

Can History be an objective representation of the Past?

Bishwajeet Prakash

Research Scholar, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi

History is 'an unending dialogue' between the present and the past, a dialogue between the events of the past and progressively emerging future ends. The historian's interpretation of the past, his selection of the significant and relevant, evolves with the progressive emergence of new goals. In fact, history can be written only by those who find and accept 'a sense of direction' in history itself. The belief that we have come from somewhere is closely linked with the belief that we are going somewhere. History, therefore, acquires meaning and objectivity only when it establishes a coherent relation between past and future.¹ History is the living past of man. It is an attempt made by man through centuries to reconstruct, describe and interpret his own past. History is collective memory, the storehouse of experience through which people develop a sense of their social identity and their future expectation. History is a kind of research or inquiry. Since, science is finding things out and in that sense history is a science.²

The word history has two generally accepted meanings as it refers to history as event or as record. The two uses of the words may be combined, as in the definition of history 'the bridge between the past and the present'. History is the past experience of mankind. More exactly, history is the memory of past experience. It is the understanding of what had happened, on the basis of what present standpoints indicate. To exist is to change, to change is to mature and to mature is to advance and make progress. History is enquiry conducted by the historian and the facts of the past into which he enquires. History is dialogue between present and past. It is a dialogue between the society of today and the society of yesterday.³ Thus, history becomes a barometer to estimate and record this progress of mankind. It indicates the growth of human mind in which the unique facts of life are collected, classified and interpreted in a scientific way.

History is the living past of man. It is an attempt made by man through centuries to reconstruct, describe, and interpret his own past. History deals with evidence, the material that the past leaves behind as records has to be used with great care for the simple reason that they may not be wholly authentic and genuine.⁴ The historian should aim at presenting as true a picture of the past as possible. The technique to arrive at the truth of the past events is called historical method. This method includes external and internal criticism. External criticism determines the authorship, the place and the time of document. While on the other hand internal criticism finds out whether the contents of a document can be accepted as true or not. The method which attributes the criticism of historical events guide

us to the idea of objectivity and subjectivity of history. Subjectivity focuses on what we know or don't know. But the objectivity is how subjective history and research should be viewed and presented.

We generally refer to objectivity in our day to day life. We generally take the objective to be true and to be the right approach in Social Science and that is the foundation on which Social Science in general and history in particular have been built. Objectivity is the founding principle of Western historiographical tradition. But the other traditions do not put so much premium on the concept of objectivity. Even in the West, the pre-modern tradition of history writing although paying less service to objectivity and it was not objective in the modern sense and it is important because sciences develop earlier and it became necessary for the humanity discipline and part of the humanity to shift towards sciences and thereby they were started to be called as Social Science.

The principle of objectivity has been the most important principle of the Western historiography over the ages. In fact, it is the foundation on which the edifice of historical profession stands. In the Western world, the historians since the early ages have believed that their writings about the past are true and objective. This belief was challenged by many philosophers and thinkers who said that the quest for objectivity was futile. However, the mainstream of historiography remained stuck to the notion of objectivity. In the words of Peter Novick, an American historian and a radical critic of the principle of objectivity, it was 'the rock on which the (historical) venture was constituted, its continuing *raison d'être*.' Most historians wrote in the belief that their writings presented an objective picture of the world. Even when they disagreed among themselves, they believed that their accounts were more objective than those of others whom they criticized. Thus the historical battles were fought on the grounds of objectivity. However, it is since the 1970s that the notion of objectivity faced its most serious challenge.

German historian Ranke derived the notion of modern historiography and from him it developed the basic principle which we follow till now in professional history writing. Ranke said history is the meaning and the achievement of writing the history should aim to show how it really was. According to him the job of historian is to reveal the past as it was, without any intervention from his side. Therefore, Ranke for the first time in historiographical tradition grounded the principle of objectivity in history writing. He argued that historian should detach completely from his own moorings, his own culture, mental, ideological surroundings and try to see the past as the people in the past saw themselves and this is only way to write history. The past has to be seen in his own terms. Ranke tried to understand the past in the nature of historical phenomena such as an institution or an idea and suggested that one had to

¹E.H. Carr, *What is History?*, ST Martin's Press, New York, 1961, pp. 23-24

²R.G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, OUP, London, 1953, p. 9

³E.H. Carr, *Opt. Cit.* p. 49

⁴E. Sreedharan, *A Textbook of Historiography*, Orient Blackswan, Hyderabad, 2004, pp. 3-4

consider its past development and the changes it underwent over a period of time.⁵

