

QUESTIONING HISTORICAL OBJECTIVITY: AN EPISTEMOLOGICAL READING OF MUBARAK ALI'S HISTORIOGRAPHY

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Abstract

This article gives an epistemological examination of Mubarak Ali's historiography and historical epistemology, including his ongoing critique of historical objectivity in Pakistani historical writing. Putting into question the positivist belief that history can be authored as a neutral and value-free narrative of the past, Mubarak Ali pre-empts the social, political and ideological circumstances in which the writing of history is generated. According to the study, historical objectivity cannot be an absolute knowledge that a historian can achieve but rather a contentious declaration of power relations, institutional authority and the positionality of the historian. Based on epistemological controversies in the philosophy of history and postcolonial theory, the article frames the work of Mubarak Ali in the context of more general criticism directed at state-centred and nationalist historiographies. It discusses his interventions in the history of textbooks, the practices of archives, and the media of collective memory to show how the notions of selective silence, the creation of myths, and selective ideological filtering inform the major historical discourse in Pakistan. Mubarak Ali contributes to the critical approach to the methodology of history by focusing on it as a social construct of knowledge, a characteristic more concerned with reflexivity, plurality, and marginalised voices. The results of the research show that Mubarak Ali has put more effort into criticising the historical approaches and patterns which only focused on the history of the state and elite.

Keywords: *Mubarak Ali, Epistemology, Historiography, South Asian History.*

Introduction

Mubarak Ali is a key and prolific author of history and historiography, with over 100 books and several essays on unique approaches and patterns of history and society. This research article is an effort to trace out epistemological approach developed and adopted to give a new understanding to historiography in South Asia. The epistemological arguments in historiography are centred on the core issue, which is the way historians create, certify, and justify historical knowledge. The positivist idea of history being a clear mirror of the past has long been refuted by modern historical theory, which has been keen to underscore the mediation, construction, and power relations of historical knowledge (Comte & Bridges, 2015). In this school of thought, this is a historiographical intrusion by Dr. Mubarak Ali as a critical South Asian commentary on state-centric, nationalist, and religiously-tinged histories, especially in the case of Pakistan. His work re-conceptualizes the historical knowledge as a socially constructed and ideologically conditioned kind of knowledge, shaped by the relations of power and institutional authority as well as collective memory (Ali, 1993).

The epistemological stand adopted by Mubarak Ali is echoed with the original argument of E. H. Carr that historical facts are not presented but rather chosen and construed by historians in definite social circumstances (Carr, 1961). Similar to Carr, Mubarak Ali denies the myth of objectivity saying that a historian cannot but come to the past with certain preconceptions based on the position of classes, political beliefs and the limitations of the very institution. Nevertheless, Mubarak Ali takes the Carr point one step further to place historical knowledge more squarely in postcolonial state power and demonstrate how the official historiography in Pakistan operates as an ideological machine generating loyalty, obedience, and religious-nationalist identity instead of critical knowledge (Ali, 2009).

Meanwhile, the concept of historical knowledge formulated by Mubarak Ali is consistent with the analysis of the power/knowledge formulated by Michel Foucault. To Mubarak Ali, history is not simply a matter of power; it constitutes one of the major locations where power comes to play. State-sponsored discourses control the knowledge, memory or forgetting of what has happened and make history a disciplinary knowledge which naturalizes authority and excludes the opposition (Foucault, 1980). Through his criticism of textbooks, governmental celebrations and religious-nationalistic myths, he shows how historical knowledge is transformed into a regime of power instead of an inquiry (Ali, 2004). This shows that for Mubarak Ali knowledge is not independent but it is shaped by those who are in power. This does not mean that Mubarak denies the real historical knowledge, but considered it as distorted and constructed history.

