
Kalhana and E. H. Carr: A Comparative Historiography

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Abstract

In 12th century A.D. Kashmiri poet, Kalhana, wrote 'Rajatarangini- the river of kings which has been of a great value not only for the study of the history of Kashmir but for Indian historical research generally. Kalhana is accepted historian of modern period. He fulfills all parameters of western history writing skills so he is honored by them as a first Indian Historian. These days lots of debates are going on this topic. E.H.Carr's work 'What is History?', is considered as milestone in modern historiography. He in his work has cleared many points related to what historian should be and what are his responsibilities? My research will be focused on E.H. Carr's history guidelines as these are accepted in western historians and put Kalhana work on those parameters and try to place Kalhana and his history work in modern historiography with its unique features. The methodology will include the collection of data related to main topic and will try to make it critical with comparative analysis. The purpose of this research paper is to highlight two great intellectuals works and to identify relationships between their works.

Keywords: Chronicle, methodology, historical facts, systematic history

Introduction

Very clearly Edward Hallett Carr, in his book, *What is History?*, shared this thought, about what history is:

"History consists of a corpus of ascertained facts. The facts are available to the historian in documents, inscriptions and so on, like fish on the fishmonger's slab. The historian collects them, takes them home, and cooks and serves them in a whatever style that appeals to him."

Edward Hallett Carr was born in 1892. After a career in the Foreign Office from 1916, he became a teacher of politics in the University College of Wales 1936. Very few people know that he was Assistant Editor of *The Times* from 1941 to 1946. Then he served as Lecturer in politics at Balliol College, Oxford from 1953 to 1955, and became a Fellow of Trinity College, Cambridge in 1955 and an Honorary Fellow of Balliol College, Oxford in 1966. He delivered a series of six lectures at Cambridge University in 1961 examining the question "**What is history?**" the title by which it was later published. It is a masterpiece in the study of historiography. It provides a viewpoint on history which is immensely different from his predecessors such as Ranke, Trevelyan, Collinwood and others. The key concepts he proposes include the history is relative to the interpretation and selection of the historians who in turn are the products of their environment and the history is subjective not objective which puts it at odds with the Rankins and empiricist. Also, it is the product and outlook of the historian's environment but not the historian itself thus refuting Collinwood and

Trevelyan. In brief the book confers the nature of historiography in six sections; however, the content of these chapters can be simplified under three primary areas which embody Carr's main arguments; (1) the influence of historians on history, (2) the nature of historical facts and (3) the subject matter of history.

The importance and value of *Kalhana's* 'River of Kings' is because it possesses the character of a real chronicle. Even European scholars noticed its existence by the time when they did not have any good opinion about Indian classical work. Many people like Dr. Bernier, Mr. Gladwin, Dr. Hayman Wilson, professor Wilson, Mr. A. Troyer, Professor Lassen, professor G. Buhler etc. also did great work on this Chronicle. All this labor clearly proves that it contains the truth worthy material which is the basic requirement for any historical and antiquarian study. He discusses the basis of his chronological system and tells that he wrote in year 1070, of the Saka era corresponding to the year [42]24 of the Laukika era means 1148-49 A.D. At the end of his chronicle he gives another Laukika year [42]25 means date 1149-50 A.D. The scholars have different opinions about the date of *Kalhana's* work but we cannot deny its recognition. *Kalhana's* chronicle *Rajatarangini*, A River of Kings possesses almost all those characteristics which are essential according to Carr. We will discuss them one by one and will bring out the best output.

The Influence of Historians on History

E H Carr expounded the importance and responsibilities of historian. He clearly expressed that historian is dependent on facts but it's he who will make them express. What is right and what is wrong, what is true and what is untrue, is the first thing a historian does. Every writing on history is the reflection of a historian's own psyche. He himself said- When we attempt to "answer what is history"? Our answer, consciously or unconsciously, reflects our own position in time, and forms part of our answer to the broader question about view we take of the society in which we live. He challenges the nineteenth century conception of history. According to him history is contemporary history and it consists essentially in seeing the past through the eyes of the present and in the light of today's problems, and the main work of a historian is not to record, but to evaluate, if he does not evaluate, how can he know what is worth recording. In this he was supported by Carl Becker, who said "the facts of history do not exist for any historian until he creates them."

