

STUDYING HISTORY: PERIODIZATION-A NECESSITY OR CONVENIENCE

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Abstract:

Periodization in History means dividing the past into certain span of time and studying the historical events therein. Periodization is so popular in history that this pattern is used not only in school books but is also considered as a basis for specialization in higher studies. This paper seeks to question whether periodization in history is inevitable or a matter of convenience. The paper brings out the merits and demerits of the system of periodizing history. It shows that periodization can only lead to confusions. The past cannot be compartmentalized into ancient, medieval and modern or even contemporary because these concepts are inevitably defined in various ways, by various persons in various places at various times. Moreover one cannot confine oneself into one period as every event has a background and a consequence. Periodization inhibits this full view. The only alternative to this confusion and controversy regarding periodization in history is to bring it to an end. One could adopt thematic study of history where a certain theme could be judged in its right perspective by considering the effects on it of the various facets of the passage of time. The ambiguous periodization of history could be terminated and history could be treated as a continuous flow.

Introduction:

Time and space factors give History its correct perspective. Chronology, an indispensable factor in history is divided into various periods. Periodization in History means dividing the past into certain span of time and studying the historical events therein. At the end of the period certain events begin again to go through another course, not necessarily as before, thus suggesting a spiral view of history.

Periodization is so popular in history that this pattern is used not only in school books but is also considered as a basis for specialization in higher studies. Periodization undoubtedly makes the study of history convenient. To give an example, "History of India" consists of a long string of events, right from the pre-historical age to the present times. This broad period

brings forth only a jumbled vision. However “Nineteenth century India” at once highlights a clear picture with its various dimensions with common, important characteristics. This paper seeks to question whether periodization in history is inevitable or a matter of convenience.

Types of Periodization

The history of any region, country or of the world is generally divided into specific periods and sub-periods on the basis of certain criteria. One criterion which is common in traditional historical writing is to divide the history of a country in terms of the dynasties that ruled over it. In this sense we have the history of India divided into Mauryan period, Gupta period, Mughal period and even British period. This division is still common as the rule of a dynasty provide a convenient chronological period for study.

Sometimes division of period is done on the basis of centuries. We have for example, the history of England, in the 15th century, the 16th century, and the 17th century and so on. However this system is disadvantageous as one cannot view the long time consequences.

Another criterion of periodization is based on development brought about by revolution either in thought or in material life. For example, there are divisions like the Renaissance and the Industrial Revolution. This type of periodization gives importance to developments in certain aspects of cultural and economic life, rather than dynastic or political. Such divisions (unlike the divisions based on dynasties) indicate broad period and not specific dates or years as development in culture and economy cannot be traced back to any particular date nor do they end on a specific date. To give an example from Indian history, the period of the rise of Indian nationalism cannot be ascribed to any particular event taking place on a particular date.

Geology and Archaeology offer some other basis for periodization. Accordingly periodization is done on the basis of the material used for fashioning tools and equipment's. First comes the Stone Age with its subdivisions of Paleolithic, Mesolithic and Neolithic, then the Metal age, running through copper, bronze, iron and steel periods. The beginning of Paleolithic goes back more than a million years and of the Neolithic to at least fifteen to twenty thousand. The copper age may have begun in Egypt as early as 4000B.C. The bronze age proper appears in the Aegan around 2600 B.C. The Iron Age may be said to embrace western civilization from the 14th century B.C. to the Industrial Revolution which produced the true age of steel, with all its implications and ramifications. It would be perceptible that

this method of periodization is partial and incomplete one as it differs from region to region and lays stress primarily on material culture. The changes and developments are most readily detected and demonstrable here. But it is quite evident that for certain other phases of cultural evolution quite another scheme of periodization would be essential.

Another more widely used periodization is done on the basis of demarcation of stages in the development of society. In this system, each period denotes not only a broad chronology, but a distinct form of society, economy, political system and culture and has a well-defined character of its own distinguishable from other periods. The broadest commonly accepted periodization of history of most countries and the world as a whole is the division into ancient, medieval and modern periods.

In terms of chronology these periods vary from country to country, as society in different countries and regions moved from one to another at different times. For example, in the history of Western Europe, the ancient period came to a close by the end of the fifth century of the Christian era and the medieval period when a new form of a social system characterized by feudalism began to take shape. Similarly the medieval period in the history of Western Europe may be said to have ended by the fifteenth century and modern period began with the decline of feudalism and the emergence of a new kind of social system called capitalism. Comparable developments denoting the passing of one type of social system and the emergence of a new one in other countries or regions, say Asia and Africa took place at different times. Therefore the specific chronology of ancient period, the medieval period differs from country to country and region to region.

