

## **Professor Susobhan Sarkar : Value Judgements in History**

History in the way it is generally understood always concerns a world that has actually been in time and is called 'Human past'. That there are events that can subsist by themselves without waiting for the idealist philosopher who may interpret them, is an absolute presupposition of all history. Idealists go too far when they denounce the possibility of a past free from all human interpretation. To historians, Past has been lying there waiting to be discovered by them. History is not creative if creation means the sort of performance we expect from a novelist. It is basic to history that all the pronouncements of the historian are checked and verified by reference to actual events in the past.

That is why it is a matter of surprise to a historian how Croce and others have written history and have not seen that writing of history involves a belief in historical reality independent of the psychological and biological reference to their own existence.

It can therefore be held that history in its most general form as Ranke thought, is concerned with all that has happened in the past. To know how it happened is the most substantive role of any worshipper at the altar of the muse of Clio. Any historical record must be record of some real events and to hope that mere exercise of concepts is sufficient to raise the card-house of events is to indulge in mere idle speculation.

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Having known that 'Past' is the object of historical research, let us see the nature of tools and implements that History engages to achieve its ends. Empiricism as is known has doubted the possibility of any knowledge of the past. It is suggested that in absence of the past events it is problematic to believe that any sense can be attached to distinctions between truth and falsehood of historical judgements, unless they can be so interpreted as to entail a future empirical collaboration. On such restriction of all possible knowledge to what can be deduced by actual or possible sense experience, much that history stands for, shall become falsehood or at best a collection of mere personal opinions and affections lacking any authenticity. Others have, however, rightly pointed out that empiricism ought to see its own limitations. Inference, and imagination, construction and vision are equally instruments of historians to understand an age that is past, people who are dead, values that have grown obsolete in time. But in spite of this gulf that divides the historian from his period of study, it is the methodological faith in the foundational oneness of life and its intelligibility that is working below the surface heterogeneity, that helps him to approach his task with these forlorn and by-gone periods of History and makes him rise above his scepticism and overcome apparent chaos of his data. If this is not granted to history, such hieroglyphics of tablets, edicts of rocks or relics as past leaves, will not enable historian to reconstruct the fabric of human development.

No historian can forget that howsoever chaotic may seem the events one is generally led to believe that order and reason may be discovered in all existence. But this is not to be misconstrued to negate the richness of diversity of existence. Rejection of the 'concrete—Historical' may result in accepting History to be an unfoldment of an Idea, or it may unfairly condemn any thing in a Historical personage that is incomprehensible to any single

contemporary consciousness. The historian ought to keep in mind the solemn words of professor Butterfield who remarkably suggests that his greatest limitation would be a defect of imaginative sympathy, whether it were the refusal to go out to understand a Scotsman or the refusal to put all his humanity into effort to understand a Jesuit, a tyrant, or a poet. Collection and analysis of data of various types, documents, coins and seals, archaeological traces and lastly the amorphous legends and rumours are most preliminary stages of investigation. It is such datum that is to be purified to build any true picture of the past. Analysis may give us learned corpus of inscriptions bibliographies of state documents and chronicles but history rightly so called is a little more than this.

It must evince an insight to be History. It ought to penetrate the obscurity of time by saving light of historical imagination. Bradley and Collingwood rightly assert that unilluminated by such imaginative light a history is an unnatural yoking of ill-digested record, unsavoury details, an inventory of senseless information that fails to offer any idea of the events of which it claims to be the herald. History is not what Collingwood calls merely 'Scissors and Paste' affair, it is an effort of thought to bring back life to dead skeleton of facts; although they can not be so addressed, before there has been the requisite operation of thought articulating them.

Croce as usual has emphasised the importance of a problem in proper historiography; that which alone makes mere chronicles and philological accumulations historically significant. Croce has shown that unless a problem is present to the guidance of the historical reconstruction the findings of history shall not gain any feature of integration, there may be details of information but they shall not enlighten us about any problem. The real value of History is not judged in mere huddling of information but in ascertaining the inner complex of happenings that presents the necessity of regarding interpretation as more important amongst its methods. Thus a historical reconstruction (as essence of history) is a re-enactment; i.e. it is based on projection of a system of ideas organised in the historical mechanism of correlation and later mounted on the framework of space-time units.