Right since the days of Herodotus, the historians have believed in the separation of the subject and the object, in the distinction between the knower and known and in the possibility to recover the past. In the words of Peter Novick the principal elements of the ideal of [objectivity] are well known and can be briefly summarized. The assumptions on which it rests include a commitment to the reality of the past, and to the truth as correspondence to that reality; a sharp separation between knower and known, between fact and value, and above all, between history and fiction.⁶ Historical facts are seen as prior to and independent of interpretation: the value of an interpretation is judged by how well it accounts for the facts; if contradicted by the facts, it must be rejected. Truth is one, not many. Whatever patterns exist in history are “found”, not “made”. Interpretations can be judged through the logic of either vindication or refutation. Logics of vindication tell us how to determine whether a given historical analysis is or is not true, while logics of refutation tell us how to determine whether a given historical analysis is or is not false.⁷

Objectivity is not just about getting the data correct, but how does it work in respect of what to ‘put in’ and ‘what to leave out’. And it also does not make any guarantees about veracity.⁸ The objectivist tradition follows the reality as well as the possibility of its mirror representation. It also maintains that there were some intentions and actions of the people and the historians should exert themselves to grasp the mental world of the people of the past. On this basis Ranke observes records which belonged to the age which the historian is studying are genuine and may be put complete faith in them by the historian. He calls them as ‘primary sources’ and maintains that these sources would provide the foundations for a true representations of the contemporary period.

Objectivity arises from criticizing and comparing rival webs of interpretations in terms of agreed facts.⁹ In the words of E. H. Carr facts are basically a series of accepted judgments. Facts are based on documents and inscriptions. For the accuracy to confront the reality of past with regard to the facts, historians rely on the ‘auxiliary sciences’ of history i.e. archaeology, epigraphy, numismatics, chronology and so forth.¹⁰ There was an enormous belief in the facts in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It was thought that once all the facts were known, it was possible to write ‘ultimate history’ which could not be superseded.¹¹ George Clark believed that there is no distinction between the ‘hardcore of facts’ and the ‘surrounding pulp of disputable interpretation’ while writing the ‘ultimate history’. Thus, interpretation had very little role to play in such kind of analysis. The writing of history was related to the documents. It did not matter who the historian was as long as verified documents for the period were available. That’s why E.H. Carr states that ‘History consists of a corpus of

ascertained facts. The facts are available to historians in documents, inscriptions and so on, like fish in the fishmonger’s slab. The historian collects them, takes them home, and cooks and serves them in whatever style appeals to him.¹²

The Rankean tradition was criticized in the twentieth century for being too naïve and being concerned with individual facts instead of general patterns. It was also criticized for being narrowly political and being concerned with elite individuals. The new trends in the historiography in the twentieth century focused on economy and society as opposed to the political and on common people as opposed to the elite. The most influential among these trends were the Marxist and the *Annales* schools of historiography. Many social scientists denied that the modern western civilization, based on rationality and science, was in any way superior to the pre-modern, or even ‘savage’, communities as far as life is concerned. At another level, many historians and theorists of history began to think that history was closer to literature than to science. Moreover, the new linguistic theories starting with Saussure emphasized that the role of language is not to refer to reality but to construct reality. Thus the world which is conveyed to us through language is not the real world. Similarly, the historians’ accounts of the past do not refer to the real past, but to the world imagined by the historians. History, therefore, is the story told by the historian.

The criticism of objectivity is mainly based on constraints of evidence and individual bias, cultural relativism and postmodern and linguistic approach. The German philosopher Kant influenced by the ideas of enlightenment formulated that there was a separation between the real world and the subject trying to make sense of. It led to the idea that it was not possible to reconstruct the reality and the correspondence theory of truth was not valid. This view later challenged the notion that history could be like science. Nietzsche challenged the notion of objectivity and emphasized that the facts of history is nothing, interpretation is everything.¹³

R.G. Collingwood provides an idea of historical relativism for the line of criticism. He elaborates that ‘the past simply as past is wholly unknowable’. Therefore, the history is not at all about the real past but a creation of the historian.¹⁴ Historical thinking implies interpreting all the available evidence with the maximum degree of critical skill. History does not mean to discover what really happened but it is writing of his/her own history which may or may not have common with others. Regarding the criticism of objectivity Carr also argues that history consists seeing the past through the eyes of the present and in the light of its problems and that the main work of the historian is not to record but to evaluate.¹⁵ Carr further explains that it is difficult to rely on the evidences and uncritical about the facts because ‘the facts of history never comes to us’ in pure since they do not and cannot exist in a pure form, they are always refracted through the mind of the recorder.

In the view of criticism the recent historical thinkers have argued that the historians’ writings and accounts are also influenced by the ideas, concepts and language of their own societies. This means their narratives effect by cultural prejudices and social absorption.

