

OBJECTIVITY AND SUBJECTIVITY IN HISTORY, PART-2

(PG SEM-1 PAPER- CC:1)

**DR. MD. NEYAZ HUSSAIN
ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR & HOD
PG DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY
MAHARAJA COLLEGE, VKSU,
ARA(BIHAR)**

Hence, not surprisingly, the views of these Relativists had invited strong criticism from some of the well established historians and philosophers. *Maurice Mandelbaum (1967)*, for instance, in his work *The Problem of Historical Knowledge: An Answer to Relativism*, had brushed aside the arguments of the Relativists as unacceptable. He disagreed with the Relativists' notion that history reflected nothing but the thoughts of the historian. He claimed that the Relativists had failed to differentiate between a "statement" and a judgment. He argued that truth in history was concerned with the statement and not the judgment. The statement and not the judgment that narrates the event as it had actually happened. External factors do not in any way influence the presentation of the statement that explains the events objectively.

Mandelbaum also disagreed with the argument that historians were selecting facts to suit their needs. He did not deny that historians select their facts, but, disagreed that this was done to suit their needs. He argued that historian usually does this based on the relevance of the facts to the question he was trying to answer . *Arthur C. Danto (1968)* disagreed with the claim that the inability of historian to detach completely from the object that was being studied was an obstacle to write objective history. He justified his disagreement arguing that the inability to detach from the object was not peculiar to history alone but a sine qua non for all empirical research.

With that he rebutted Beard's claim that complete detachment was possible in natural sciences. In natural sciences, Danto claimed, the researcher usually begins with a hypothesis and selects only those facts that could support his hypothesis. Hence, not only a kind of attachment exists between the subject and the object but the subjective selection of facts also occurs . *Oscar Handlin (1979)* refuted Becker's argument that since the actual reality was not available for the historian to investigate he cooks up a story that suits him based on whatever little traces that had been left behind of that reality. Handlin argued that it was impossible for a historian to create an event based on his

imagination if the available facts, even if they were too little, did not support the historian's version of that event . *E. H. Carr*, too, though was espousing a view similar to that of Becker when it came to the definition of what historical facts were, was opposed to the claim that truth in history was not objective. He suggested that objectivity should not be measured based on the degree of detachment between the subject and the object but rather on the relationship between the available facts and the interpretation arrived at by the historian. History has to be accepted as objective if it is supported by the facts presented by the historian. A much stronger criticism against relativism was put forth by David Hackett Fisher

in his *Historian's Fallacies: Towards a Logic of Historical Thought* (1970). Fisher condemned historical relativism as absurd and pernicious as it encouraged anyone and everyone to write whatever he wanted and get away with it by arguing that what was written need not necessarily be true to everyone and at all times. In short, Fisher claimed that historical accuracy has diminished due to the progress of historical relativism . The debate between the Relativists and the Objectivists that had started at the beginning of the last century does not seem to have an end. It continues to go on even now, though not with the original vigour or vehemence.

However, the unceasing questioning of objectivity in history keeps disturbing the serious historians who are genuinely slogging to recreate the past as truthfully as possible within the given limitations. It is just unfortunate that their arguments in defense of objectivity had failed to convince the Relativists. The Relativists are unwaveringly sticking to the conviction that the criticism put forth by Becker and Beard against objectivity holds true then, now and forever. An Analysis of the Relativist Argument From the foregoing it is obvious that Both Becker and Beard's skepticism against objectivity is premised on the argument that the past had passed leaving behind very little traces thus making it impossible for anyone to recreate it in its totality. Their justification is that since the actual reality is not there whatever is presented as history by the historian is

nothing but the historian's imagination of the past. Thus, Becker claims, there are two histories: one the actual past and the other the imaginative recreation of the historian. And, the history recreated by the historian could never be what had actually happened but a mental mapping of the historian—"a blend of truth and fancy". This, the Relativists argue, allows the historian to present a picture that suits the needs of the time the historian lives. Hence, history could only be true relative to the time of the historian. Becker elaborates this point in his "Detachment and the Writing of History" (1958), arguing that "Someone saw the incident and wrote down like Caesar was stabbed by Senators. When I read the statement a mental picture is formed at once: several men in a room driving daggers into one of their members.

