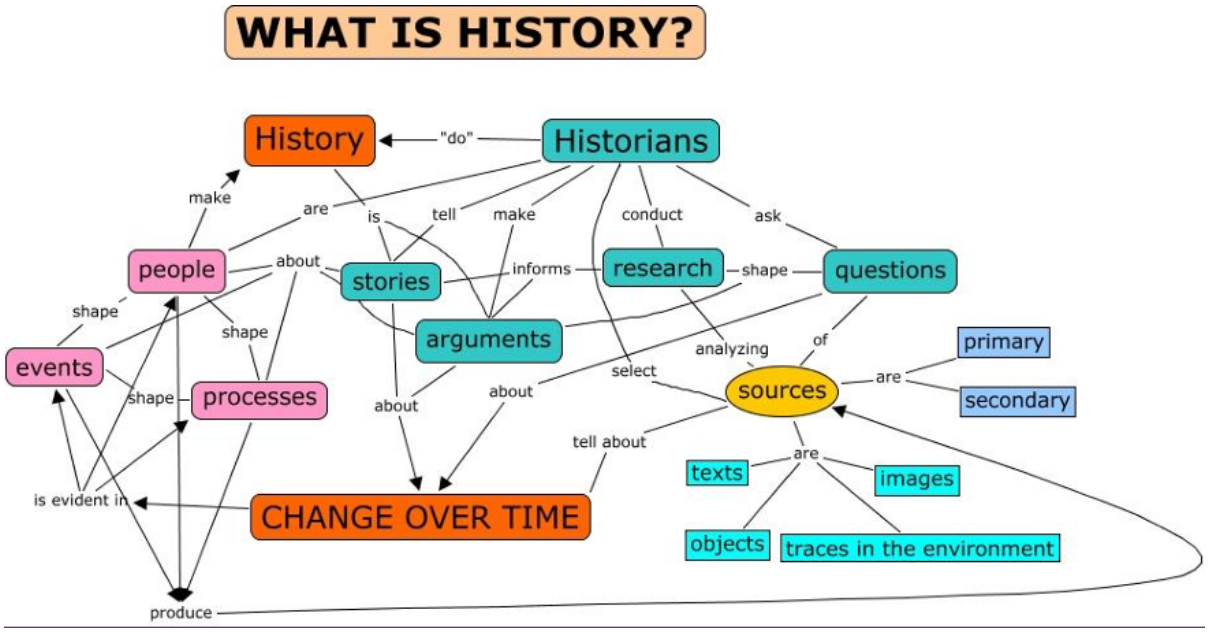
> ***Mains: GS I - Indian Heritage and Culture, History.***

Why in News?

In March 2025, a wave of textbook revisions such as omitting or vilifying figures like Babur and Aurangzeb while glorifying select native rulers.

What are the significances of studying history?

> *History is the knowledge of and study of the past and it is not merely a recollection of events but a study of causes, consequences and context.*



- **Understanding the past** -It helps us understand how societies, cultures, and civilizations evolved over time.
- By learning about past events, we gain insight into how the world came to be the way it is today.
- **Learning from mistakes** - By studying mistakes made in the past—be it in governance, conflict, or societal choices—we can strive to avoid repeating them.
- **Shaping identity** - It contributes to our sense of identity, both as individuals and communities.
- By learning about our heritage, we strengthen connections to our culture and traditions.

- **Inspiring progress** - Innovations and ideas from the past often serve as inspiration for future advancements.
- For instance, scientific discoveries and inventions build upon historical knowledge.
- **Promoting critical thinking** - It encourages us to question and analyze sources of information critically, fostering a deeper understanding of cause-and-effect relationships.

What are the impacts of revisionism of history?

Revisionist history, especially in the political sense, seeks to reinterpret the past to justify present-day political agendas, often tied to nationalism, identity politics, or territorial claims.

Reinterpretation of history is a legitimate academic exercise, where new evidence or perspectives reshape our understanding of the past.

- **Renaming or destruction of monuments** – These revision activities coincided with rising public anger demanding the renaming or even destruction of Mughal tombs.
- There were viral campaigns that called for vandalising historical monuments, driven by narratives that paint centuries of India's past in black and white.
- **Polarisation** - While some advocates that such moves correct colonial or biased portrayals, the selective rewriting of history often fuels polarisation, not clarity.
- **Disrupts social harmony** - When history becomes a battleground for ideology rather than a source of reflection, it can fracture society and foster hatred instead of understanding.
- **Divides society** - When history is weaponised in the form of revisionism, especially with an intent to restore a perceived lost glory or correct historical wrongs by reverting to a "status quo ante", it ceases to be a guide for the present and becomes a tool for division.
- **Causes conflicts** - Revisionist exercises are not only dangerous but have been the root of conflicts, wars and prolonged suffering across different parts of the world.

