

Politics of Truth and the Everyday life: an Anthropological perspective on Oral and Written History

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Article History

Received: 28.09.2017

Accepted: 11.10.2017

Published: 30.10.2017

DOI:

10.21276/sjhss.2017.2.10.10



Abstract: This paper seeks the complex issues between the oral/ethnographic narration and historical narration of the past. The oral history often collected by ethnographers directly from the people may have huge differences with the supposed authentic written account of history. For instance, the people in Tibet still believe, and they have tales and songs which say that Mao Zedong came to Tibet for the Communist Long March through China in the 1930s but the written records of the long march and Zedong's personal history reject this claim. However, the written history can't reject the paradoxical existence of oral tradition and vice versa. Both oral and written history has cultural significance and hence exists beyond the truth. In this context, it is difficult to pass judgment whether ethnography or history is the truth; rather it demands anthropological concerns to understand the reason behind the disjuncture. The social and cultural feature which creates disjuncture or paradox between the oral and written forms of historic accounts is more important to understand the truth. Anthropologist Carole Mcgranahan argued, "This situation demands to consider the social truth, cultural logic and political claim embedded in history as examples of the productive excesses inherent in and generated by this conceptual disjuncture." This paper also emphasizes the concepts like social truth, cultural logic, and political claims to solve the complex issues between the ethnography and written history.

Keywords: Ethnography, History, Oral Tradition, Social Truth, Cultural Logic, Political Claim

INTRODUCTION

Both history and ethnography are a science and art of writing about people, society, and culture. Between history and ethnography, there are many similarities as well as differences. While a historian reconstructs the life of humans from the ancient time to the modern era, an ethnographer tells the story of human life, past and present, by living with them. One of the fundamental differences between history and ethnography is that ethnography most often trusts memory, oral tradition and sometimes myths to tell the story of people and their lives. In contradiction to it, historians have a strong belief on written documents to understand or reconstruct the history of the people. Whether it has been carried through people's memory, tales, and myths or a well-documented record in a written format, there will be different factors and forces which play a crucial role in constructing both histories as well as memory -- a source of ethnography. These factors sometimes create disjuncture within history or sometime in ethnography as well

This is very obvious reality about history that all historians claim that what they are telling is truth and

what the 'others' tell is not. One of the finest examples for this we can find in the recent historic discourses on the Mughal history projects in India. Apparently, historians from diverse ideological and academic backgrounds have been meticulously doing historic research on this area, and the findings of these studies make crucial differences between. Say for instance Sandeep Balakrishna [1] an amateur right-wing historian criticise the way how the mainstream academic historians constricted Indian history especially the Mughal history and he say that what all of them told us was false "They whitewashing the historical record of Muslim atrocities in India is donning cruel despots and tyrants as benevolent and progressive rulers. The classic example is Aurangzeb, the bigoted tyrant par excellence. Even a casual perusal of Jadunath Sarkar's five-volume History of Aurangzib or the shorter India of Aurangzeb or even the primary source, the authorized biography of Aurangzeb, the Masir-i-Alamgiri has ample evidence to show for his fanaticism and hatred against Hindus. Yet, our school and university and other books of popular history paint him in nearly the opposite light". When Sandeep Balakrishna argue with ample evidence that the Mughal

ruler Aurangzeb was a fanatic Muslim ruler and he hated Hindus, Audrey Truschke, Mellon postdoctoral fellow in the Department of Religious Studies at Stanford University, argue with a claim of honesty that “Aurangzeb decided to move away from what little remained of the Mughal interest in Sanskrit as a political decision, rather than as a cultural or religious judgment” Richard Eaton, an eminent historian argued in other way on the same subject that “the destruction of temples by Muslim rulers in India was exceedingly rare and even when it did happen, it was a political act meant to chasten recalcitrant rulers and not a theological move” When historians speak paradoxical view on the same subject, the truth remain a question always. Histories are never only about facts, but also about specifically cultural ways of ordering the world and thus about the status and nature of those facts [3]. Similarly, following stories will explain the role of historic narrations in human social life, and history is not something as many of us think that it is the truthful tale of the past, this will lead us to be more cautious and more meticulous while doing ethnographic studies.

