Time, Chronology and History: the Indian Case

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Abstract

Western historiographical traditions have rather neatly counterposed their own concept of linear historical time to India's cyclical time and emphasised the denial of history, i.e. of change in the latter. The counterpositioning is however flawed and cyclical concept of time does not exclude change.

If the Hindu philosophical constructs of time revolved around cyclicity, the coming of Islam to India in the 11th century brought a new, strictly linear conception of time and history. In Islam, eschatological and historical time elide and draw a sharp dividing line between pre- Islam and post-Islam history of the universe, the first characterised by 'ignorance, savagery' and the second by its erasure. However, there have been powerful dissenting voices within the Islamic world questioning the division.

The notion of tripartite division of Indian history into ancient, medieval and modern, evolved through a long history and became hegemonic in the 20th century. In the 1950s and 60s, the strong influence of Marxism redrew the boundary lines within the tripartite division. At the end of the century with new problematiques of social and cultural history, the very concept of the tripartite division is under a strain.

A long tradition of Western historiography has neatly characterised early India's historical consciousness as essentially ahistorical, for time for early Indians was mythical rather than historical and it was cyclic rather than linear. Even as a conception of the creation of the universe is imaged in the *Rgveda*, the earliest of the four *Vedas*, the Aryan mythological texts, no referral date is assigned to it there. In some later texts, however, the beginning of time – and therefore of the universe – is established at 12000 years. But time moves in a rhythm of four cycles: the *Sat-yuga* (the age of truth), the *treta* (third), the *dwapar* (second) and the *kali-yuga* (the last age) after which the cycle will begin again. In some versions, these cycles are envisaged in millions of human years. Thus even as

the creation of the universe is conceptualised, its end is not. Cyclical time is thus embedded in the Hindus' very vision of life and universe. It is entirely mythological, counterposed to linear time in history, considered an attribute of the Western historiographical tradition. There is no shared space in-between.

The absence of historical consciousness was accepted as axiomatic down to the 1960s. In 1967 R.C.Majumdar, a leading historian, lamented that '…the Hindus at the beginning of the nineteenth century had no knowledge of their own history and their early attempts to reconstruct it were not only crude but almost ridiculous.' [1] Interestingly, it was also during the 60s that the Western paradigmatic division of the existence of historical consciousness in Europe and its absence in India came under a strain. V.S.Pathak's *Ancient Historians of India* was a major intervention in this direction, followed by the philosopher, A.K.Warder's *An Introduction to Indian Historiography*.[2] More recently, Romila Thapar has, in a brief monograph, questioned the very counterpositioning of cyclic and linear time and has argued, with great elegance, that the notion of a precise and measurable historical time, genealogical, dynastic and regnal chronologies, as well as the notion of historical change were all growing within the overall frame of mythical, cyclic time in early India.[3]

Islam, however, brought an alternative vision of time to India in the beginning of the thirteenth century; it also brought a different tradition of history-writing. Time in Islam is both eschatological and historical, proceeding along a linear trajectory

[1] R.C.Majumdar, *Historiography in Modern India*, London, 1970: 5. (The book comprises lectures given by Professor Majumdar in Bombay in 1967).
[2] V.S.Pathak, *Ancient Historians of India*, Bombay, 1966; A.K.Warder, *An Introduction to Indian Historiography*, Bombay, 1972.

from creation to the Day of Judgment. Usually locating the birth of the universe at 14000 years ago and that of Adam at 7000 years, Islam envisions time both as eternal[4] as well as discontinuous, a juxtaposition of instants, each finite in the context of an infinite totality, until the moment of judgment. [5] The Quran itself conceives of both eschatological and earthly time where one day of god is equal to one thousand human years.

Historically, it is the birth of Islam which divides time into the pre-Islamic age of *jahiliya* – ignorance or savagery --and the age of enlightenment, coterminous with the hijri era. The rise of Islam thus becomes the reference point of all history, establishing a convergence between sacral and historical time. The break with the age of *jahiliya* was emphatic not only because Islam constituted its repudiation but also because the *jahiliya* culture was essentially pre-literate, marked by the absence of articulate historical thought. In Tarif Khalidi's words, 'The Arabs learnt a new history when they acquired a new religion'.[6]

The new religion also brought to India a new conception of historical periodization. With the establishment of the Muslim State in India in around the first decade of the thirteenth century, the Muslim craft of history-writing, developed in the Arab world, moving through and absorbing the Persian as well Turko-Mongol historiographical traditions, reached India to produce a large number of historical works. Most of the works written in 'medieval' India were in

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[3] Romila Thapar, *Time as a Metaphor of History: Early India*, New Delhi, 1996.
[4] Paul E. Walker, 'Eternal cosmos and the Womb of History: Time in early Ismaili Thought', *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 9, 1978: 357; L.E.Goodman, 'Time in Islam' in Anindita Niyogi Balslev abd J.N.Mohanty (eds), R*eligion and Time*, Leiden, !993: 138-62.
[5] Louis Massignon, 'Time in Islamic Thought', M*an and Time*, Bollingen series, 30 (3), 1957: 108-09. Goodman, however, suggests that discontinuous time is one among several strands of religious thought in Islam. Goodman, 'Time in Islam'.

the nature of court chronicles, composed by courtiers and written in the Persian language which was the language of the court.[7] Predominantly, if broadly, they belonged to the genre of Muslim historiography.