Religious and political conflicts of revisioning history
Crusades • **Crusades** – They were a series of religious wars initiated, supported, and sometimes directed by the Christian Latin Church in the medieval period. • They were sparked by the belief in the sanctity of Christian control over Jerusalem. • **First Crusade (1096–1099)** - It launched to reclaim the Holy Land from Muslim rule, despite the region's diverse religious history. • **Impact of crusades** - Centuries of bloodshed, occupation, and retaliatory campaigns, none of which restored any meaningful peace but, instead, deepened divisions between civilisations.

European Wars of Religion in the 16th and 17th centuries

• **The Protestant Reformation** - It began in 1517 , challenging the authority of the Catholic Church and led to the emergence of new Christian denominations.
• These divisions fueled religious tensions and conflicts across Europe such as - Schmalkaldic War, French Wars of Religion, and Thirty Years' War.
• **Schmalkaldic War (1546-1547)** - This war in the Holy Roman Empire was a major conflict between the Protestant Schmalkaldic League and the Catholic Holy Roman Emperor.
• **French Wars of Religion (1562-1598)** - These were a series of civil wars in France between Catholics and Protestant Huguenots, lasting for 36 years.
• **Thirty Years' War (1618-1648)** - This devastating war, fought primarily in Central Europe, involved religious and political conflicts within the Holy Roman Empire and drew in other European powers.
• **Implications** – These wars demonstrate the dangers of historical grievances being revived under the banner of religious or political legitimacy.
• The danger was not in recognising the grievances of the past but in weaponising them to reshape the present based on historical constructs.
• Rather than moving forward with mutual tolerance and understanding, European States plunged backward into a cycle of vengeance, each side justifying their acts through selective memories of the past.

Nazism

• **Dangerous revisionism of Nazi Germany** - Adolf Hitler's ideology rested heavily on the notion of reclaiming the glory of the German Reich and correcting the "humiliation" of the Treaty of Versailles.
• **Manipulation of history** - His rhetoric about the Aryan past, the "stab in the back" theory, and a need for Lebensraum (living space) were all rooted in a highly manipulated version of history.
• **Impact** - The attempt to reverse the outcome of the First World War by restoring German supremacy led to the Second World War and the Holocaust — a catastrophic result of trying to reengineer history through conquest and genocide.

Partition of India in 1947

• **Competing historical narratives** - Hindu and Muslim nationalists invoked centuries of grievances under previous rulers.
• **Impact** - What should have been a peaceful transition into two sovereign States turned into one of the worst episodes of communal violence in history, killing over a million and displacing more than 10 million.
• The violence was not about the future; it was about reclaiming identities and rights rooted in selective versions of the past.

- **Creating chaos** - Much of the chaos in today's world arises not because we forget history but because we seek to relive or reverse it.

Israel-Palestine

• **Clash of History and Geopolitics** - In the contemporary world, Israel-Palestine remains a deeply complex and tragic case of historical grievances clashing with present-day geopolitics.
• **Historical claims** - Both Israelis and Palestinians stake claims based on history — often diverging, irreconcilable, and deeply emotional.
• **Impact** - Efforts to reverse history, whether through settlements, territorial claims, or denial of nationhood, have prolonged a conflict that cannot be resolved by appealing solely to the past.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine
• **Historical unity claim** - In Eastern Europe, Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 was partly justified by revisionist arguments about the historical unity of the Russian and Ukrainian people and the invalidity of Ukraine's post-Soviet independence.
• This attempt to undo post-Cold War borders in the name of historical continuity has led to massive human suffering, economic crises, and a destabilisation of the entire region.

- **Ignorance of Present times** - The obsession with returning to a perceived golden past blinds nations and people to the opportunities of the present and the possibilities of the future.

What lies ahead?

- The discipline of history demands a careful and nuanced discernment of the past.
- While historical wrongs must be remembered to avoid their repetition, they must not be interpreted as mandates to reclaim past statuses or boundaries.
- As philosopher George Santayana aptly put it: "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it."
- But equally dangerous are those who remember the past only to relive it, seeking justice through reversal, not reconciliation.
- The greatest service we can do to history is not to rewrite it, but to learn from it — with humility, not hubris.

Reference

The Hindu | History as battlefield

SHANKAR IAS PARLIAMENT
Information is Empowering