

New Approaches in the Oral Traditions of History

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Abstract :

Oral tradition is an age old source of collecting historical data. This paper therefore examines oral tradition as a reliable source of historical writing. In this presentation - New Approaches in the oral traditions of history, efforts were made to define the concept of oral tradition, to present arguments for and against the use of oral tradition as a reliable source of historical writing and to mention its implications for historical writing. It was therefore concluded that oral tradition can be used in historical writing. However, the historian must be cautious of some factors, such as the need to be patient to go to the root of the information gathered through oral tradition in order to ensure that the facts collected and gathered are authentic and genuine.

Keywords : Oral Tradition, History, Historical writing, Historian, New Approaches.

Introduction :

150 years ago, in British India some western historians considered Indian historiography nothing better than ethno history or folk history, worthy of the attention of only the anthropologists, but not of professional historians due to an assumption that the Indian continent still laid in an ancient period lacking writing systems, civilization, or a proper sense of history. Such historians mistook the predominance of oral cultures and traditions and the close relationship of Indian historical sources to folklore to be a lack of historical consciousness. Indeed, Indian historical sources are predominantly oral traditions, reported through time as part of the knowledge, literature, language, and cultural resources of communities. Yet other sources are contemporary traditions remembered as part of the personal experiences of people living within a generation. Professional historians classify this second category of oral sources as oral history. These oral sources represent the baseline of the internally derived data that carry the ideology, philosophy and history of communities. Through the multidisciplinary method, historians are able to apply the insights

of history, historical linguistics, archaeology, and the resources of other disciplines to enrich the evidence of oral traditions, oral history, and folklore. Oral tradition has been a universal form of historical consciousness, which usually operates alongside writing. This was, indeed, the case in ancient India and also in ancient Greece which was a secondary centre of innovation in the development of writing.

When Herodotus visited Egypt in 454 BC, he collected information through oral traditions from the priests, who were also the custodians of the archives. The Greek father of the western tradition of historiography was himself a practitioner of oral tradition and oral history. Historians of India use historical footprints wherever they can find them, and in whatever form like oral traditions, oral history, folklore, ethnography, the linguistic record, archaeological artefacts and other sources of evidence.

Meaning of Oral Tradition :

Oral tradition is a story, tradition or practice that is shared orally or through speech usually handed down from generation to generation. Eventually, the information obtained from Oral tradition is usually written down. It can tell us so much about the society and the people who created them and allow history to be kept and shared by groups who did or did not have the facility or art of writing. It is a good way to keep valuable information for others in the group and allows the literate and the illiterate alike to share the information.

In 2004 Ali described oral tradition and included myths and legends which throw light on the origin of communities and their social, economic and political institutions, their taboo, totems, social concepts and practices.

Is Oral Tradition a reliable source of historical writing

Many commentators and professional historians, particularly foreign historians such as Wilhem Frederick Hegel, Robert Lowie, Hugh Trevor Roper and many Indian Historians trained in England vehemently expressed that oral sources of history are unreliable. This perhaps is due to the misconception of these historians to equate the documentary materials with history and absence of these definitely means no history for them. Even though oral tradition has its own weaknesses or shortcomings like lack of exact chronologies and dates among others, it can still be argued seriously that these short comings are not sufficient and genuine enough to negate its reliability as a source of historical writing. No wonder, in 1990 Govind Chandra Pandey submitted that "Such limitations (noticeable in oral tradition), when they are recognized explicitly by the historians who must work with them, do not necessarily invalidate Indian historiography as a scientific

discipline; in fact recognition of the limitations strengthens its claims to be scientific while it stimulates the rigorous search for other means of achieving reliability". Thus, oral tradition remains a reliable source of historical writing. It should be noted that in most part of India, major learning consists of oral tradition. Thus in order to make oral tradition reliable as a valuable source of historical writing like the other sources, the historians using this source must be meticulous, painstaking and cautious. Hence, the historians using oral traditions must possess an intimate knowledge and a clear understanding of the local languages, traditions and customs of the place and people whose oral traditions they are collecting for the reconstruction of their history.