Construction, thus is a necessity of historical knowledge. But the elements of conjecture ought to be clearly delineated in construction. There has been a confusion about the exact role of 'projection' in thinking about the methods of historical knowledge and its structure. Bradley has illegitimately identified this operational character of the process of 'projection' with actual ontological dependence of historical events on the mind of the historian. He remarks, "We have further shown that although this experience is not always personal in the sense of that which we can immediately verify for ourselves, it yet is personal in the sense that upon the observation and judgement of our own mind it ultimately depends".

Michael Oakeshott in a slightly different form has come to similar conclusion. Towards the nature of 'realities' outside the enwrapping consciousness his criticism is on general idealistic lines. He asserts that any experience is for consciousness and beyond the ken of consciousness any conception of an isolated 'reality' is a contradiction in terms. "History is experience. The historian's world of ideas is conceived as recalling what has happened, nevertheless it is a gross fallacy to suppose that recalling is something less than a form of experience, to suppose that we can recall anything but ideas."

Collingwood has found out the true instrument of this form of historical experience and believes it to be nothing short of Copernican revolution in the correct apprehension of the devices of historical consciousness. It is the discovery that so far from relying on an authority other than himself to whose statements his thoughts must conform, *historian is his own authority and his thoughts autonomous self authorising possessed of a criterion to which his so called authorities, must conform by reference to which they are criticised.*

We have to understand properly the significance and value of the statements of such idealistic thinkers when they suggest that History is a species of thought, and that involves

a comparison and unification of experience without which it is dumb. But that does not mean that we must indulge in absolute acceptance of the idealist claim that he can dispense with reference to past events as facts. Historian should never commit the error of the comic thinker who as Toynbee remarks in his examination of Collingwood's ideas of History identifies himself with the personage of his study. The aim of visualization and coherence is to fill the gaps as are witnessable in the texture of events (as best conceived on the evidence) but this never implies or permits inventions of wish fulfilment. It is just a normal expectation that in absence of more verifiable details the past course most probably have been like this.

Thus it is generalization and inference wrought on the observed and observable data that is taken as the historical method. Prof. Susobhan Sarkar says, poetical license surely is not for a historian. His labours and aims are not amusement but veridical analysis of past events. Hence fancying or mentalising are rather inimical to historical reconstruction. The historian should allow the shadows of events that are struggling to get concrete shapes in the consciousness of the present to have their natural concretion. Historians' reconstruction is not addition of materials, ab-extra, but rather a discovery of meaning from within his available evidence.

Recent writers like Mandelbaum have asked if history deals with man's life, actions and achievements in time then, as Prof. Sarkar has suggested that History and more rigorous sciences differ only by the amount of logic they employ in their methods. He writes : "It is a distinction between two sciences on the basis of the amount of logic they use, for we know that the difference between the first and second statements is that the first involves the logical operation of quantification where as the second does not. We feel that sciences should not be distinguished on the basis of the amount of logic they use.....the distinction between sociology and history is stultifying, it separates the finding of fact and the formulation of laws into two distinct disciplines". But even if one grants Mandelbaum's contention in regard to the subject matter of history we need not agree with Prof. Sarkar that only difference between History and other sciences will be in the degree of logic applied in their respective methods. On the other hand we believe that some thing like the 'art of history' shall remain, howsoever, sociology and other allied sciences may statistically overwhelm it by their laws and coefficients. For the character of History is not based on a system of concepts conceived to explain the forces and dialectics of society. It is rather interested in realising the depth and value and character of historically concrete Individual. M. N. Roy remarks on the contemporary trends of historical methodology that it aims to recover "Man as the medium of values, which he alone applies emerges triumphantly from the mass of dead materials, choosing the right method he brings them to life. And writing of contemporary History appears as simply another expression of man's urge to create anew and to protect against the clock that upbraids him with the waste of time". History assesses the individual on the touchstone of values, treats him as a vehicle of spirit, who is an agent of excellence, and artifice of deep fountains of aspirations, those aspirations of *True man*. As such the place of Historical knowledge is different, its scope wider and appeal more concrete, than any science.

Many controversial issues have emerged out of the discussions concerning the veracity of historical statements. To many the question of veracity of any judgment in history, is useless, because they think that verification can never be free from subjectivity. But this is rather too much for any scientific study. The subjectivist should realize that truth is nothing if not objective and universal. Historical research has involved a process of verification that is conducive to successful testing of 'historical judgments.'