The concept of 'world history', developed in the Arab historiographical tradition from al-Yaqubi and al-Tabari onwards had a strong presence in Indian history-writing, even where the histories that were actually written were spatially confined to a region. However, both spatially as well as temporally, Islam constituted the demarcating line. The first major work in India in this genre was the *Tabaqat-i Nasiri* by Minhaj al-Siraj, written around the sixth decade of the thirteenth century. 'World history' for him comprised the history of regions where Islam had by then established itself, i.e. Arab territories, Iran, Central Asia and India. The narrative begins in each region just before the arrival of Islam there and recounts the battles fought and measures taken to establish Islam's power. There is very scant interest or knowledge of the history, society, culture, religion and literature of the period prior to the coming of Islam to these areas. It is as if history did not exist before the point of contact of the region with Islam; the age of *jahiliya*, followed by the age of Islam.[8] The point is made explicitly in Indian context by a sixteenth century historian, Mulla Abdul Qadir Badauni, when he explains why he chose to begin his three volume *Muntakhab al-Tawarikh* from the time of Subuktgin, whose son Sultan Mahmud of Ghazni, established Islam in India on a

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[6] Tarif Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought in the Classical Period*, Cambridge, 1994: 115.

[7] These have been subject of a good number of studies in recent decades. See as a sample, Peter Hardy, *Historians of Medieval India*, London, 1960; M.Hasan (ed.), *Historians of Medieval India*, Meerut, 1968; Harbans Mukhia, *Historians and Historiography During the Reign of Akbar,*New Delhi 1976; K.A.Nizami, *On History and Histotiography of Medieval India*, New Delhi, 1983.

permanent footing, rather than from Muhammad bin Qasim, who was actually the first Muslim invader of Sindh, a northwest Indian territory, but whose conquest of the region proved ephemeral for Islam.[9] Others, comprising a range between orthodox and liberal historians, reaffirm the assumption by taking it for granted.

Even the format of these works testifies to the strong presence of Islam. All histories, with one extremely significant exception, begin with the praise of Allah, followed by that of Muhammad, going into an enumeration of the Caliphs of Islam, the past sultans down to the current sultan whose courtiers the authors were. Clearly, the political descent of the current sultan was being traced through the denominational lineage and his legitimacy was being predicated upon his adherence to Islam. A few of the historians also mention Adam after Allah before going on to Muhammad; Adam, after all is part of Islamic theology, as he is of Christian.

Understandably, all events are narrated with reference to the hijri calendar. There is one singular exception is when the Mughal emperor Akbar (r. 1556-1605), institutes a new era, called the Divine Era (*tarikh-i ilahi*), and his courtier and an extraordinary historian, Abul Fazl, faithfully adheres to it in his magnum opus, the *Akbar Nama*; we shall return to Abul Fazl below. However, irrespective of the era, medieval Indian historiography is very strict about the chronological sequence of events, a feature first developed in the Arab tradition.[10] Indeed, Arab historians date an event by the year, the month and the day, not failing to take

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[8] Minhaj-al Siraj, *Tabaqat-I Nasiri*, William Lees and M.Abdul Hai (eds), Calcutta, 1863-64; Eng. trans. in 2 vols. by H.G.Raverty, Calcutta, 1881.

[9] Mulla Abdul Qadir Badauni, *Muntakhab al-Tawarikh*, vol. I, Maulavi Ahmad Ali (ed.), Calcutta 1868: 5, 7-8.

note of even the day of the week of its occurrence.[11] World history is broken down into regional history, which in turn is broken further into dynastic, regnal and, in the case of the current sultan into an annalistic arrangement, a feature that came down from al-Tabari.[12] Chronological location is further reinforced by the use of chronograms, coining of phrases or verses, the numerical value of whose combination of letters yields the year of the occurrence of the event. However, each event, placed in a strict chronological sequence, is treated as a single, independent entity, unrelated to other events. The format itself reinforces the singularity of each event: 'One of the events that occurred in this year was…'; 'Another event that took place in this year was…' This is how events are narrated.

The pervasive centring of the spread of Muslim power, use of the hijri calendar and a very strict adherence to the chronological sequencing of events are then the defining characteristics of historiography in medieval India.

