

Evaluation of the Authenticity of the Documents' Narrators on the History Research

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Abstract:

The most significant task of a history researcher is to evaluate the authenticity of the relevant documents, the extent of their authenticity and to observe the ethical codes.

The degree of the authenticity of documents depends on the place of its narrator, and the extent to which he has been influenced by the external atmosphere or his own inclinations. Moreover, based on the tradition of copying the documents in the past, a great number of existing documents are either adapted or changed. The unfamiliarity of scribes or their preferences and the degree of their honesty and devotion to this task affect the credit of the document. Besides, some documents are the translations from different languages, and the original document usually does not exist. Consequently, here the honesty of the translator and following the principles of translation play important parts.

The researcher should consider the possibility of forgery. A document like an artistic work may be a counterfeit. The forger may belong to the past or be a contemporary, who has forged a document for money.

The aim of this paper is to study and evaluate the extent of scientific honesty and the observance of ethical codes on the part of the writers and introducers of historical documents.

Keywords: document, history research, authenticity, scribe, forgery, counterfeit

Introduction

The sense of curiosity concerning the past and sifting out what our predecessors have learnt and done motivates us towards a study of history. The basis for historical studies is the documents and evidences that have been left behind. At no time can it be claimed that these documents reflect the entire truth. Even the most clear of them all such as pictures and documentaries are incapable of presenting the entire truth

and there is the strong likelihood of their perverting the facts. Amongst such documents those kinds of writings that can falsify the mind of the writer or scribe or the translator are more common. Such falsification sometimes occurs deliberately or inadvertently. However the fact remains that the foremost task of a historian is to sift these documents with a keen acumen so as to verify their truth.

Historians

Analyzing historical events depends on the historical writings of past historians. What our predecessors have left behind them in writing or in other actual material goods are documents which can be used for analyzing and drawing conclusions from certain historical events. However the question remains to what extent these documents are valid and trustworthy?

To what extent can we trust what our predecessors have committed to paper? Are verbal documents and histories based upon them trustworthy? In point of fact we can not reside complete trust in their writings and it is from this point onward that the duty of a historian shapes itself. Even the most objective of historians could not escape the vitiating influence of their times and their own personality biases and preferences. A historian may be completely unconscious of his own basic biases. Such biases may be clearly evident to others but completely unknown to the historian himself; and since such biases are for the most part unconscious he can not display them to himself or to his readers (Toynbee, 26).

Also many historians have heard many of the things from others and have not personally been witnesses of the things that they describe. Herodotus acquired many of his information concerning Persians from travelers who were traveling from Iran toward the West. We have many such examples of these kinds of reports. For instance Izzuddin Ali-ibn Assir (555-630 A.H.) who resided in a far away place such as Iraq and Syria that had not yet been attacked by the Mongols, yet he has left behind some historical writings behind (Nasavi, 4). Still many of their writings are useful and interesting to us. Such writings acquire more importance if we repose confidence in them.

Apart from that many of our historians had close connections to owners of power and consequently falsified the facts either out of regard to their own safety or their own interests. We are well aware that writing history has been an occupation that has always been closely associated with the courts of kings and rulers (Mirza Samia, 16; Malcolm, 1/281). Due to this a mistake or an unguarded statement could entail dangerous

consequences for the historian. In fact these historians belong to the category of those who have cleverly perverted the facts. Such historiographies that are known more popularly as official historiographers are easily distinguishable from other historians. For instance we well know that Arrian Nicomedi (96-180 A.D) who was fond of Alexander and one of his most staunch champions omitted many of the incidents that could have tarnished his hero's personality and reputation (Pirnia, 1/58). Or the traditions of Arabs concerning the conquest of Persia during the Sassanid reign is not devoid of their tribal prejudices(Zarinkoob, 6). We can find plenty of such examples amongst writers of history. Bearing the above views in mind can we be sure of their veracity?

Without the slightest shadow of doubt many of the information presented in their writings bear the stamp of their personal prejudices or they been in line with the whims of the owners of power. Nevertheless a contemporary historian who sets out to sift them can not utterly disregard them. The veracity of a contemporary historian compels him to view these writings critically. As Stanford has reminded these documents are of our historical knowledge and for a contemporary historian to critically weigh them is most natural (Stanford, 114-115).

