

Epistemic Value of Memoir: Some Reflections

Raghunath Ghosh*

I. Introduction

A memoir is a piece of auto-biographical writing, usually shorter in nature than a comprehensive auto-biography. The memoir often tries to capture certain highlights or meaningful moments in one's past. The memoir may be more emotional and concerned with capturing particular scenes, of the series of events, rather than documenting every fact of a person's life, e.g., auto-biography, confession, diary, journal, letter, personal essay etc. The present paper intends to examine whether the stories gathered through these memoirs have got any epistemic value or not. When an event is proved to be true, it is taken to be having an epistemic value. If some thing has got an epistemic value, it is to be contributory to the formation of history. Whether the incidents acquired through these memoirs have got an epistemic value or not is proposed to be undertaken here.

II. Memoir and its Contribution to the formation of History

Historical data are facts and hence they are taken to be true. The truth of such data is not to be taken as *a-priori* but it is to be authenticated and proved epistemologically. In Indian tradition there many theories of knowledge through which they can be proved to be true. There is long drawn debate in the history of Indian epistemology whether memoir can be taken as a right cognition (*pramā*) or not. The philosophers of Nyāya persuasion believe that there are four types of right cognitions, viz, perceptual (*pratyakṣa*), inferential (*anumiti*), analogical (*upamiti*) and testimonial (*sābda*). On the other hand, the wrong cognitions arise from doubt (*samśaya*), illusion (*viparyaya*) and memory (*smṛti*). In this context a fundamental question remains: Can memoir provide us right cognition? The Indian thinkers consider it as untrue due to the fact that the cognition is generated by trace or impression alone (*'samskāra-mātra-janyam jñānam smṛtiḥ'*) leaving no scope for its verification. In other words, the incidents or statements gathered from memoir cannot be verified on account of the fact that the incident or the content of the statement is not occurring in our presence leading to the impossibility of their verifiability. Impression or trace (*'samskāra'*) is a compulsory factor for any cognition if there is a scope for its verifiability as found in 'recognitive cognition' (*'pratyabhijñā'*) which is stated to be generated by trace (*'samskāra-janya'*), but not by the 'trace alone' (*'samskāra-mātra-janya'*)¹. When there is a recognitive cognition such as 'This is that Debadatta' (*'so'yam devadattah'*), there is the impression of Debadatta seen earlier as well as his presence in a different place and time (*kālāntare*

* Professor, Department of Philosophy, University of North Bengal, Dist. Darjeeling
E-Mail: raghunbu@yahoo.co.in

deśāntare). That my impression about Debadatta is correct is capable of being verified with the physical presence of him in different place and time. For this reason it is called authentic and hence historical. On the other hand, there are certain cognitions that are known as such depending on impression alone, e.g., memory etc. That is why; this type of memory-cognition cannot be verified due to the physical absence of the object leading to their absence of trustworthiness. Memoir remains in the latter group and hence it is not trustworthy due to their verification problem leading to non-formation of history.

Memoir can be taken as testimony if it comes from a reliable or trustworthy person (*'āpta-vacana'*)². Only the trustworthy person can say-‘My life is the message’ (*'Āmār jīvanai vāñī*), which is to be taken as testimony by the rest of the people. But what about other ordinary people? Can their statements based on memoir be taken as authentic? A person who is free from illusion (*bhrama*), forgetfulness (*pramāda*), and weakness due to the defect of the sense-organs (*vipralipsā*) is to be taken as ‘reliable’ (*'āpta'*). How do we know that an individual is free from these defects? There is no mechanism to know that they are free from such defects. Even somebody has got record of having no such defects, there is no guarantee regarding the fact that afterwards he has not developed such defects. An individual may be taken as reliable due to not having any past record of cheating others etc. From this can it be proved that in future he may not be involved in such activities? In other words, an individual may not have forgetfulness or weakness in sense-organs for the time being, but it may happen that he develops such habits afterwards. Hence, the cited criteria of reliability are not acceptable.

Apart from above memoir is stated to be associated with the following impediments:

- i) Too much narrative structure, which cannot be verified due to the absence of the object.
- ii) Too much usage of irony, symbolism, imagery, which may lead us to the world of confusion.
- iii) Too much influence of fictional quality which has less importance in ascertaining historicity of facts.
- iv) Language as such cannot grasp the reality as endorsed by the Buddhists who admit that an object is of ‘unique particular’ (*'svalakṣaṇa'*) due to its momentary nature. An entity endowed with such character can grasp the reality, which is ultimately real (*paramārthasat*). Memoir being expressed through language is not free from such defects.
- v) In memoir the whole fact is not documented, but in stead it gives a fraction of the same, which cannot form a holistic picture.

In short, it can be said that memoirs are normally associated with the above factors which may lead us to the realm of skepticism. If there is any skeptical doubt regarding some entity or some explanation or interpretation, it cannot provide us epistemic value due to having its confusive character. An incident or description is stated to be having an epistemic value, if it is verified through some accepted means of knowing (*pramāṇas*). Too much linguistic jugglery including the use of metaphors, imagery etc sometimes hides the real nature of an object. That is why; the Buddhists logicians are in favour of

not accepting language as a means of knowing, because to them 'language' is nothing but 'mental ascription' or 'fiction' ('*kalpanā*'), which covers the true nature of an object ('*samvṛti-satya*').³ Hence an object is to be known directly through perception (*pratyakṣa*) alone.