The epistemology of Mubarak Ali is also complemented interestingly with the criticism of the elitist historiography provided by Ranajit Guha. Ranajit Guha established a history writing series with the name of Subaltern Studies Group, which established to rewrite the history of marginalized groups, ignored by modern historiographers (Ludden, 2003). Similar Guha and others, Mubarak criticises the histories that favour the rulers, conquerors, and institutions and marginalize the peasants, workers, women and minorities (Guha, 1982). Nonetheless, when Subaltern Studies accentuates the reclaiming of an autonomous subaltern consciousness, Mubarak Ali gives more attention to systematic ideological falsehood generated by the postcolonial state. The politics of social history and history-from-below was therefore, epistemological and political: historical knowledge is incomplete and warped where the experience of the disadvantaged is not referenced (Ali, 2009).

At the centre of the theory by Mubarak Ali is a strict differentiation between history, memory and myth. He posits that nationalistic and religious histories tend to blur such categories, and replace emotional memory and symbolic myth with critical and historically evidence-based history. In opposition to this trend Mubarak Ali is an advocate of secular and rational epistemology, in which historical interpretations rely upon material circumstances, social relations and structural analysis as opposed to providential or theological assertions (Ali, 1999). This does not mean that he has not worked on religious aspects of history; he has authored a book, *Ulema, Sufis and Intellectuals*, which is written with a critical approach (Ali, 2015).

Mubarak Ali conceptualizes historical knowledge as a practice of contest and is an ethical one. It is critical reason and social justice that shape his accountability, as a historian, not to the state or nation. Mubarak Ali makes historiography a form of critical consciousness by uncovering the political applications of the past and reclaiming the lost histories. His epistemological project therefore posits history as neither an archive of national pride, but as a field that can challenge power, ideology, and provide the democratisation of knowledge (Ali, 2016).

Literature Review

Literature produced on Mubarak Ali's work are limited which can be found in the form of research articles and book reviews. Some of the articles and book reviews are consulted and reviewed to understand the idea of scholars and researchers on the historiographic themes and approaches adopted by Mubarak Ali. Syed Jaffar Ali edited a volume *Challenges of History Writing in South Asia: Special Volume in Honour of Dr. Mubarak Ali* is an attempt to highlight the flaws and challenges that have dominated history writing in South Asia. The book is divided into three sections based on contributions from Pakistan, India, and beyond South Asia, and explores many facets of the subcontinent's Indian history as well as opposing viewpoints. The book emphasises the need to broaden the historical perspective and break free from its long-held stereotypes. The

book is a tribute to Mubarak Ali, a renowned historian from Pakistan. The preface highlights his efforts to bring history from the private to the public realm, broadening its scope. It states that Mubarak Ali actually made an effort to change history from narratives based on fiction to reports based on research, bringing it into line with the research-oriented paradigm. Another article *Mubarak Ali's Contributions in Historiography Trends in Pakistan* illustrated the key contributions of Mubarak Ali in history writing and devising new notion for writing history from below or to criticize the status quo to write against the elite well (Zohaib, et al., 2022).

Lahko et al. (2023) concentrated on Mubarak Ali's historical writings pertaining to the province of Sindh. They regarded Dr. Mubarak Ali's writings as critical and introduced a fresh perspective on Sindh's history and literature (Lakho & Palli, 2023). Waseem Abbas (2023) has considered Dr Mubarak Ali as the pioneer of people's history writer of the subcontinent (Abbas, 2023). Meanwhile, Hasan Mansoor mentioned that Mubarak Ali stresses on secularisation of history (Mansoor, 2019).

Methodology

This research study is based on the qualitative research techniques, interpretative research design, grounded in epistemological and historiographical analysis. The primary sources for this research study are based on the works of Mubarak Ali's books, articles and media talks and the secondary sources are articles, books and other sources which are written on historiography of Mubarak Ali. Contrary to this, it is influenced by the epistemological arguments of the philosophy of history, especially the critique of positivism and objectivism. Knowledge power relations, the use of ideology in historiography and postcolonial critiques of historical knowledge are some of the concepts that allow one to view the work of Mubarak Ali. Such schemes allow placing his revisionist historiography in the context of larger global and South Asian intellectual traditions.