PREVIOUS APPROACHES IN ORAL TRADITIONS OF HISTORY

The Vedas of the Aryans and The Pentateuch of the Jews also were first received through oral traditions and later they were published. When Megasthenese, Fa-Hien, Huen-Tsang, I-Tsing, Al-Baruni, Ibn-Batuta, etc visited and traveled all over India, they spoke to the people in India and learnt about the thoughts and cultures of India from the people. Then they wrote those descriptions and narrations in their own language which continue to serve as the main sources of Indian history even today. All these travelogues justify oral traditions and prove that oral traditions are a leading element in the building of history.

All the travelers of the world right from ancient times to the modern times listened to the narrations and updates of the local people and based on those descriptions, they wrote their travelogues. Undoubtedly, the descriptions of these travelers are regarded as the leading sources of history, though their travelogues are a result of the information they had gathered through oral dialogues and conversations.

Similarly, the Europeans also learnt the Indian languages from the Indians after coming to India and then built history. Though they studied the Indian scriptures and texts or discovered the archaeological facts later, but basically, all their knowledge and discoveries which they got orally through conversations later took the form of contemporary history.

Not only in India, but in Egypt, Israel and Africa also, the early history was passed down the generations through oral traditions. Later they were published in the form of books and texts.

The above excerpts are self explanatory to establish the importance of oral traditions in the building of history.

1

Speaking of New Approaches in Oral Traditions, on 16-17 April, 2011, National Research Seminar on the Goa Liberation Movement and Satyagrahis of Madhya Pradesh organized by Government Mankunvar Bai Arts and Commerce Autonomous College for Women, Jabalpur, is the most significant event. This seminar was organized by Prof. R. N. Shrivastava and Prof. Vandana Gupta. In this seminar, more than 100 Satyagrahis of the Goa Liberation Movement were invited. They were felicitated in this forum and they shared their thoughts and experiences related to the Goa Liberation Movement. The organizers tried to visit the houses of the martyr Satyagrahis and spoke to the wives, children and other relatives of the martyrs and these narrations were published as the proceedings of the seminar.

When the proceedings of this seminar was published in 2012, it was realized that 51 Satyagrahis from Jabalpur only had participated in this movement. It was known from the surviving Satyagrahis and the sources available with them that 262 Satyagrahis from Madhya Pradesh had participated in the Goa Liberation Movement. I wish to thank Prof. R. N. Shrivastava and Prof. Vandana Gupta for their efforts to visit the homes of the Satyagrahis and collect information. Later they compiled this information and published it in the form of a book called "गोवा मुक्ति संग्राम एवं मध्यप्रदेश के सत्याग्रही"

Undoubtedly, to listen to the orally narrated events and to build the contemporary history based on those facts is a very important activity. Proceedings titled "गोवा मुक्ति संग्राम एवं मध्यप्रदेश के सत्याग्रही" is the most important example of the oral tradition in building history.

2

In my city Sagar, there is one of the oldest churches in India is situated at Sagar cantt. which is known as St. Peter's Church, Sagar. This church was built in 1840 AD. My Grandfather late Mr. S. P. Gideon, retired head clerck from the police of Central Province and Berar, was a permanent member of this church from 1937 to 1974 AD. From him, I came to know how the British treated the Indians, how the British treated the Indian Christians? how the British treated the Priests? what were their culture and traditions, how was the polity, society, art and architecture, etc of Sagar, what was the status of the Hindus and Muslims residing in Sagar, etc. I collected all this information from my Grandfather and when I became the teacher of history, I studied the art, architecture and the paintings used in this church and read the contemporary material, then prepared a research paper and presented it in a seminar in Jhansi and after that it was published. I would like to clarify once again that oral traditions are a very significant resource for building lively history. This further contributes to the building of national history.