But, it's not the statement alone that enables me to form the picture. My own experience enters in. I have seen men and rooms and daggers and my experience of these things furnishes the element of which the picture is composed. The picture changes as I read more of the Roman world". With this, he argues that there is no way whereby one could get to know the actual history of the past. What we get is not what actually had happened but what the historian tells us to have happened. It is surprising to see a simplistic argument like this coming from a renowned historian like Becker. It is not denied that a mental picture, as Becker claims, is likely to form when one reads or hears of an incident. However, it must be understood that the initial

picture that is formed in the mind of the historian, or any one for that matter, on reading or hearing a statement is not history yet. No trained historian shall present that incomplete and unsubstantiated piece and claim it as objective history. Unlike Becker's "Everyman" the historian shall continue to read more and more of all the extant evidences of the event that he tries to explain in order to comprehend fully what had actually happened. That is the obligation of any trained historian. And, that, too, he does not do on an ad hoc manner. He will not attempt to recreate the event based on the predetermined contemporary values or ideas, as Becker argues, but rather would follow the

Rankean tradition and will try to understand the event on its own terms by "immersing himself in the epoch" in which the event had occurred. And, of course, as the historian reads more and more of the available evidences his mental picture continues to improve, not changes as Becker claims, nearing the actual reality. And, he shall start recreating the reality only after this exhaustive research for facts on the event he studies and is convinced that he has comprehended the past in its right perspective. Obviously, Becker seemed to have confused himself between the "Everyman" that he had accredited as historian and the trained historian. It may be true that "Everyman" can be a historian when history is reduced to, as Becker had done, to mean only

"memory of things done and said" . But history has a larger meaning than that. And, the fact is, not "Everyman" is trained to write serious history. If "Everyman" is accepted as historian, and worse still, his work as history, obviously, objectivity will remain an unattainable dream. Beard cites Tacitus as example to support his claim that historians are usually influenced by their personal beliefs and emotions and manipulate history to suit the needs of their time. What Beard writes about Tacitus is true. No doubt about that. It is generally accepted by historians that Tacitus, rather than presenting history as it had actually happened, was more inclined to use his ingenuity to paint a damning picture of

the ruling aristocrat. But then, it looks that Beard has chosen a wrong historian to support arguments against objectivity in history. Hence, using Tacitus' works to argue against objectivity in history does not do justice to the serious historians who continue to strive to recreate the past as accurate as possible. Rather, the works of the great Greek historians like Herodotus and Thucydides should have been analysed for this purpose. *Herodotus is honoured as the father of history while Thucydides is acclaimed as the first scientific historian.* They are honoured not only for being the earliest to write proper history but more importantly for their contributions to the art of history writing that keeps motivating historians to these days with the belief that the human past could be recreated as it had actually happened.

As mentioned earlier, Herodotus took the trouble to visit almost all the states that were involved in the Persian Wars in his effort to seek as much evidences as possible to write the history of that war. It took him several years to do this. He also took pains to verify the veracity of the facts that he had collected before organizing them in a coherent manner to give us the story of the Persian War . Thucydides did it even better, and had given us the history of the Peloponnesian War. The objectivity of these works had never been questioned, though for a brief period during the Roman times Herodotus' work was subjected to some criticism . It may also be noted here that neither Herodotus

nor Thucydides had allowed their own feelings to dictate what they wrote. They also did not write merely to satisfy the expectations and the needs of the society they were living in then. In fact, Herodotus was criticized by his own people for not being patriotic in his writing for he had praised the virtues of the "barbarians" while reproaching some of the Ionian leaders for their treachery during the Persian Wars . Beard's unyielding arguments to prove that written history was true only relative to the historian's time looks as though he was making an attempt to give justifications for his own work that had been decried vehemently in the US. Using Marxist approach , he has in