Results and Discussion

Mubarak Ali's Concept of Knowledge and Change

The idea of knowledge and change as developed by Mubarak Ali is based on the critical epistemology, which considers knowledge as dynamic, contested, and transformative. According to him, one cannot change the society without changing the ways of knowing. By challenging the objectivity, bringing out ideology and espousing critical education, Mubarak Ali makes knowledge the area of domination and the most important tool of emancipation. His thoughts have much to offer on the issues of intellectual stagnation, as well as the perspectives of progressive change in the current Pakistan. This he has mentioned in his several writings like *Bar-e-Sagheer Mein Musalman Muashray Ka Almiya*, *Tareek aur Tehqeeq*, *Tareek aur Awam*, *Tareek aur Aurat* and several other books.

Mubarak Ali theorizes that knowledge is a tool that can either be used to perpetuate or be deployed to produce change. To him, the prevalent means of knowledge in Pakistan particularly that taught in schools, especially in official histories, have served mainly to legitimize the state, nationalism and religious orthodoxy. Like he wrote that the three ulema—Ahmed Sarhindi, Shah Waliullah, and Sayid Ahmed Shaheed—emerged as the key characters around whom the entire historical process revolved when a group of contemporary historians who interpreted history from an orthodox point of view reconstructed the subcontinent's history. Another feature of this history is that it was written in a rhythm of good and evil: on the one hand, the liberal forces were busy eradicating these three ulema who not only supported orthodoxy but also revived the religion, while on the other side, the orthodox forces were fighting to maintain the Muslim identity in the Indian subcontinent. These celebrities' roles are greatly inflated, and the facts are misrepresented

and exploited to preserve their reputations (Ali, 2015). In order to discredit the secular leadership, whom they called opportunists, the ulema who wrote the history of the independence struggle exalted the role of their predecessors and credited all accomplishments and triumphs to them. This historical perspective mirrors the aspirations of the current religious leadership, which aims to seize control of the Muslim community by driving out the progressive and secular forces. They can mobilise the populace in their behalf thanks to the ulema's historical role. (Ali, 2015). This knowledge does not encourage critical thought and renders the past historical as an unchanging, heroic and ethically uninformed place. Naturalizing these stories turns knowledge into a process of change prevention, instead of change agency. According to Mubarak Ali, this generation of unquestioning knowledge and its circulation is therefore a key setback to social development. The central part of his thinking is the connection between historical consciousness and change (Ali, 2002).

Mubarak Ali points out that the societies that cannot critically address their past are stuck in myths and illusions that do not allow intellectual and social growth. He underlines that historical knowledge should be re-interpreted every time, regarding new questions, visions and social facts. Change is not, then, simply a political or economic state of affairs, it is rather epistemological. It is impossible to bring any meaningful social change without changing the ways of producing, teaching, and comprehending knowledge (Ali, 2018). Education and more specifically history education is an important location in the Mubarak Ali knowledge and change structure. He is very critical of memorization, moralized texts, and ideological text books that stifle discussion and questioning. To him, education ought to instil scepticism, contextual knowledge and the realization of multiple perspectives. This kind of education has the potential to enable people to challenge authority and inherited truths thus creating the environment to change. Knowledge, when critically mobilized is a liberating power and no longer an instrument of domination (Ali, 2002).

The idea of historical knowledge elaborated by Mubarak Ali lies on the basis of a critical, secular and socially inclined knowledge of history that criticizes the traditional, state based and ideological accounts of history. Being one of the most prominent Pakistani public historians, Mubarak Ali defends the idea that historical knowledge is not a priori or objective; it is a social product and it is inextricably dependent on the relationships of power, ideology, and interests of the ruling elites. To him, history has been a weapon of legitimization particularly by the state in order to advance selective memories, to idolize rulers and to silence the other voices. He thought that new kinds of history writing could lead to the development of a more thorough epistemic history. He has often cited Marc Bloch and his Annales school of historiography, which advanced the idea that the field of historical knowledge should be expanded. He has asked Pakistani historians to employ this method in order to write a thorough history rather than focussing on a linear and traditional approach. Mubarak thinks that in order to trace new historical information, transformation is important (Ali, 2016).