In Sagar, there is a very important place of Jain religion called the Varni Parisar, Moraji. It was built by Shri Ganesh Prasad Varni. In 1905AD, Shri Ganesh Prasad established the Sattark Sudha Tarangini School. This school and its hostel were started 115 years back. Today this institution is known as Shri Ganesh Digambar Jain Sanskrit College and is spreading and propagating religious education in the society. The hostel building in the Shri Ganesh Digambar Jain Sanskrit College premises, Varni, Moraji, Sagar, was in a very dilapidated condition. This was causing problems for the students. So the Trust and management committee of the college decided to build a new hostel. Accordingly, the foundation stone for the building was laid on 7 March 1992 and the building is ready today.

Presently, this college has become a unique place for learning of Jain literature. Since it has become a historical place, I met the scholars who are interested in religious works and tried to get information about the history of this place. Apart from this, I met and interviewed the other renowned dignitaries of the city like late Shri Dalchand Jain, late Shri Vitthal Bhai Patel and late Shri Shiv Kumar Shrivastava, Ex Vice Chancellor of Dr. Harisingh Gour University, Sagar and some of my Jain friends etc. and prepared a research paper and presented it in a seminar in Gwalior, which is now in a published form. Though I referred to the Gazetteer while preparing this research paper, the rest of the basic information was obtained through oral or verbal method. Thus, the significance of oral methodology is self evident in historiography and building of history.

There is a settlement/village called Jaruakheda which lies between the Tehsils of Sagar and Khurai. Though there is no mention of this place called Jaruakheda in the first Hindi Gazetteer Sagar Saroj, prepared by Shri Hiralal, but it is evident from the legends that this village existed even during the time of the British. So it is very difficult to say why it is not mentioned in the first gazetteer. While going from Jaruakheda to Khurai, as we move a little further from Jaruakheda, there is a very famous temple to the right side of the road. This temple is called as Thakur Baba ka Mandir. There is no bus or truck which does not stop at this temple. There is a railway line on the left side of the road. Thakur Baba ka Mandir is so famous that people come here for various appeasements and on fulfillment of their wishes, they offer small and big metal (copper) horses. Some people offer live hen also. Probably, offering horses became a tradition because I personally think that Thakur Baba used to ride on a horse. Since I was a student of History, I was curious to know more about the history of this place. So when I was posted at Bina, I started my research work on this topic.

The main question in my mind was, "Who was Thakur Baba? was he a diety, regional God or someone else?" So I interviewed the local people. I got a lot of information,

but a shopkeeper called Balram Patel gave me very significant information about the fables and beliefs prevalent in this place for many years. After that, I conducted a detailed survey of the temple, read the available literature and prepared a research paper which I read in a seminar in Ujjain. This research paper has now been published. I collected the elementary and basic information of this research paper through oral method and now it has taken the form of written and recorded history. Later the proceedings of the seminar was published from Delhi.

Conclusion :

So far this paper has established the fact that there has been a considerable opposition to the use of oral tradition in historical writing, mostly by many European and non-European writers who were trained in Europe. However, it has been noted that such opposition is unjustified because there is no historical source either oral or written that is fool-proof and has no limitations. Nevertheless, the use of oral traditions and other non-written sources like oral history, oral evidence, archaeological remains and a host of others have come to stay as reliable sources for the writing of history or for the rediscovery of the past. Also, the fact that eminent historians like R K Majumdar, H D Sankalya, A S Altekar, Ramdhari Singh Dinkar, Narmada Prasad Gupt and others used oral sources or non-written sources to reconstruct Indian history proves that oral traditions are good source materials for historical writing. However, the reliability of oral tradition can be better guaranteed through the interdisciplinary approach. The conclusion arrived at through the oral sources could be cross-checked through other available written sources and disciplines such as Anthropology, Ethnography, Linguistics, Geography, Sciences and Archaeology.

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