Prof. Beard has pointed out : If all historical conceptions are merely relative to passing events to transitory phases of ideas and interests, then the conception of relativity is itself relative, when absolutes in history are given up the absolutism of relativity is also rejected.....the hypothesis of chaos admits of no ordering at all, hence those who operate

under it cannot write history, although they may comment on history. An even more interesting issue has been raised in Prof. Carl Becker's article where he holds "As an actual event the signing of the Declaration was what it was as a remembered event it will for Mr. Everyman, what Mr. Everyman contrives to make it, will have for him significance and magic much or little or none at all as it fits well or ill into his little world of interests and emotional comforts."

Both the above thinkers assert in their different ways that all historical judgments have some extra perceptual foundation. Granting historical actuality a place of its own in past events, we have to be clear that judgments in history are made by interpretive thought. Idealist methodologist like Oakeshott, Becker and Collingwood make much of the confession of the historians that they are incapable of coming to an agreement. But why historians disagree ? Does the disagreement of opinions in historians imply absence of any norm of verification free from subjective bias of the historian ? It is true that historian does not deliberately introduce the subjective factor into his data, but there are certain prejudices which are so inherent in human mind that they while remaining unconscious to the historian himself, vitiate his interpretation of facts. This reminds us of what Bacon calls 'idols.'

Prof. Sarkar has remarked : all history is a matter of opinion based on facts : of opinion guided and limited by facts that have been scientifically discovered.

He says, "the question of verification is of vital importance and we must seriously determine whether historical statements have truth value or not if there is no possibility of their future verification." It is true that history can never aspire to reach a rigid scientific level in providing a device for testing its conclusions, yet it is unreasonable to label this limitation as subjectivism or bias. It is a normal property of human knowledge that imagination comes to assist thought in fighting against the chaotic mass of events bringing out coherent system of a significant whole.

Historians are thus both scientists and artists. The ideal of historical account shows constant application of fancy to the frame work of facts. On the other hand if we agree with the imagists, who advocate free reign of imagination in historical writings that fancy creates history, we certainly degrade it from study of facts to sensational journalism. But subjectivism as advocated by writers like Collingwood and Oakeshott never distracts true historians from their scientific approach. They perceive clearly that behind 'imagination doctrine' there lies the ghost of solipsism.

One must not forget that history as History can not be given the status of philosophy. Prof. Sarkar disapproves : ...the delight in the linguistic accident which has caused men to call both by the name of history, we are easily led to the Crocean identification between past and present and we lay ourselves open to the influence of fancy tales about a four dimensional world in which past history can be influenced by those who contemplate it from the observation post that is called the present.

This criticism of Prof. Sarkar against Croce's identification has been a right warning and his suggestion that we should distinguish 'Geschichte' from geschichten that is the actual events from their record thus has very clearly dispelled the confusion that is caused due to a mere linguistic accident in English language, that the two concepts are referred by one word 'History.'

History is not mere 'thought' or the 'contemporary awareness of the spirit' as Croce calls it, nor is it merely a sympathetic re-enactment of thought alone as Collingwood suggests.

It is as referred by Butterfield "a form of descriptive writing as books of travel are. It is concerned with processes of life rather than with the meaning or goal of life."

Coming to the nature of historical judgements, all historical judgments in a sense are descriptive. They are of the type of memory recall. Memory some times fails to give us the right knowledge, it is not impossible to detect where it is mistaken and why we take it as

such. In this sense memory judgments are susceptible to verification. We can not call back the situations that are referred to in such judgments but these judgments are always so tempered that they can be shown to imply certain other assertions that can be empirically verified. Coherence of various elements in a judgment is its internal condition.

Judgments having any internal discrepancy thus can be proved to be invalid. In the first instance it is noted that internal coherence of the different constituents is the most essential condition in any descriptive judgment in history, as it is essential for memory. It may be remarked in agreement with Prof. A. J. Ayer that any assertion with regard to past events can be objectively tested by way of collaboration from written record that can be taken as latent percept. In nowise are such judgments dependent on the person who makes them. Thus evidence as latent percept and hieroglyphics of past as 'dumb bards', can be so utilised as to provide an opportunity for assessing the truth content of any historical statement.