One of the most pressing aspects of the historical thought of Mubarak Ali is the criticism of the traditional historiography as a bit too preoccupied with kings, wars and political events. He dismisses the jubilant and heroic vision of the past and especially in Pakistani and South Asian to the extent that history books are manipulated by nationalism and Islamic religious ideology. Such strategies, according to Mubarak Ali, distort historical knowledge in the sense that they mystify the past and dishearten critical inquiry. Rather, he demands a logical, empirical, and critical approach to history (Ali, 2018).

Ali Mubarak also views history as a social process that is determined by the structure of economies, the relation of classes and life. It is based on Marxist historiography and social history that he focuses on the experiences of the marginalized classes, including those of the peasants, workers, women, and religious minorities. In his case, real historical knowledge is not formed by elite texts only but by studying social institutions, cultural practices and material conditions. He also supports the use of varied resources, such as archival documents, literature, folklore and oral traditions, to build an all-inclusive, more sophisticated interpretation of the past. Similar difficulties pertaining to the history of marginalised communities in the Subcontinent during the British Raj were illustrated in his edited book *Tareek aur Awan* (History and People). According to him, all people are created equal; some are more well-known and well-known because of their social standing, while others are disregarded by history (Ali, 2018).

The other important point of the concept of historical knowledge by Mubarak Ali is the correlation between knowledge and power. To his argument, he says that the worldview of those in power is usually represented in the dominant historical discourses and that these discourses serve to uphold hierarchies in the society. The task of the historian is to dismantle these narratives and reveal the ideological basis of these narratives. Mubarak Ali has a vision of a historian as a critical intellectual that doubts authority, opposes orthodoxy and encourages the masses to be historically aware (Ali, 2012).

Mubarak Ali associates past knowledge with social change. In his opinion critical interpretation of the past will help societies realize the trends of oppression, challenge the traditions they inherited and envision new destiny. He tries to use democratization of history and its accessibility to the non-academic community in order to turn history into something more alive and useful, a weapon of critical thought and social change (Ali, 2012).

Mubarak Ali's Approach towards Modern Historiography and forms of Knowledge

The attitude of Mubarak Ali towards modern historiography is revisionist and critical and epistemologically based. He sees contemporary historiography not as a research methodology but as a historical mode of thought, focusing on reason, context, plurality and critical intervention into the past. His writings continuously oppose the traditional, nationalist and state-financed historiographies that prevail in the writing and teaching of history in Pakistan and in British historiography of Subcontinent (Ali, 2005).

The central feature of the approach taken by Mubarak Ali is the denial of positivist/absolutist thought of historical objectivity. Although he asserts the significance of empirical sources and research on archives, he states that facts of history are always determined based on ideological and institutional spectacles. To him, historiography in the present demands that historians should be aware of their own positionality and also be aware of power structures that govern historical knowledge. This reflexivity, he argues, is so much missing in official historiography where history is projected as a given and something unquestioned (Ali, 2002) Mubarak Ali relates the modern historiography to a perception of change and contingency in history. He denounces the stories which depict religion, culture, and national identity as eternal and unchanging. These narratives, he claims, lie in the pre-modern historical consciousness and are opposed to the modern historical thinking. Conversely, the historiography in modern society identifies social institutions and concepts as the product of certain historical circumstances that develop with time due to the conflict and negotiation (Ali, 2022).

Modern historiography is conceived by Dr. Mubarak Ali as a critical and emancipatory practice. His viewpoint is aimed at turning history writing into an instrument of intellectual emancipation and social reform by debunking myths, exposing distortions ideologically, and stressing historical context.

Nature of Historical Knowledge

Mubarak Ali's essay demonstrates a thorough understanding of historical knowledge. According to Mubarak Ali, history writing and history never are neutral; for instance historians integrate their opinions and analyses in historical events, which is why the past is studied from various angles. For him, historical knowledge should not be limited to the history of the state and politics, but should also encompass the history of towns, Panchayats, norms and rituals, crafts, the history of sects and groups. All of these new kinds of historical knowledge will highlight major historical events in a region or country. It is the historian's responsibility to present previous events without ambiguity, which is a difficult undertaking that can be accomplished by a qualified historian who is knowledgeable about historical events and occurring (Ali, 2002).