What made *Kalhana* different from the many chroniclers and storytellers who had existed before him in India was his ability to be informative and accurate. It is noted that *Champakapura* was a small State in Kashmir. The king of this state was paying tribute to the monarchs of Kashmir. The king of *Champakapura* was also said to be the prime-minister of the Sovereign of Kashmir. *Kalhana* was renowned Sanskrit Scholar. But he was not the poet whose art was exploited by royal patronage. Being a poet by profession, *kalhana* possesses the subtle poetic art and rhetorical embellishment which constitute the characteristic object of the *Kavya*. He at the same time keeping his readers from being bored with long and tedious descriptions in a long and tedious language. This could be expected from him since he who was a very good poet, just like so many other chroniclers of those times. He used all available sources but used them only after judging their authenticity and historical value. The author himself expressed that he wrote a critical systematic history of the Kings in 1148

A D., after a scrutiny of twelve ancient histories, inscriptions, the eulogies of the hierarchy of the past generation of the kings by the heralds and officers of the State and that he cleared all his doubts, in the light of his researches. *Kalhana* was clear that he had to write in an unbiased manner. He himself said that - "That noble minded poet (historian) is alone worthy of praise whose words, like that of a judge remain free from love and hatred in relating the facts of the past."

He himself has given importance to the historian above bare facts in his work like, "worthy of praise is that power of true poets, whatever it may be, which surpasses even the stream of nectar, in as much as by it their own bodies of glory as well as those of others obtain immortality.

Kalhana believed that historian and his present circumstances have direct influence on his work. He is the one who sees past through the eyes of today. "Who else but poet resembling *Prajapatis* [in creative power} can bring forth lovely productions, can place the past times before the eyes of men?"

According to *Kalhana*- A good history has the power to take the person into past and explore in a way like an eye witness. That history involves a superior kind of creativity which retains its relevance even after many centuries.

So, it can be said that like a good historian, he also explains in detail the sources that he has used to write his history are also the flaws in those sources. Eleven chronicles of the kings of Kashmir already existed, he informs us. They all had been put together in a simplified manner in a single book. As it would happen the originals, along with their details, were lost to memory and hence there was a need to write a fresh history of the Kings of Kashmir. For writing his history *Kalhana* used three books for basic information. Like a good historian he also looked for corroborative information from other sources, including edicts and inscriptions found in Kashmir. *Kalhana* says that the books wherein ancient events are rated give pleasure to good people. So, he asserts that the duty of an impartial historian is to record, without bias the lives of the kings, though they enhance or belittle the prestige of the Mother-land.

The Nature of Historical Facts

Carr often criticises the common misconception, often held by Positivists, that history is simply about the gathering of facts. This is because Positivists, or those who believe in the Empirical Theory of Knowledge, believe that history could be studied as a hard science. This belief, according to Carr, is based on the mistaken assumption that an unbiased conclusion could be extracted by simply analysing what are deemed to be empirical facts. In other words, Positivists believe that the facts would simply "speak for themselves." Based on this erroneous belief, the Positivists then presupposed that history, like the hard sciences, have a dependent variable, the conclusion an independent variable, the facts and a controlled variable, the objectivity of the facts. This view is unsurprisingly consistent with the Empirical Theory of Knowledge which argues that outside stimuli are separate from one's capacity to process them. In other words, Positivists believe that gathering information is not influenced by the issues of language and translation. The absurdity of such a belief should

have been apparent for any reasonable historian, for even a brief deliberation would yield the fact that humans are notoriously impressionable. Indeed, everyone may have their own guarded opinions, but these are often influenced by others, and even shared experiences are often remembered differently by different people.

Central to Carr's bid to correct the Positivists' faulty of understanding history is his argument that facts do not speak for themselves. Carr argues that this is done only by a historian who can pick and decide which facts deserved to be shown, the order they are shown, and their context. For this he has given very practical example like one catches fish any cook it according to his taste. Fish is fish but we can make different dishes with just one type of fish. So, it's the taste or we can say the cultural influence which gives a result.

So, past is itself filled with facts, these facts must therefore be sifted, interpreted and analysed for their relevance and value in relation to the prevailing historical knowledge. From this perspective, historical facts are thus seen as being essentially created by the historian and not merely discovered. This distinction between creation and discovery obviously has major ramifications in terms of the objectivity or reliability of the facts, particularly for the Positivists, but Carr embraces this inherent limitation in history as simply part of what a historian must accept: that "Neutrality in history is impossible." Therefore, by acknowledging this limitation, the historian's relationship with his facts is transformed from something that is akin to regurgitation, as posited by the Positivists, into a discipline that creates them. Another way of looking at this is by viewing history as something that is "made," not "born."

This view is countered by saying that it results in ramifications when one simply assumes that subjectivity is the essence of history. Indeed, this is a dangerous notion that could be taken advantage of by anyone, for ill or for good. For instance, all nation-states create their own origin myths to foster a sense of shared identity and to unite disparate groups of people, demagogues often re-shape history to serve their aims, and some revisionist historians may make changes to the prevailing historical narratives to serve a political objective. Since history is inherently subjective, oftentimes offering an infinity of possible meanings, some historians therefore believe that historical interpretations should all be viewed as equals – that none is any righter than any other. But Carr, believes that although history may have an infinity of meanings, one should nevertheless take comfort at the fact that there are a few which offers a better interpretation than all the others. For Carr, the quality of the interpretation is more important than the quantity of the interpretations. This view is central to the most important aspect of the creation of historical facts and for the historian himself.