Probably it is for the occurrence of judgments of value that history has invited much prejudice against itself. Had the historian of antiquity Tacitus been followed, who said that 'History can not restrain evil by the terror of posthumous infamy', the nature and function of History would not have been so badly misunderstood and slighted as at times they have been. Leopold Von Ranke, the celebrated nineteenth century theorist and historian started a movement of historical composition that aimed at describing events as they happened. His own study of Roman world is a work of such theoretical virtuosity. For this reason it is to be seen what exactly is the status of 'Value-Judgments' in the historical reconstruction. It is to no purpose to take a side without understanding the controversy from within. In historical circles it has been a vexed issue as to what importance one should attach to value judgments so profusely strewn in Histories. Here also there are extremists. Ranke as we have seen is one. Acton is another. Acton can not understand a historian who fails to discharge his obligation of telling his audience the nature and amount of moral excellence his historical characters display. Power corrupts, absolute power corrupts absolutely are the sort of weighty and ponderous overtones that he relishes.

Valuation of events that a historian studies is not completely avoidable. The point at issue has been whether one is right in exalting History to the rank of supreme court that apportions blames and rewards virtues. But this has many implications. To some history is the vindication of good and chastisement of evil, and it shall be dereliction of a necessary obligation on the part of the historian to take an indifferent attitude. It can be said without serious risk of opposition that *Raison d'être* of history is not such moral conversion. If such virtues seem to triumph in history, historian rejoices in it but strictly as a professional expert he may not permit this goal to restrict study. For the study of History 'facts' are sacred, and as a devotee of Clio the historian will regret such valuation as a puerile chicanery of enthusiasts.

No historian is more positively partisan than the brilliant catholic Acton who acted as a panegyrist on freedom and provost marshall of virtue. To him history is nothing if it does not correct injustice or avenge innocence. The liberal and cultivated Victorian in him constantly bustled to pass judgments of value on facts. He took history primarily what has been called a school of virtue and guide to life. The greatest achievement of history is to develop and perfect and arm conscience.

This moralising of events for the historical study should be completely disapproved. Moralization is uncalled for. Also Prof. Butterfield wholly and completely disapproves it. Valuation has some special meaning for historical study. It is not to find out the moral worth. It really aims at discovery of significance which depends on understanding the nature of an interrelated whole, and that is why it is different from a collection of statistical data. The

quality of various factors combine together to make the present possible. The valuation is effected by the forces of events themselves. May be historian inclines to extol virtue or deprecate evil but to go round the past world with a stick to explore the character of his subject is to invite ridicule and bitterness. Such zeal for propaganda (for it is forcing an idea into a fact) is born of prejudice and is reflective of an incapacity to actualize a historical perspective. It makes history in Croce's words a weapon rather than a discipline, it will not last as thought but be expressive of cognitive tendencies, in his own words : "Thought would cease to be the creator of life, and by becoming tendentious it would decay into untruth. Will and action being no longer illumined by truth would then be debased to passionate and pathological fury and spasm."

We must not forget that values expand and moral codes are notorious for their differences. That which is taken to be morally good is condemned in a subsequent age as the greatest evil. As Professor Butterfield remarks : "When all historical explanations of character and conduct have been exhausted, it must be remembered that the real moral question is still waiting to be solved, and what can the historian do about the secret recesses of the personality where a man's final moral responsibility resides ?"

History reconstructs events and leaves them for its readers to draw their own lessons. History in the first place feels no attraction for any commission in the service of virtue. Prof. Sarkar has soberly recommended a middle course. He has quite pertinently started that some frame, some perspective shall always be present in all history written by men, but the opinions so reached should be checked from driving to an extreme. He states "The difficulty of forming judgments about past is that every historical approval or condemnation (say of the French Revolution) is based on the assumption that if things had gone differently they would have been better or worse. *But this is just what one can never find out.* And so though we may each of us have his opinions let us hold them in modest diffidence."

But then one should not have the impression that history has nothing to do with value, or it can be disinterested in Man's fate. On the contrary History is studied just because one feels intense attraction to that which has been Man's lot.

To understand human destiny the question which comes in Prof. Sarkar's mind is— 'Have values a direction in History ? But we are first required to ascertain whether there is an order or scheme working in it before we try to understand the human destiny.'

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