Mubarak Ali believes that historical knowledge evolves and changes with time. Local historians write South Asian history with the correct attitude, but Western historians examine historical events with a colonial viewpoint (Ali, 2002). This approach has distorted the history of South Asia as a whole. For the history of Pakistan, Ali has also adopted a similar approach that the historical knowledge has been constructed in a linear form which supports the state and state narrative. Although Mubarak Ali feels that myths should not be the basis for historical knowledge, this does not mean that he simply adheres to modern or scientific history. For him, all forms of information with a material status qualify as historical knowledge. Ali's understanding of the nature of historical knowledge is more similar to the postmodernist approach to historical knowledge (Ali, 2002).

Criticism on Mubarak Ali's Concept of Historical Knowledge

Analysis of Mubarak Ali historiography and his theory of historical knowledge have also received critique through a number of scholarly and ideological standpoints even though he has made a crucial contribution to the writing of critical history in Pakistan. A significant critique is that his method is excessively Marxist and secular, and is prone to result in an interpretive bias according to some scholars. The critics argue that he is so obsessed with the aspect of class, power and ideology that at times, he is economically deterministic and does not give much opportunity to religion, belief systems, and agency as an independent historical force (Babar, 2020).

A second objection is that he dismisses nationalist and religious accounts which his critics consider to be dismissive, but not dialogical. Although Mubarak Ali is quite correct in highlighting ideological distortions in state-sponsored histories. Critics hold that Mubarak Ali tends to run this phenomenon as a veil of elite manipulation, at the expense of attempting to understand the complexities of religious consciousness in its role in forming social movements and popular identities in South Asian history. This has made others accuse him of the fact that he is diminishing the cultural and religious experiences to power tools instead of living them as real experiences (Mehboob, 2021).

In his methodology, academics have indicated that the work of Mubarak Ali, particularly in his popular books, is not systematic in terms of archival depth. The harsh polemics of his tone and the use of secondary sources on some of his works have sparked a debate over historical rigor. Critics say that this focus on critique and deconstruction sometimes entails minimal to no empirical reconstruction, so some of his findings seem generalized or repetitive. Also, the idea of historical

knowledge by Mubarak Ali is criticized as being normative. He explicitly puts history in its place as a means of social reform and enlightenment which some historians view as the erosion of the boundary between scholarship and activism. In this sense, his work has been reported to replace one ideology, namely progressive secularism, with another, instead of being completely out of the ideological constructs (Zohaib et al., 2022).

There are those who assert that his dichotomy on the histories of the elite and the subaltern can be too strict. His constant preference of marginalized voices is regarded as minimizing the complexities and contradictions of elite groups themselves. Nevertheless, most researchers recognize that the historiographical intervention of Mubarak Ali has played a crucial role in undermining orthodox historiographies and creating critical discussion of historical knowledge in Pakistan.

Conclusion

Mubarak Ali a historian and author has worked on different project of history. His major thoughts on history are different from the contemporary Pakistani historians. He has written more than hundred books. Most of them are related to motivational writing. He has widely criticized the existing historical methods of writing. This paper has explored revisionist historiography by Mubarak Ali by epistemological approach which has been his continuous criticism of historical objectivity and his re-conceptualization of historical knowledge. As it can be seen, Mubarak Ali does not dismiss objectivity in absolute terms, instead he objectifies its traditional positivist perception by revealing the ideological, political and social pressures that determine the making of historical events. To him, neutrality is usually a mask of interests of dominant classes, state power, and ideologies of nationalism or religion. Historical knowledge should, then, be conceptualized as contingent, placed, and for interrogation.

Mubarak Ali contemplates the reflexive historiography by foregrounding power relations, social structures, and a marginalized voice that aims to democratize the past and disrupt elite-centered representations. His stance on epistemology is in line with the traditions of critical and post-positivism, with a series of focus on interpretation, context, and positionality of the historian. Meanwhile, his demand of rational inquiry, the evidence, and source criticism do not allow his work to fall down into relativism.

The analysis also recognizes the weaknesses of the approach adopted by Mubarak Ali such as being normative and being ideologically dogmatic at times. However, his intervention is still important to destabilize orthodox histories and broaden the field of Pakistani historiography.

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