III. History and its Relation to Time:

History is not the study of the 'past' only but 'the continuous present'. In every moment history is being created. We are 'upon the Time' and that is why, creating history. The theory of Time given by Sri Aurobindo is interpreted as 'Philosophy of History'.⁴ Anything changing under time is history and hence each event is 'historical'. If this theory is accepted, every thing is to be treated to be historical. It is also evident from the following *Mantra* of the Rigveda:

*"Kālo bhūtimasṛjata, kāle tapati sūryah/
Kālo ha viśvā bhūtāni kāle sūryo vipaśyati//"*⁵

The spirit of the *Mantra* quoted above is to show that each and every thing is happening under the influence of time and hence historic in the true sense of the term. The Vedic seers also acknowledged that time has created animals, the Sun shines through the grace of time, all animals in this earth are under time and the Sun can illuminate all through the influence of time alone. Nothing remains outside the purview of time and hence nothing remains outside the purview of history.

Rabindranath also endorses the same idea in his *Śeṣer Kavita*. To him all is historic as opposed to static. When a lover becomes united with his lady-love, time is a causal factor. The same time- factor works when there is a separation of the both. It is nothing but the play of time as mentioned in the following verse:

*"Kāler yātrār dhvani śunite ki pāo? Tāri rath nityai udhāo,
... Ogo bandhu, sei dhāvamān kāl, jadāye dharilo
More pheli tār jāl tule nilo drutarathe..."*⁶

That is, can you hear the sound of the journey of time in this world? The chariot of time is always moving faster. This kinetic time has dragged me towards its moving chariot after spreading its own net. It proves that everything is under the influence of time and hence there is nothing which is stated to be ahistorical.

III. Positive Role of Memoir

Memoir provides us its connection with a particular time. Without the help of memoir creation of history is not at all possible. It is true that memoir of the past, immediate or remote, has got a direct relationship with history which cannot be ignored, but the content of memoir must be authenticated. In order to authenticate the content of memoir other corroborative factors are to be investigated. Truth in it is to be determined through other evidences like relics, old newspapers, literature, old people who had witnessed the incidents without depending solely on what is available in memoirs. The content of the memoir may generate a curiosity in one's mind to determine the truth and falsity of the matter through other corroborative evidences. Hence the content of memoir may be a pointer to the reality which constitutes history and hence memoir has got some

instrumental value of its own. If the content of memoir is substantiated through corroborative evidences, verification and cross references, the past will start speaking many things creating a new history, which we always look for. Rabindranath endorses the same idea with the following lines in his poem-‘*Atīt*’:

*“He atīt, tumi bhuvane bhuvane kāj kare jāo gopane gopane,
mukhar diner capalatā mājhe sthir haye tumi rao/
he atīt, tumi gopan hṛdaye kathā kao, kathā kao//”⁷*

That is, the past acts silently in this manifold world. It remains silent while others are busy with their works. Possessing a secret heart let the past speak silently. In other words, the past, if analyzed or interpreted properly, can explore many untold stories with its secret heart. Even the static stone of the mountain can sing a beautiful song illuminating our glorious past (‘*gīta gāyā pāttharone*’). The past can provide us a lot of information if it is interpreted correctly with the help of other corroborative evidences.

Even the past can illumine us with its inherent light if proper care is taken and proper analysis is done. The same idea has also been expressed in the following poem of Rabindranath Tagore:

*“Atīter tīr hate je rātre bahibe dīrghaśvās
jharā bakuler kannā vyathibe ākāś,
sei kṣaṇe khunje dekho, kichhu mor pichhe rahilo se,
tomār prāṇer prānte, vismṛti-pradoṣe,
haito dibe se jyotih//”⁸*

That is, even the pathetic stories embedded in the past can provide us some ray of hopes in the history if they are properly interpreted. The great sigh arising out of lamentation of the fallen *Bakula* flower paining even the sky has got the capacity of generating rays of hope to our hearts if they are properly ‘searched for’ or ‘re-searched’ (as pointed out by the term ‘*khunje dekho*’) with the help of arguments and other determining factors.

IV. Conclusion

If someone is in a position to ‘search again’ the past, he will create history definitely without repeating the ‘*given facts*’ wherein lies the originality or creativity in history. This phenomenon of ‘*khunje dekhā*’ (‘to see after thorough search’) is otherwise called by the Naiyāyikas as ‘*anvīkṣā*’ (‘subsequent viewing’), from which the book dealing with argument or subsequent viewing is called *ānvīkṣikī*.⁹ Any argument or thesis substantiated with argument is subject to further rational scrutiny, which is called *anvīkṣā* or ‘re-search’ or ‘*khunje dekhā*’. Hence past is not to be taken as a closed chapter, but as store-house of thousand untold treasures that are to be brought out in light. Such creative or original work is history in the true sense of the term. For this memoirs may be taken as instruments if their epistemic values are adjudged through other corroborative factors.

References:

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7. Rabindranath Tagore: *Sañcayitā*, Visvabharati, Santiniketan, 8th edition, 1379 (Bengali year), p.468
8. *Ibid*
9. *Vātsyāyana-bhāṣya* on *Nyāyasūtra* no.01.01.01. Re-edited by Raghunath Ghosh (Ed by Satish Chandra Vidyabhusana), New Bharatiya Book Corporation, Delhi, 2003, p.3.