his *Economic Interpretation of the American Constitution* (1913), tried to argue that the founding fathers of the US were driven by economic interests rather than philosophical considerations in framing the US Constitution. According to Peter Novick, Beard's work was condemned not only as "libelous, vicious and damnable but also as filthy lies and rotten aspersions." Of course, Beard could argue that what he had written was true relatively. But, unfortunately, his interpretation was rejected even at his own time and by his own people. It is possible that the aversion the Americans had against Marxism could have been the reason behind this aggressive rejection. Even Becker was not spared. He was severely criticized for espousing pro communist

views and was forced to substitute the term "Marxism" with "so called scientific socialism" in his works . The problem here is not so much on the perspective that a historian uses but allowing preconceived ideas to influence the interpretations he makes in his works. It's not clear whether Beard had begun his interpretation of the US Constitution as a neutral and truth seeking historian or started off with the preconceived Marxist hypothesis that all human activities were decided by economic considerations, and had tried to prove that the framing of the US Constitution was no exception to that theory.

Nevertheless, the Relativists continue to argue that different historians tend to see history in different perspective and due to this the truth in history is not absolute but keeps changing. In history, using different approaches is not only unavoidable but something that is encouraged, too, as the explanations derived from different perspectives enable a deeper and wider comprehension of the past. In the history of India, for instance, for a question as to why did India become economically backward under the British rule even though the British had introduced modern economy, there are at least three different explanations by three renowned historians.

But, on a critical analysis of the three answers it can be shown that they are not contradicting but complementing each other. **Romesh Dutt** did not make an unsubstantiated statement when he *claimed that the British had executed a gradual plan to close down all the industries that had existed in India then.* He had provided ample authentic evidences, gleaned from the official records of the English East India Company (EIC) and the British Parliament, to substantiate his thesis. These records show without any doubt that special instructions had, indeed, been given to the EIC officials to take whatever actions they could to hasten the closure of the existing Indian industries and curb the growth of any new ones. In the light of these evidences, could anyone with some basic training in writing history argue that Romesh Dutt's version of history is not objective?

Romesh Chunder Dutt instance, argues that the British had intentionally destroyed all the Indian industries to rid competition from them and at the same time to convert India from an export oriented economy into a market for the products of England. *D. R. Gadgil* , however, *claims that the Indian industries had suffered natural death as they were unable to compete with the technologically superior competitors from Yorkshire and Lancashire.* Whereas, *Barrington Moore* argues that the *British had created conducive climate for economic growth in India by improving transportation, communication and irrigation facilities, but the failure of the Indians to grab those opportunities to participate actively in the economic endeavors had made India to lag behind industrialization.* The three explanations given above may seem to be

contradicting each other and hence strengthen the argument in favour of relativism—what is true to one historian is not so to another. But, on a critical analysis of the three answers it can be shown that they are not contradicting but complementing each other. Romesh Dutt did not make an unsubstantiated statement when he claimed that the British had executed a gradual plan to close down all the industries that had existed in India then. He had provided ample authentic evidences, gleaned from the official records of the English East India Company (EIC) and the British Parliament, to substantiate his thesis. These records show without any doubt that special instructions had, indeed, been given to the EIC officials to take whatever actions they could to hasten the closure of the existing Indian industries and curb the growth of new ones.

In the light of these evidences, could anyone with some basic training in writing history argue that Romesh Dutt's version of history is not objective? In fact, Moore (1966) himself agrees that there was a concerted effort by the EIC to impede industrial growth in India. Similarly, Gadgil's argument, too, cannot be rejected as unfounded. It is based on the Darwinian principle of the survival of the fittest. With the advent of the mightier British industries the Indian manufacturers gradually folded up their businesses. Though it may be argued why the government of the day didn't take any proactive actions to protect the weaker Indian industries against the onslaught of the British

Industries, which any responsible government is duty bound to do, the fact remains that what Gadgil has put forth has truth in it.

