The Methodology of Oral History

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Abstract—The research methodology adopted for writing scientific history like, internal criticism, external criticism, elimination of value of judgment and generalization, can be adopted in oral history. In regional or local history, the families play a predominate role. Thus, the writing of family history is an absolute necessity in the reconstruction of regional or local history. Oral tradition and memory of individuals supply considerable data for such writings. Oral history must be preserved in proper archives of oral history. They can be documented with details like content, name, occupation, period and significance. Unfortunately, the Indian institutions, both governmental and non-governmental have not realized the significance of the oral history. Thus, oral history is valuable for present and future generations as an emerging discipline with considerable unity and practically useful.

Keywords—Research methodology, oral history.

I. INTRODUCTION

Research methodology of oral history is more complex than the subsequent interpretations and narrations given by the historians. An interview with the oral historic must be more factual and analytical. They must have or direct experience of an event or situation. In fact their interviews can be used to highlight the histories of war, business, agriculture, journalism, ethno migration, labour, women, sports, music, philanthropy, human rights movements, science, literature, dance and foreign relations.

As discussed by Ritchie [1994 p.19] like other areas of social science the Research methodology of oral history has to be systematic, comprehensive and narrative. Oral historians believe that their experience of history is more complex than the subsequent interpretations and narrations given by the historians. Rarely one can get historical evidences through such writings. Oral history must be preserved in proper archives of oral history. They can be documented with details like content, name, occupation, period and significance. Unfortunately, the Indian institutions, both governmental and non-governmental have not realized the significance of the oral history. Thus, oral history is valuable for present and future generations as an emerging discipline with considerable unity and practically useful.

According to Ballard [1990 p.32] an interview with the oral historic must be more factual and analytical. They must have or direct experience of an event or situation. In fact their interviews can be used to highlight the histories of war, business, agriculture, journalism, ethno migration, labour, women, sports, music, philanthropy, human rights movements, science, literature, dance and foreign relations. The past valuable information can be recollected through oral history interviews.

Barnes [1963 p.34] pointed out that the individual recollection and memory are the important aspects of oral history. Hence the interviewer requires technical skill and experience. He should have through knowledge of what he wants to ascertain and extract from the interviewee. The questions are to be focused on the interrelated areas, which would be able to highlight the problems with more insight. For that the Oral historian should be professionally well-equipped and much experienced. If he has no knowledge of what he wants to know or record, he may not be able to get anything substantial or useful from the interviewer. His primary knowledge on any aspect of the historical event is an essential factor.

Burchkhardt [1958 p.39] said that as oral history is based only on memory. Therefore the interviewer should keep a good memory power of the event or custom. The date, or details of the event may not be correct and that has to be checked or examined with authentic written sources. Any field note or diary of the interviewee or his autobiography can also be used to supplement his narration or experience. In such cases the interviewer should possess good information of the activities, contribution and participation of the interviewers. For example, there is no meaning in collecting information from a social activist on areas such as, music and literature, unless he is specialized in those areas.

Carlyle [1928 p.42] highlighted that it is not possible to conduct interviews with all persons keeping good memory or knowledge of an event or situation. Here, a random selection is made of persons, like participant, eye witness, promoter and ideologue. In the absence of such persons, the memory of the community, which keeps a tradition, heritage or custom, can be ascertained. The tomb-stones will never highlight the life experience of the dead underneath. But, the descendants of those persons or persons of their genealogy may be able to share some valuable memories and transmitted to them by their ancestors. As a result, debates are going on over the relationships between memory and history, and between individual and his collective memory.

Gooch [1961 p.34] revealed that the collective memory of a community or a tribal group or marginalized section, can be recorded by an oral historian, to highlight their customs, manners, rituals and common experience. Here, the specific group of men or women or tribals or migrants can share their common experience. If any exaggeration or under estimation or over estimation takes place, there is every possibility of correction from the groups itself. The approach of a collective interview or community interview to ascertain community
memory or collective memory is a suitable methodology for tracing the oral history of a community or a tribal group related to their experiences in a particular social, economic and political situation.

Smith [1964 p.41] asserted that a community oral history typically refers to one that is defined by a group of interviews with people who live in a geographical area, like a village, sub-urban mofussil or any other region. Community history refers to a shared social identity of particular caste, profession and occupation. The experience of a particular group in a particular place is shared to the project of a community through oral history. The tribal history can be pursued in this methodological frame work. Such interviews can give us new understanding of the local culture, beliefs, habits, individual stories and anecdotes and it may also lead us to hills, homes, streams, churches, temples, farms, streets and houses. An interviewee can be asked to identify "three of his most memorable experiences" related to his life, activity and locality. Such recollections are very valuable for any aspect of oral history. Interview can also be conducted on a single event or a particular theme. In such cases, an interview can flash and reflect even an insight into a specific problem. It will help to understand the multifaceted dimensions and under currents of an event or situation.

Tikekar [1964 p.26] found out that the waiting of an oral historian is quite often criticized on account of the loss of objectivity and by the large scale reflection of subjectivity. Even scientific history is related to class history. The research methodology adopted for writing scientific history like, internal criticism, external criticism, elimination of value of judgment and generalization, can be adopted in oral history. Oral history has also the class character and ideological commitment. Its elimination is a difficult process. This is mainly caused due to the growth of history as a social science. As a social science it is not only a factual narration, but also a scientific explanation of facts. For instance, when an interview for Oral history is conducted to trace the impact of land reforms, it can supplement two arguments.

Rocuse [1946 p.64] observed that in regional or local history, the families play a predominate role. Thus, the writing of family history is an absolute necessity in the reconstruction of regional or local history. Unfortunately such a new trend has not come up in our academic activities. Oral tradition and memory of individuals supply considerable data for such writings. The interviewees in this direction can highlight, analyze and narrate a historical situation. It interrelates the historical studies to human memory of a collective group, individual and community. The narrative accounts based on oral history project the life and story of the common man, his frustrations and aspiration as part of historical knowledge. Thus, oral history is valuable for present and future generations as an emerging discipline with considerable unity and practically useful.

II. CONCLUSION

The oral history has its own research methodology to highlight, analyze and narrate a historical situation. It interrelates the historical studies to human memory of a collective group, individual and community. The narrative accounts based on oral history project the life and story of the common man, his frustrations and aspiration as part of historical knowledge.

REFERENCES