On the other hand we know that some historians who paid attention to truth and had regard for morality endeavored to reflect the facts. They tried to view the conditions critically and to set down events without favoritism though they might not have been so successful. Abulfazl Bihaqi, an Iranian historian of the Middle Ages, has reminded us of this belief of his and has indeed tried to observe this principle so as to set down historical incidents truthfully (Bihaqi, 11179). Other historians also can be found such as Ibn Tughtughi (born in 660 A.H.) who composed The History of Fakhri, and Ibn Vazeh Yaqubi (dying in 284 A.H.) who wrote The History of Yaqubi. Although they both were Shias their writings are wonderfully bereft of any kind of prejudices (Bayyat, 94,115).

Some historians have viewed pessimistically the events of their own times. In analyzing these sources caution must be exercised. For sometimes viewing with a hostile eye the then existing governments and rulers has completely misguided the historian and compelled him to falsify events. For instance we know that the opinion of Ibn Arabshah (791-845 A.H.) the author of Ajaeb-ul-Maqdour-fil-Nawaebul Timur was hostile toward some of the policies of Timur the Lame. Or Utba (born in 350 A.H.) in spit of being an official and a court historian, has recorded

down the miserable poverty and the dire conditions in which people used to wallow on account of Sultan Mahmud's policies. Jozjani (born in 589A.H.) curses the Mongol rulers and Jouvaini who frequented the Mongol courts used to lavish his praises upon them and to support them(Bartold, 114; Bayyat, 243).

Similarly in the past a group of Muslim historians contented themselves with the task of recording past events without trying to draw reasonable inferences from them. Tabari (born in 224A.H.) adhered to this principle. According to him what he is reporting from the past sources might be unpalatable to the reader. In his view the reader must know that such a report is not due to him, he is simply a narrator who has narrated what has come down to him (Tabari, 6). Such kinds of reports when the historian informs about the source assures us of his veracity. But there are others who have simply narrated without mentioning their sources and have given them out as their own. Ibn Assir, Hafiz Abru, Saalbi (350-429 A.H), Sharafdin Ali Yazdi(dying in 858 A.H), Marashi (born in 818 A.H) are some of the most renowned examples that strike our minds. However there some who have taken utmost pain to record down their sources such as Hamdullah Mustufi (680-750 A.H) who authored such books as Tarikh Gozideh, Zafarnameh and Nuzhat-u-ghulub, or Hamza of Isfahan (born in 270 A.H) who wrote Suni-ul-Muluk-ul-Arz and Anbyiaul who actually remind the reader of the sources upon which they have drawn (Mustufi, 6; Isfahan, 1).

Still the writings of these historians who have not cared to observe the truth and have left no traces of their sources behind are valuable for they have put us in touch with an important source that could well have been lost. Sometimes these historians have made more complete their writings by mentioning some of their contemporary events. However this does not mean that such a thing exonerates them from the reproachments which they deserve.

The Scribes

Most or perhaps all of the historical writings that have come down to us prior to the invention of the printing press was due to the praiseworthy efforts of the scribes. Their painstaking efforts have made it possible for us to have the opportunity to become aware of the reporting of historical writers. It was due to this that scribes had an exalted place in society. Most of them were well acquainted with the sciences of their own days and their places of work resembled centers of learning. Some writers were scribes before launching upon their careers as writers. Yaghoot Hamavi and Ibn-ul-Nadim fall in this group (Maile Heravi, 233). The

importance of scribing was so much that some writers set down the rules pertaining to actual scribing (ibid, 160-161). They held themselves responsible for letting others know if some changes were necessary and had actually been introduced to make them known by marking them (ibid. 157). Still the scribes either deliberately or inadvertently did not observe this principle of scientific veracity in their writings. The same factors that could misguide a historian were equally instrumental in leading astray the scribes in their writings and judgments. Outer as well as inner factors were at work. Religious and sectarian prejudices were some of the factors that vitiated their writings (ibid, 245,233,168). Also the scribes' own ignorance concerning certain sciences was an important factor in this regard. And sometimes to display his learning the scribes would effect needless changes in their reports and thus pervert the facts. More often than not most scribes would interpret the reports in the light of their own whims and fancies or prejudices (ibid, 62). That is the reason why we are faced with many bogus documents. And many historians are today aware of this glaring defect and they strive with might and main to rectify these errors.