It cannot be brushed aside as something invented by Gadgil to satisfy the needs of his time. And, the argument of Barrington Moore, too, is not without any basis. No one can deny that there was vast infrastructural improvement in India under the British rule. But, whether or not that was sufficient enough to lure the Indians to participate and contribute positively to the economic growth of India has to be analyzed before admitting the merits in Moore's hypothesis. Nevertheless, it is wrong to argue that the other.

version of history presented by Moore is a mental map— a creation of his imagination—that could at best be true to him and his time only. As has been said above, all the three explanations should be accepted as fragments of the larger reality and each of these is true and complementing each .In essence, that is what history is all about. To ensure that historians do not slither away from presenting the true past, *Marwick (1989)* suggests that the *approach a historian chooses should not be decided based on the historian's preference but the problem that has to be solved.* One approach may be suitable for one type of problem while another for a different type of problem. A historian may

choose any one approach or a combination of several approaches depending on the question that has to be answered but without giving exclusive privileges to any one approach. In this respect, it is well to note here that using a particular perspective will not impede the attempts of a historian to write objective history if his allegiance is solely to the facts of history and presenting them as truthfully as possible. Only when a historian shifts his allegiance from presenting the truth to any particular ideological considerations or political thoughts or any other outside authority and find ways to please them would he get drifted away from presenting objective history.

Neither Herodotus nor Thucydides and not even any of the great Roman historians had ever tried to present the total reality of the past. In fact, no one knows what the total reality is! Even for a simple incident that may happen now, right in front of everyone's eyes, no one will be able to capture the total reality. What is reported in the press and other Medias, and even in the government gazettes, too, cannot justifiably claim to be portraying the total reality. Under such circumstances, expecting historians to recreate the total reality of the past as a precondition to objectivity is a little too farfetched. And, arguing that the inability of the historians to do that undermines the objectivity of the history presented by them is unacceptable. It has to be understood that not knowing the total reality is not the same as not knowing the reality at all. What has to be scrutinized

in any historical work is not whether the total reality is presented or not but whether what has been presented is corroborated fully by verified evidences and whether or not the historian has managed to free himself from any external influences during the process of recreating that particular human past. That aside, just because the historian has shown only a fragment of the past, that, too, something that he believes to be significant, it does not mean what he has produced is not true. He did not create it. It is something that had actually happened and exists independent of the historian's interpretation. It is a part of the larger actual reality that the Relativists argue and not an intervention of

the historian. Hence, it is unreasonable to argue that that fragments of the real past that the historian has recreated is not true or true only relatively.

CONCLUSION

It looks like the argument against objectivity in history, at least much of it, stemmed from the misconception on the meaning and practices of history. It is *grossly unreasonable to compare history with the natural sciences and expect a complete detachment from the object that is being studied*. It is not denied that the historian is a prisoner of the age and society he lives in, and the danger of he becoming a victim of ideological considerations, political thoughts, nationalistic fervours, patriotic zeal and so on is imminent. But, that *does not mean a complete detachment is a must for writing objective history*. A trained historian is able to handle this hitch effectively as he is aware of these distractions. That aside, a complete detachment, though it could never be possible, shall never entail the writing of any meaningful

CONCLUSION

history. Becker , himself concedes that "detachment would produce few histories, and none worthwhile, for the really detached mind is a dead mind." Thus, *the argument that history could be accepted as objective only when the historian detaches his experience, knowledge and feelings completely from the history he writes is not sustainable.* A historian needs all these resources to be able to analyze and comprehend the actions of the human in the past in its right perspective. In conclusion, let it be said that objectivity in history is achievable if historians seriously endeavor to work for it. It is not denied that there are historians, like Tacitus, who allow their personal feelings to dictate them

CONCLUSION

while trying to recreate the past. For them history has other uses other than presenting the past as it had actually happened. But, then there are also those who despite the pessimism sown by the Relativists continue to strive to write history with the strong conviction that history is objective. They look upon the traditions of Herodotus and Thucydides as the guiding principles in their pursuit to recreate the true past. And, as *Peter Novick* has put it, *if a historian works as "a neutral or disinterested judge and never degenerates into an advocate or even worse, propagandist" he could definitely be able to write objective history.*