⁵Andreas Boldt, Ranke : objectivity and history, *Rethinking History: The Journal of Theory and Practice*, Maynooth (Ireland), 2014, p. 7

⁶Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream : The “Objectivity Question” and The American Historical Profession*, CUP, Cambridge, 1988, pp. 1-2

⁷Mark Bevir, Objectivity in History, *History and Theory*, Vol. 33, No. 3, Blackwell, 1994. pp. 329-330

⁸Andreas Boldt, *Opt. Citation*, pp. 2-3

⁹Mark Bevir, *Opt. Cit.* p. 333

¹⁰E.H. Carr, *What is History?*, ST Martin’s Press, New York, 1961, pp. 2-4

¹¹*Ibid*, pp. 1-3

¹² *Ibid*

¹³*Ibid*, pp. 21-22

¹⁴*Ibid*, pp. 15-16

¹⁵*Ibid*

The critic of objectivity says that it is impossible to achieve and attain complete objectivity. During the Post-World War II period, there developed some other school particularly in 1960s and 1970s which had a different challenge and posed a different challenge to writing history and the objectives principle. This was the linguistic school. They said they rely upon the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure.¹⁶ Saussure's ideas completely revolutionized the theory of linguistic. It changed the perception how to view the language, the whole linguistic system. He said that the language does not refer to reality, what we are referring is certain ideas and concept. He thought that the relation of words to their meanings was usually completely arbitrary, and that words or what he called signifiers were defined not by the relation of to the things they denoted, the signified, but by their differential relation to each other.¹⁷ Saussure's theory meant that language does not follow reality and that it does not reflect the phenomenal world addressed by it.

Roland Barthes further carried the argument. According to him the claim of the historian to write about the reality of the past is fake. The history written by them is not about the past but 'an inscription on the past pretending to be a likeness of it, a parade of signifiers masquerading as a collection of facts.'¹⁸ Objectivity was the product of the referential illusion.

The most radical challenge to history-writing came from the theory developed by Jacques Derrida. Derrida said that one term in a language, even in one language does not refer to one thing, it refers to many things. Meaning of the term is not fixed, it is unstable and variable. One term can refer to many things. We base our history on the language, on the text written in the past without knowing the exact meaning of the terms. So, when we (historian) identify those terms, we try to interpret those terms in our own ways. Nevertheless, what these terms in the past meant may have been completely different. So, our entire quest for achieving objectivity or truth is ill-grounded and not possible or misplaced.¹⁹ More he explained that because the language and terms in the language is unstable so, any linguistic system is unstable. Therefore, it is not possible to write something which can refer as truth, which can reconstruct the past, which can produce the reality and which can refer to the reality. The language is the self-content system and all we can do to read text and compare with other text. It is not possible to know reality at all. The world although exist objectively somewhere nevertheless, what we know about the world through the language, through texts and not through the real world. So, we cannot know the real world, we can only know the language, we can only know the text. His famous statement concludes all his perception i.e. 'Text is everything and everything is text.'²⁰

Thus, objectivity is somewhat an idealistic view of reality, history in which Derrida said that is not possible for historian to write about the past to know truth, to write objectivity about anything. So, objectivity is completely impossible. All we can do to write text basing on another text and not basing on reality as such.

Now, we can say that the complete reconstruction of past is not possible nevertheless fact that even the partial reconstruction is not possible is questionable. Therefore, we can say that although we cannot completely construct the past. But we may partially understand it and partially reconstruct it. Secondly, we know that seeing from human eye we cannot comprehend mountain as a whole nevertheless it does not mean that mountain does not exist, it does exist and with develop technology and technical resources it is possible to construct the picture of reality in certain way.

References

1. Bevir Mark, Objectivity in History, *History and Theory*, Vol. 33, No. 3, Blackwell, 1994
2. Boldt Andreas, Ranke: Objectivity and history, *Rethinking History: The Journal of Theory and Practice*, Maynooth (Ireland), 2014
3. Carr E.H., *What is History?*, ST Martin's Press, New York, 1961
4. Collingwood R.G., *The Idea of History*, OUP, London, 1953
5. Novick Peter, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and The American Historical Profession*, CUP, Cambridge, 1988
6. Sreedharan E., *A Textbook of Historiography*, Orient Blackswan, Hyderabad, 2004

¹⁶ E. Sreedharan, *A Textbook of Historiography*, Orient Blackswan, Hyderabad, 2004, p. 295

¹⁷ Ibid

¹⁸ Ibid, pp. 295-296

¹⁹ Ibid, pp. 296-298

²⁰ Ibid