The violation and perversion of hand written documents is not a thing that has been indulged in by the scribes. The violators of written documents indulged in such practices so as to secure their own interests. Cheating others and gaining fame are some of the reasons for their malpractices (Evi,191/4).

Historical Translations

With the establishment of Abbasid Dynasty, savants and scholars gradually started translating the masterpieces of other nations. This epoch reached its apex during the reign of Mamun who keenly followed the translation of Pahlavi, Greek, Indian and Syrian books. In the history of Islamic civilization we know a number of translators: Ibn Muqaffa Irani (dying in Limits 141 A.H) who translated a large number of books from Pahlavi into Arabic. Hunain ibn Issac is one of the most famous translators of the Abbasid period.

Translation played not only an important role in preserving and actually transmitting the many scientific writings for the future generations but also with the help of the aforesaid translators many important historical writings could easily be accessed. At times it also happened that many writers and scholars like Abu Rayhan Biruni translated their own writings into other languages.

In translations the same pitfalls that could overtake historians and scribes could also overtake the translators. Apparently the incapability of the translator to present a genuine translation of the work at hand might have been the most common of such pitfalls. Perverting what they were translating left its bad effects with which present historians labor and grapple. At times the availability of the real source has made it possible for us to overcome this deficiency.

A number of works translated deserve mention: in 332 A.H. Abubakr Muhammad ibn Jaffar Narshakhi (286-348 A.H) composed a book called the history of Bokhara in Arabic. In the sixth century A.H. Ahmad ibn Muhammad ibn Nasr Alghabavi translated the book into Persian since people did not play much enthusiasm for reading it in Arabic, removing some parts of it notwithstanding. He finished his undertaking in 522 A.H. IN 574 A.H. Muhammad ibn Zaffarin Omar edited this work. Sometime later an unknown editor added some parts to the end of the book and carried the historical narration up to the time of the Mongols.

After him, Balami in 352 translated the History of Tabari. However he preferred to add some more parts to the original text. This innovation on the part of Balami made the book into something new. During the reigns of Kharazmshahian, Shahabudin Nasavi the personal secretary of Jalaudin Kharazmshah composed his own historical book in Arabic. In the seventh century an unknown translator rendered it into Persian. The Arabic version remained unknown till recent times. In 1891 with the efforts of Hudas a teacher of Oriental languages in Paris it was possible to access this book which is now in Paris Museum(Nasavi, preface): By comparing the translated text with the Arabic version we can easily know that the unknown translator did not take note of many parts of Nasavi's book or deliberately ignored them.

Still we can not undermine the worth of their efforts. For instance the efforts of Balami in preparing a valuable work have made it possible for us to be acquainted with a new work and we have far more information than we used to. Such an undertaking when the translator observes the principle of veracity is indeed worthy of praise.

Conclusion

Writing history without depending upon sources and documents does not much differ from story writing. In the first place a historian is obliged to verify the truth or veracity of the sources at his disposal and subject them to a keen analysis.

The documents and sources that a historian uses may have suffered perversion down the ages, but this does not imply that because the original narrator of the events has not observed veracity therefore his production is useless. Many writers of history were connected to sources of power and out of regard for their own safety they were forced to pervert the facts. Still these writings if viewed critically can have their own unique value.

Even the perverted versions written by scribes or translators can not be entirely valueless and thus cast them aside. It is true that many factors were responsible for their perverting the facts yet not all scribes and translators were of this kind. Most writers considered it their duty to report events truthfully since the prevailing culture of the time demanded such a thing on the part of a historian who risked the public's censure if he dared to go against the norms. In addition many available versions have their own corresponding versions too and this makes it easier for us to sift things and finally arrive at the truth.

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