It should also be remembered that the ancient period or the medieval period in the history of all countries does not have the same characteristic feature. There are variations even in many essential features of social and economic life, political system and culture. Thus medieval China or medieval India does not necessarily denote the same kind of society, economy and political system as that in medieval Europe. However while periodizing the history of the world as a whole the variations in different parts of the world are ignored for the sake of convenience, and new forms of society and economy, even though they might have emerged only in one region of the world, are taken to mark the beginning of a new period. For example, the period after the fifteenth century, which marks the beginning of modern period in Western Europe exercised a powerful influence on the history of other countries and regions in the subsequent period.

Evolution of the concept of periodization

The notion of periodization of history, familiar to us in the conventional divisions of ancient, medieval and modern came into being not until the close of the 17th century. The earlier notion of periods or stages of history were pensive and retrospective. Its beginning can be sketched to the notion of cycles of human development held by the Greeks and Romans. Culture was held to pass through definite stages of ascent and decline with the process repeating itself indefinitely. The Greeks developed a comparable idea in the conception of a decline from an original “Golden Age”. This found its best known expression in the doctrine of the five ages of man expressed by Hesiod, i.e., gold, silver, bronze, heroes and iron.

To the Christian Fathers there had been two important periods in human development, that of the unspeakable paganism between the creation of Adam and the birth of Christ, alleviated only by the shining exception of the divinely guided Jewish culture (the Greek civilization, the base of the western culture has been given no importance), followed by the glorious Christian era which dawned with the coming of the Saviour.

Various philosophers have endeavored to survey the history of mankind with a view to discovering a pattern and thus dividing it into various stages. On an analogy with the biblical version that God created the world in six days and rested on the seventh day, St. Augustine demarcated seven periods in history, from Adam to the Deluge, from Deluge to Abraham, from Abraham to David, from David to Babylonian captivity of the Jews, from Captivity to the birth of Christ, the present age and the age during which God shall give us rest.

These two divisions were gradually transformed into Ancient History and the Middle Ages. The medieval historians for the most part were wont to stress the continuity of history rather than periodization. They tended to regard the medieval period as a continuation of the Roman Empire.

One of the first to break away from the view was the Italian Historian, Flavius Blondus (1388-1463). He came to conceive of the Middle Ages as the period in which the peoples of Western Europe had broken away from Rome and had created a history and culture of their own. Blondus thus clearly had in mind the notion of at least two periods of history-antiquity and the Middle Ages.

The rise of the Protestant Reformation suggested to the other writers who lived after these events that perhaps a new era had dawned in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. There might be a modern age. This threefold division of history, which is still conventionally used, was first set forth by Gilbert Voetius(1588-1676) in connection with church history. He suggested that there was an ancient period, which came down to Augustine, an intermediate age from Augustine to Luther and a new time since Luther's time.

Friedrich Hegel believes that dialectic is the very moving principle of history. He is of the view that each stage or thesis being short of perfection contains in itself an opposition or anti-thesis. There will be a struggle between thesis and anti-thesis until a synthesis is created. Despotism is a thesis and democracy is an antithesis, and out of this struggle a synthesis, constitutional monarchy is produced. This synthesis is not the final, for the process continues, until there emerges a perfect state.

Karl Marx too using the Hegelian dialectic traced the various periods through which the history of mankind went, but with a materialistic interpretation. Class struggle is the basis of society and therefore according to Marx mankind has gone through three or four major modes of production and their ownership and therefore periods namely ancient slave society, feudalism and capitalism. The capitalism will lead to dictatorship of the proletariat and then to the perfect goal of communism.

The basis of periodization in India

The Hindus in the days of antiquity developed a concept of time and a conception of cyclic trends. It says that Kalpa(cycle) of 43,20,000 years constitute a "four age" period(Chatur yuga). They are krita yuga or the age of moral perfection consisting of 1,440,000 years, treta yuga or the age of moral discipline of 1,080,000 years, the dvapara yuga or the age of suffering of 7,20,000 years and the kali yuga or the age of degeneration of 3,00,000 years. After the end of one kalpa, another kalpa is to follow. However this system of periodization is purely based on myth and not on any reasonable or scientific principle.

Since the advent of the Europeans historical writing in India was influenced by western ideas and methods of research. The historical outlook of the Europeans was conditioned by the prevailing conceptions in Europe and their attitude towards the Indian powers. Thus as in European history they divided Indian history into the ancient (dominated by the Hindu-

Buddhist powers), medieval (dominated by the Muslim powers) and Modern (dominated by European powers).