So, it can be observed in Carr's writings that history is never neutral. Likewise, a historian's understanding of the past can never be divorced from the prevailing culture, politics, and ideas of the present. In other words, a historian's understanding of the past is filtered through his worldview. This means, therefore, that the power relations, the prevailing norms, culture, religion, and political ideas dictate how a historian interprets the past. Because of this, Carr has arrived at the profound, but debatable, notion that the historian "belongs not to the past but to the present." One way that Carr demonstrates this notion is

through his criticism of the nineteenth century historians who lived under the Zeitgeist defined by “confidence and optimism.” During this period, historians simply believed that history had no meaning, “that its meaning was implicit and self-evident.” The nineteenth century, with the strong belief in *laissez-faire*, was defined by the belief that everything will just fall in their proper places once the facts have been ascertained. This idea is obviously the basis of the Positivist belief that facts will speak for themselves. With the full benefit of hindsight, Carr simply describes the nineteenth century historians as living in the ‘Age of Innocence’. He argues that this innocence led them to unknowingly ignore the limitations posed by history.

Because history can never be objective, it has none of the formulas that are at the core of the hard sciences historians therefore are given a certain level of “creative license” in the way they interpret and write history. For Carr, the writing of history is a process that involves simultaneous reading and writing, the latter being the aspect that expands a historian’s intellectual horizon. In this arguably laborious process, the historian is essentially engaging in a continuous process of moulding his facts to his interpretation and his interpretation to his facts. Paradoxically, however, this process is both one of the strengths and one of the weaknesses of history since it essentially allows for its use for propaganda purposes. Oftentimes, non-democratic societies tamper with their history to legitimize the ruling regime; but even democracies are equally guilty of tampering with their history to cover up past records that may be viewed as contradictory to their ideals. Nationalism, religions, tribalism, etc. all create their own interpretation of history with the implicit aim of serving their own ends. Therefore, Carr’s suggestion that one must first study the historian before one begin to study the facts is something that must be instilled, not only to historians, but to non-historians also.

In conclusion, E. H. Carr has demonstrated that the historian and his facts are inseparable. In other words, the facts create the historian and the historian creates the facts. This is obviously a circular argument, but it proves that the Positivist notion that facts could simply speak for themselves as erroneous. Also, Carr has shown that history is ultimately a subjective enterprise simply because the historian will always be limited by his subjective worldview. By extension, this means that historical facts are never neutral nor objective. But Carr has accepted this limitation since he thinks that students of history must first study the historian before the historical facts – an important prerequisite considering the dangers posed by the various misuse of history.

Kalhana, the author speaks about the sources and the purpose of his writing *Rajatarangini* as follows

“When I say that I am writing the history written by my ancients, the readers should not disregard my work, without comprehending my motive expressed herein” (R.T. 1-8) So did the *kalhana*, He also did not ignore important legends either because popular stories, but at the same time he used his poetic skills to narrate history of Kashmir though not always accurate, can still provide the historian important information about the past. One such example is that Kalhana used with great care is the story of the great lake called *Satisara*, the lake of *Sati* that existed in ancient times. Kalhana picks up the story of the

Satisara from a previous text called the *Nilamata Purana*. *Kalhana* uses this story to describe the topography of Kashmir and changes in it over the years. The story is about a huge lake that originally stood in the place where present day Kashmir is. In this lake lived the demon *Jalodbhava* (one born in water). Like all demons he too terrorised the people in the neighborhood. Finally, the people prayed to the gods who came and took positions on the surrounding mountaintops. *Jalodbhava* however refused to come out of the water. So, Vishnu requested his brother *Balbhadr* to drain the lake. *Balbhadr* hit a mountain with his ploughshare and broke open a path for the water to drain out. As the lake dried, *Jalodbhava* could not hide anymore and was killed by the gods. It is only recently that *geologists* have begun to date the deposits in this region to discover that due to the rise of the Pir Panjal range around 4 million years ago a vast lake had formed. Subsequently, because of the opening of a fault near *Baramula*, the lake drained out by the emergence of the river *Jhelum* about 85,000 years ago. *Kalhana's* description of the geological history of Kashmir could not have been more accurate. The important point is that he had been able to reconstruct it through the judicious use of a popular legend much in the manner that historians even today use folktales and legends to glean information about an otherwise unrecorded past.

So, we must realize that the motive of *Kalhana* was to present to his readers a correct chronological history of the kings of Kashmir; but not to leave his basic poetic skills and personal experiences. There are many examples in his chronicle where he has given his views. He has used his own way of language and expressions along with critical analysis.

