

# THE PROBLEM OF HISTORICAL OBJECTIVITY

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During the last two hundred years' history has been developed into an autonomous discipline, a system of knowledge which can be legitimately considered as a kind of science. But no knowledge can be scientific, if that is not science. Those who think that history is a science, no more no less, regard objectivity as imperative for history. Objectivity is a generic term, therefore, when we use the word objectivity to explain historical reality; it is different from the objectivity of science. For a scientist, he deals with external things without allowing his personal feeling, attitudes, thoughts to influence his analysis and explanation. But history can never be objective in this sense of the term, because the historian and his subject matter cannot be separated from each other. But one can achieve objectivity in terms of impartiality and impersonality, as distinct from propaganda or motive oriented history.

There are some popular misconceptions about historical objectivity.

- There is a general belief that truth lies somewhere between two extremes, as if history is just two dimensional. Even when we accept that there are two extreme positions of historical truth, the middle position can never be found because it is difficult to measure. Historical explanations and positions involve the extent of extravagance; therefore, there is always a danger of middle point being tilted to the side which is more extravagant than the other. So that is why Kitson Clark in his *Critical Historian* remarks that an effort to discover middle position by the historian is an act of irresponsibility and intellectual cowardice.
- Rankean school of historians argued in favour of historical objectivity. The positivists also favoured a scientific methodology to achieve in history. This trend led to the misconception that historians should have the objectivity of a scientist. The objectivity is not possible in history due to the nature of the subject. It is not only impossible but also unhistorical. There is a general agreement among the scholars that historical approach is always personal one. Biases and prejudices are inevitable in history. It is natural for human beings to take sides, to censor, to extol, to colour, to embellish. They are swayed by personal, moral, patriotic, and meta-physical considerations. So every history is *point of view history*.
- It is argued that every history is written from certain *point of view* and it makes sense only from that point of view. Carl Popper, in his work *The Poverty of Historicism* opines that the way out of the dilemma of objectivity is to be clear about the necessity of adopting a *point of view*. Point of view to history is like a soul to the body. Without a *point of view* history or historical evidence has no meaning. There is a fundamental difference between, a *point of view* and a *prejudice*. The *point of view* is based on rationality, it is hypothesis. But *prejudice* has based on emotions, feelings and blatant interest of an individual or a group or an

institution. This explains the difference between an historian and propagandist of between a painter and photographer.

- Every historian has a *point of view* to present in his writings and that *point of view* starts operating the moment he makes the choice of his subject for study. He has to delimit the scope of his subject matter, as he cannot incorporate all events of the past. He is obliged to select facts on the basis of the hypothesis of his study and his personal judgement. He subjects his facts to his own understanding which to a great degree, allows in personal interests, beliefs, and values to creep into his analysis and evaluation of the significance of the selected events. This explains why historians with similar socio-cultural background basing their analysis and interpretations of the same historical data, give different conclusions.

There are many factors which lead to difference in interpretation and assessment in historical works, which avoids historian from being objective. They are;

### Personal Prejudices

In history personal prejudice or bias is unavoidable because the person of an historian is the medium of assessing the significance of historical events and data. In spite of the fact that he is equipped with scientific rationality and methodology he is a psychological being. Within himself he has his own awareness of phenomena, his own concept and vision of life which is unique. Because the evolution of his consciousness is due to the interpretation between his inner self and the external reality which he lives. He evolves his own set of values, his own outlook, his own personality and his own prejudices and performances. He can be aware of particularities, avoid prejudices but he cannot avoid platitudes which are integral parts of his personality and which unconsciously colour writings. Even Rankeans and the positivists could not check their personal platitudes from influencing their writings.

Ernest Nigel in his, *The Logic of Historical Knowledge* says recent philosophers like Isiah Berlin and Leo Struss have pointed out that historian's subject matter is such that it is highly value-charged and his structuring of historical account is value guided. Though it is desired that he should avoid 'ensoriousness', yet it is impossible to overcome human tendency of moral and psychological evaluation of a given historical phenomenon. Butterfield in his, *The Whig Interpretation of History* says, the historian should not give moral judgement of any historical events. Collingwood in his *The Idea of History* says, historian is obliged to evaluate human actions in purposive terms. So no historian can have a neutral mind, because he presents a perspective which is relative to the problem of governing his mind.