This paper argues that the truth about ethnography is not relying on narration or stories passed through generations rather the ethnographer needs to bring the emotions and the political or cultural reasons which create tales, myths, and memory in a society. This is what Paul Stolar [2], an eminent ethnographer of our time, said “A credential principle of ethnographic field work is this: listen to what your subjects are saying but pay special attention to what they do. As we all know, what a person says is not necessarily what he or she does.”

DIFFERENT HISTORIES OF KUMARA KSHATRIYA

Kumara Kshatriya is a small community, consisting of less than 200 families living in the town of Kanjangadu in Kasarakode, the northern district of Kerala. In the past five decades, the Kumara Kshatriyas have told two different stories about their community. In the 1950s they claimed to belong to the warrior community because they saved and helped King Ikkeri fight various battles with other dynasties including the dynasty of Hyder Ali of Mysore. This led to calling themselves as Kumara Kshatriya, which sounds like a sub-caste of Kshatriya caste. This has been recorded in the government agencies (Sreekumar, Nisar. 2014).

The first author of this paper met Narayanan, a 67-year-old man, from Kumara Kshatriya community in 2011. Narayanan explained that it was a decision taken by the community leaders to assert upper caste status; they had wiped out all evidence of their past identity in order to adopt the new one. The old man had a big brass vessel from their temple that had the community's name, Alapaika, etched on it, which was later scribbled

to make it difficult to read. He said his ancestors were not happy with calling them as Alapaika. The Alapaika is the old name for Kumara Kshatriyas and has been mentioned as a tribe in early anthropological literature. (Sreekumar, Nisar. 2014)

When preparing an ethnographic account, the author was advised by Narayanan to highlight the history of Alapaika tribe and its socio-economic backwardness in the contemporary scenario. The social economic conditions of the Kumara Kshatriya community is not sound, and apparently, they are lagging behind their own counterparts living in the neighbouring state of Karnataka, where they have been enjoying the reservation in education and other sectors.

The community has been demanding reservation for more than three decades but their demands are constantly rejected or dallied. The first of the many reasons is that the caste name Kumara Kshatriya has confused the authority to support their new claim that they are a tribal community called Alapaika. Another reason is that the government agencies have observed few of the male members of the community wearing sacred thread across their body, which clearly suggests that they belong to the twice born upper caste. Now, the community leaders, including Narayanan, think it was a wrong decision taken by the community leaders in 1950s to assert upper-caste identity; they have realized that most of their rituals and their culture are similar to that of the local tribal culture than the upper caste culture. This identity crisis of the Kumara Kshatriyas and the paradoxical claim of their own history raise fundamental issues beyond the discourses of reservation.

This Kumara Kshatriya story speaks many facts about historic narrations of people. More profoundly its talks about the role of socio-political claims in making people's own narrations. Similarly, there are some other forces and factors which also play key roles in the process of people's versions of history. Carole Mcgranahan [3] argued that ‘the social truths, cultural logics, and political claims embedded in this history as examples of the productive excesses inherent in and generated by conceptual disjuncture’.

TIBETAN STORY OF MAO'S VISIT

Carole Mcgranahan, [3] eminent Canadian anthropologists, has been working on Tibetan people in Tibet, Nepal and other exile areas for more than two decades. She recently published a paper on her experience of encountering the paradox between historic accounts and ethnographic memory of people during her fieldwork.