However this periodization was divisive in its implications and tended to communalize Indian history. Though the Muslim masses were as poor, exploited and oppressed as the Hindu masses and there were Hindu zamindars, nobles and rulers along with Muslim ones, these writers declared that all Muslims were rulers in medieval India and all Hindus were the ruled. Thus the basic character of a polity in India was identified with the religion of the ruler. Later the culture and society of various periods were also declared to be either Hindu or Muslim in character.

The nationalist historians began to question the validity of the arbitrary way in which the Indian History had been conventionally divided by the imperialist historians. R.C.Majumdar's contribution in this regard is significant in that he helped to replace the periodization in Indian history as evolved by the imperialist historians by a new periodization viz., ancient India came to cover the period upto 1000A.D., medieval India from 1000A.D.to 1818 A.D. and modern India from 1818 onwards. However on what basis is not known!

The Marxist historians have adopted a novel pattern of periodization. It has been done on the basis of socio-economic change. While the history of ancient India covers the period from pre-historic times to the eighth century, the medieval India begins from about eighth century to about the early eighteenth century where feudalism was the dominant characteristic of socio-economic system. The modern period begins from about the early eighteenth century when the feudal structure begins to break away to 1950 when India is all set to establish itself into a modern, independent nation.

Critical analysis of periodization

The system of periodization has been criticized by many philosophers. Oswald Spengler vehemently attacks the European periodization of history into ancient, medieval and modern. He condemns this classification as a childish and meaningless scheme and replaces it by the Copernican view which is organic in structure, which does not admit of any water tight compartments. Besides it gives no privileged position to any particular culture and regards all other cultures such as India, Arabia, China, Egypt and Babylonia to be as important as Western or Classical culture in the scheme of things.

H.E.Barnes too regards periodization as childish. He contends that it obstructs the study of universal history as it ignores more than nine-tenths of the period of human existence upon the planet. In the second place there are no such general cultural synchronisms among the peoples of the earth as will allow of a definite periodization of universal history. As an instance a comparison of the state culture in Egypt, Mesopotamia, India, China, Britain and California in 4000B.C. will show great diversity of culture included under a single arbitrary temporal synchronism. In the third place such a scheme is inadequate even for the periodization of a single state, as one can really observe by comparing the culture of Germany in A.D.500 with that of the court of Emperor Frederick I-both falling in the so called “medieval period”. Further Barnes says that it is certain that all scientific periodization in future need to be highly pluralistic, discriminating and specialized. In certain phases of culture, like technology and economic institutions, there seems to be a definite pattern of accumulation and progress. But art and religion appear in no such formula, and there will continue to be wide divergences between the cultures of various states of world. Hence he says it would seem that the periodizing of the future will need to be confined to some definite type of cultural development in a single state or culture area.

But my question is whether we need to hold at all to the older nomenclature. This is very difficult to answer because we are so obsessed with the idea of periodization that we cannot respond to this from a detached point of view. Periodization aids in the systematic study of History. But if one introspects into the system deeply, the very concept of periodization seems to be ambiguous. The very terms ancient, medieval and modern are relative and hence vague. What seems to be modern today is ancient to the future generations, and what seems to be ancient now was modern at that time. While the Neolithic age is considered at present to be primitive age, a comparison of it with the Paleolithic age, makes it a modern age. In my opinion the concept of being in the “modern age” has risen after the renaissance as the people during this period thought that the triumph of reason over superstition has made them modern. But that is not the ultimate. There is always be a tomorrow which will bring some further progress and make the “modern age” more modern.

Geoffrey Barraclough in his book, “An Introduction to Contemporary History” has opined that the last decade of the nineteenth century should be considered as contemporary history as this was the period when the problems which are actual in the world, took first visible shape. He considered it to be a period different in “quality and content” from what is

known as modern history. One of the distinctive fact about contemporary history is that it is world history, i.e., -the world has become integrated in a way, it had never been before.

This shows that the s called “modern period” has become more modern and therefore the recent modern period is called as “contemporary period”. I wonder what our future generations are going to label the future periods of progress.

Conclusion

The above discussion brings out the merits and demerits of the system of periodizing history. It shows that periodization can only lead to confusions. The past cannot be compartmentalized into ancient, medieval and modern or even contemporary because these concepts are inevitably defined in various ways, by various persons in various places at various times. Moreover one cannot confine oneself into one period as every event has a background and a consequence. Periodization inhibits this full view. The only alternative to this confusion and controversy regarding periodization in history is to bring it to an end. One could adopt thematic study of history where a certain theme could be judged in its right perspective by considering the effects on it of the various facets of the passage of time. The ambiguous periodization of history could be terminated and history could be treated as a continuous flow.

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