### Group Prejudices

Man is a social animal. Historian also belongs to social cultural group. He is the creature of time, place, circumstance, interest etc. E.H. Carr in his *What Is History* says that, nationality, race, social status, family, kinship, community and profession which influence historian's work dominantly. These categories influence more seriously than his personal prejudices. The group assumptions have rational warrant and assume the nature of principles, such as the sentiments of nationalism and democracy. These are highly valuable principles of modern state according to David Thomson. Personal prejudices rest on one's feelings and therefore have no relational warrant. David Thompson in his *The Aims of History* says, sometimes major historical events involve prejudices and biases and just because they

happen to be significant for a nation or a community tradition, they tend to divide historians on national, communal, and racial lines. For example, debate on French Revolution, origin of I world war or 1857 movement etc. Passions of patriotism, religious beliefs and practices, ethnicity and traditional customs have caused tremendous intellectual distortions.

### **Conflicting historical interpretations**

Conflicting historical theories emphasize the relative importance of different kinds of casual factors which lead to historical controversies and disagreements among the same historical reality. The real danger of such theories comes not from their application, but they are given by highly cultivated minds and are used by political or social organizations to justify their interests and aims. Sometimes it becomes a fashion or a conviction with scholars to follow them. When theory becomes a source of obstinate conviction with an historian or when he deliberately twists facts and distorts reality for the propagation of an idea or for the achievement of a purpose other than historical truth, history becomes its first victim for it is reduced to the level of propaganda.

But that does not mean that historians should reject all the theories to achieve objectivity. As a matter of fact, historical theories render helps in achieving relative degree of objectivity. They help us formulate rational hypothesis and then develop a rationally and structurally convincing thesis. Therefore, they can be gainfully employed as tools and instruments to illuminate facts and interpret historical reality. Choice of a theory or a set of theories depends largely on the nature of the subject matter and its specific demands. It certainly not suggested that the application of theories would yield objective history; but history is less biased and less prejudicial and relatively more objective when theories and concepts attend upon the facts.

### **Differences in Philosophical views**

Like every human being, every historian has his own vision of life, his own perspective, his own set of moral and meta-physical beliefs, in short his own philosophy of life. He consciously or unconsciously refers to his judgement of values. Perhaps, no historian has been able to escape this. A good historian conscious of his moral and meta-physical prejudices, no doubt, attempts at freeing himself from those prejudices and pre-conceptions by acquiring a degree empathy. But empathy is an intuitive process which in turn makes the historian to fall back upon his accumulated personal experience, both internalised and assimilated. The assimilated experience is an integral part of his total self, his whole being. Therefore, it is inseparable from his imagination. This process thus introduces subjective element in his understanding of the given historical reality.

So philosophical views involuntarily colour the judgement of historians, because the act of judging evidences by intuitive process is an active and not a passive one. The problem of involuntarily reaction or response of the historian to the external reality of the past takes us to the problem of human nature and history. Generalisations about the human nature are at back of historical explanations. This is based on historian's point of view and perspective. History is objective to the extent that it is based on facts, authentically explained from historian's own point of view. It leads to the argument that there is no history as there is no past. History is nothing but historian's view point, i.e., historian's history. There is no past, as history illuminates only the present. Therefore, history tends to be propaganda, at best the propaganda of view point. Hence history is viewed as 'practical past' as against 'historical past'. But

'historical past' recognises objective rule in respect of rational hypothesis, evidence and explanation. Such an effort with all elements of subjectivity provides certain rules to historian to follow.

It is further argued that it is not only impossible but futile for the historian to strive for objectivity of a scientist. Scientist has set of rules, similar fundamental principles, and similar evidences. All of them can be observable. But history does not have this. So it is not possible to have same validity of natural sciences. So Raymond Aron, in his *Introduction to the Philosophy of History* says, in history we cannot have absolute objectivity. One may have to content with the fact that some historians are sounder in their analysis than the other or one historian interprets historical reality in this way and other that way. So absolute objectivity in history is a *noble dream* or a *majestic mirage*.

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