The Tibetan people, both, who live in Tibet and in exile, told stories of Mao Setung, the great leader of the Chinese revolution, that he had visited Tibet and spent a considerable number of days with their Lama during his Long March in 1936. They still sing songs of Mao's visit and his life in Tibet and believe that Mao had survived the Long March when his fellow leaders had not survived because he lived in Tibet. The painting of Mao in a Tibetan dress has become an essential part of the lives of Tibetans, and is prominently visible in Tibetan tea shops, houses and monasteries. The paradox is that this memory has no historic authenticity and value. The historians rejected this claim made by the Tibetans because the story does not have any factual pieces of evidence or historic records by the Government of China, nor do the records on the life of Mao and especially the history of Long March prove that Mao had visited Tibet and spent time with Tibetan Buddhist leaders.

BETWEEN HISTORY AND ETHNOGRAPHY

We have already discussed the paradoxes existing in historic accounts by giving the examples of how various historians have argued the facts about Mughal India. And then, the story of Kumara Kshathriya have reviled the ethnographic fact about how people construct their history and how various factors like social and political claim fabricates its logics. Then the Tibetan story has discussed yet another phenomenon that the disjuncture between historic documentation and ethnographic narration.

In facts, these are crucial methodological and philosophical problem existing within and between history and ethnography. Though the first problem, the different and paradoxical historic view on the same subject is crucial and which affects human social life it remains the problem of history, and historian needs to address the issue. The second problem, the society deliberately creating different stories as a narration of history which may or may not have paradoxes, is an ethnographic problem. How has ethnography been addressing this issue? The very concepts of 'participant observation' or the more recent term the 'observing the participant' in fact deal help ethnographer to make plain belief on what people say in the field. 'An ethnographer don't visit people for a week or two or call them up on the phone and then write about them; rather they live in their subject communities for long period of time- often many years during which they establish and reinforce a network of social relationships- relationships that underscore the complex social, economic and emotional realities of contemporary social life' [2]. 'Ethnography requires diligence, sensitivity, commitment and a foundation of mutual trust. Through the ongoing social implication of an ethnographer in the lives of her or his subjects, these dimensions gradually develop. This

painstaking and difficult process eventually enables the ethnographer to tell the story of people with respect, power, and a depth of understanding that allows us to a better understanding of human condition' [2]. Hence a better ethnographic investigation can bring in-depth ethnography on Kumar Kshatriya reflecting the causes of their different narrations of history along with their concepts of social mobility and other aspects.

The third issues the apparent disjuncture between history and ethnography has methodological dimensions. An ethnographer always tends to believe what people talk about themselves and the stories and songs they have been carrying through generations. "Anthropology is blind to how many its practices on telling other people's stories- badly. What happens is that those stories are elaborated as scientific as scientific observations gleaned not from storytellers but from 'informants' (Taussing 2006:62). But a historian needs to be written or any authentic form of records to believe things that have occurred in the past. Here an important question is whether history or ethnography is true. It also leads us to think about our own social and personal life, how we can trust the memory, tales, and myths which have been carried down through ages. If history rejects all of this then what will remain as our cultural asset.

To solve this fundamental problem between history and ethnography we need to address the philosophy of truth. The post-structuralist understanding of truth has rejected the notion of the universality of truth rather 'Truth is a thing of the world: it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power. Each society has its regime of truth, its 'general politics' of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and make function as true; the mechanisms and instance which enable one to distinguish true and false statement, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts are true [4].

When universality of truth is no more exist but people in different society may able to define truth. It also leaves the crucial job to an ethnographer to find the 'regime of truth' in the subjected society. "Enacting the process of reflecting on the self and the world and of the world of acting simultaneously within and upon what it finds there" (Ortner 2006). And also to address the disjuncture the ethnographic theory has suggesting As da Col and Graeber [5] admit, there is not "anything particularly new here ." Just a lineage of wide-ranging "anthropological scholarship that over the last three decades has addressed... disjuncture, and the moments or events of 'speculative wonder' or 'positive equivocation' to which they give rise" and to which da

Col and Graeber have given a name [5]; hence their call to return to ethnographic theory, Carole Mcgranahan [3].

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