Critical Approach to Sources

In a critical assessment of the field of historical studies, E. H. Carr's essay "The Historian and His Facts" introduces his readers to the importance of recognizing the limitations that are inherent in the study of history as well as his view on how historical fact is created what kind of historian's relationship is with his/her facts. Using various historians as examples from the nineteenth and early twentieth century as examples, E. H. Carr's essay presents a sensible appeal for a paradigm shift in the field of historical study that departs from the arrogant and misguided assumptions of past scholars. Although some of the information he provides may appear like common sense, such as the fact that history is never neutral, he nevertheless articulates his ideas in a jargon-free manner that any novice would easily understand. So, it is like two-edged sword for historian. At one level history is based on facts and at the other no facts or research can be total unbiased. As a historian's writings reflect more general ideas about bias and interpretation, at the same time he clearly marks that the term bias is often taken to have a negative connotation, but in this case, it means something closer to perspective that effects interpretation. These ideas largely come through in the first chapter, 'The Historian and His Facts.' Carr's argument gets a bit caught up by his attempt to define what a 'fact' is and how it becomes a 'historical fact', but for examining his ideas they can be viewed essentially as the raw materials of history or, under the term most commonly used today, *evidence*. History, then, is written through selection of facts or evidence and this process is an act of interpretation. Based on Collingwood's ideas, Carr states three main points:

1. History means interpretation. Historians tend to find what they're looking for.

2. A historian needs an 'imaginative understanding' of the mindset of the people he/she studies.
3. we can only look at the past 'through the eyes of the present' even the language we use embodies that perspective.

However, he recognizes the dangers of complete skepticism, subjectivity, post-modernism, and all the other 'post-isms' that this view might seem to suggest, that we could be left with either with a history that has no meaning or an infinity of meanings. The way he seeks to resolve this apparent contradiction is through the idea of 'reciprocal action' on two levels, 'between the historian and his facts' and 'between the present and the past'.

In the work of *Kalhana*, he gives great emphasis on the importance of primary sources and he very proudly describe the facts which he has used while writing his great work. Before *Kalhana* also, the works based on history line are seen like *Suvrata* abridged and condensed the detailed ancient histories for easy reference and wrote a history, namely " *Raja Katha* ". The language being concise and difficult, this book was not within the comprehension of the readers. Although *Suvrat's* poetry manifested the early history but his writing style was so compact and critical that it remained incomprehensible and even misleading for many." *Kalhana* criticized *Suvrat* for his writing style. Indirectly he also says that his writing style is simple and comprehensible and that there is no space for confusion or misguidance in his writing. Another scholar, *Kshemendra* wrote a history, " *Nripavali* "; though this is free from language faults, it does not give us correct old histories and as such it cannot be accepted as accurate history. *Kalhana* is criticizing the text " *Nripavali* " for lack of historical content. He blames that the book is more like a literature and less like a history. He says that isn't it an expertise to analyze those past incidents? I'm working hard on the project to write a history which will be superior in every way. (1.10) He explains that his task is difficult and could be done by experts only. He also promotes his book as better than earlier.

Kalhana clearly says that he rewrites the history written by his predecessors. So, the events mentioned in *Rajatarangini* have an authenticity, based upon the records of the ancients who were alive at the time of the respective monarchs and they are not the outcome of the idle fancy of ' *Kalhana* '. As such in this book is not visible, the safe shelter of the modern writers of history, namely, the stock phrases like, 'It is possible, it is probable, it may be taken as granted, or we may guess, conjecture or surmise' and so on. He did not transgress the limits of information found in the writings of his predecessors, nor did he reject those incidents, on the score of myth or fiction. In few cases, there were doubts, for which he took great pains to verify and clear them with the information from other sources, like the records of the eleven ancient chroniclers, and one of *Nilarmuni* and the grants and inscriptions of the old kings. In this way, *Kalhana* sifted the evidence available at his disposal with great care, caution and patience and arrived at correct accurate historical material for his *Rajatarangini*.

Conclusion

Kalhana is a renowned name in history world not because of his history of Kashmir but because of his historiography. Historians praise *Kalhana* for that but very few know about his historiography ideals and techniques. Every historian and history lover should know that because it still can inspire the way history is written today. *Kalhana* in prologue to his book introduces the qualities and ideals of a good historian. Book *Rajatarangini* is written in epic style, so he also calls himself a poet. Giving a brief introduction of early historians and their work, he argues why his "*Rajatarangini*" is better than the previous texts. He also describes the sources which he used in his historical quest. That's the reason, most modern historians accept him not as a great poet but as a great historian. When we compared his work on E. H. Carr's given parameters, we found *Rajatarangini* not less to contemporary work. Where he gave strong recommendation to facts that to which are primary, along with historian's personal qualities of interpretation and analyzation.

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