There is, however, one very serious questioning of the first two of these characteristics. If the rise of Islam as the demarcating line in history posited an irreconcilable dichotomy between the age of *jahiliya* and the age of Islam, between faith and unbelief, *kufr*, emperor Akbar sought to eliminate the line of demarcation and to resolve the dichotomy at the level of state's functioning. The state for him was not an instrument of denominational hegemony; it must impart equality of treatment to its subjects irrespective of denominational identities.

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[10] Aziz al-Azmeh, 'Histoire et narration dans l'historiographie arabe', *Annales :E.S.C.*, mars-avril 1986, 2:420-21.
[11] R.Stephen Humphreys, *Islamic History: A Framework of Inquiry*, New York, 1995: 130.

Since the hijri era was one of the most assertive symbols of that demarcating line, Akbar subsituted for it a new era, named as the Divine era. This was a solar calendar and was thus opposed to the lunar hijri calendar. It was actually formulated during the 28th regnal year of Akbar, it was made operative retroactively from the beginning of the reign.[13] Indeed, a difference of 25 days between the accession and the beginning of the era was written off so that the onset of spring in March, marking the renewal of the earth and the beginning of the exceptional reign, marking the renewal of time, could coincide with the inauguration of the new era and the new calendar. Akbar, although formally illiterate, was also saturated with a sense of history. He wished to commemorate his reign as history and therefore commissioned the writing of the *Akbar Nama* (Book of Akbar). It was his courtier, friend and admirer, Abul Fazl who accomplished the task.

Abul Fazl went about establishing the historical legitimacy of the ideology of his patron. In place of the old dichotomy between Islam and *kufr*, grounded on the premise of subjugation and discrimination, Abul Fazl substituted a new dichotomy: one between a universal religiosity and a denominational religion, in this case predominantly Islam, but other religions as well. He thus opens the *Akbar Nama* with the praise of God, Allah, goes straight to Adam, avoids any reference to Muhammad, the Caliphs or any other denominational figure and proclaims Akbar as the 53rd generation descendent of Adam. He thus

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[12] F.Rosenthal, *A History of Muslim Historiography*, Leiden, 1968: 71-2;T.Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought*: 73; Aziz al-Azmeh, 'Histoire et narration': 418.
[13] Abul Fazl, *Akbar Nama*, Vol. II, Maulana Abd al-Rahim (ed.), Calcutta, 1881: 9-13; *idem, Ain-i Akbari*, vol. I, H.Blochmann (ed.), Calcutta, 1872: 265-78.

disengages Allah from any sectarian associations with Islam by envisioning him as the God of all humankind; by proclaiming Akbar as the descendent of God through Adam, the first human being, he also disengages Akbar from any association with sectarian identities and establishes him as the universal ruler of all mankind. Any reference to Islam or its prophet or the dividing line of the hijri era, between *jahilya* and Islam, thus becomes irrelevant. Instead, Abul Fazl posits time as flowing uninterrupted from Adam to the reign of Akbar. In a teleological construction of a very longue durèe, Abul Fazl visualises Akbar as the culmination of the rise of humanity from the birth of Adam and his reign as the fulfillment of all history.

This was a challenge to the hegemony that Islam had come to acquire in the craft of history writing in medieval India. The enormous weight of Abul Fazl's genius and the nature of medieval Indian polity, which frequently employed Islamic idiom and rituals but never came anywhere near becoming a fully fledged theocratic state, placed the *Akbar Nama* at the apex of intellectual creativity. Even as it remained a role model for generations of historians, no one else really emulated it and its conception of the flow of time uninterrupted by the rise of Islam remained entirely a unique venture.

Strict as adherence to chronology was in the whole range of Muslim historiography, Abul Fazl was such a stickler for details and accuracy of information that he would break off the narration of an event, for another might have intervened even as the first was in the process, narrate the second and

return to the first and pick up its thread.[14] His measurement of chronology is exact to the last day even when he is recounting the duration of several dynasties extending to several thousand years. Thus, in his enumeration, 191 rulers of Kashmir had reigned for 4109 years, 11 months and 9 days;[15] or, 'It is said that 2355 years, 5 months and 27 days prior to this, the 40th year of the Divine Era, an ascetic named Mahabah lit the flame in a fire temple to worship God….'[16] Here too Abul Fazl was making a departure. Besides his penchant for details of the data, he held time in a certain amount of awe. 'Time', he says 'is precious, for which there is no exchange'.[17] Compare his placement of the Mahabharata war at 4096 years before the present, i.e. when he was writing in 1595[18], with his contemporary Badauni's who places it blandly at more than 4000 years ago.[19]

As courtier-historians, their vistas extended at the most to the events in which the court was at the centre of things. Their chief concern thus was what we would today designate dynastic history, or alternatively political history in a somewhat narrow sense. Historical chronology too was thus determined by the demands of this genre of history.

With the coming of British historiography in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, historical periodization did not undergo a radical change. James Mill was the first to introduce the tripartite division, Hindu, Muslim and the British

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[14] See Harbans Mukhia, *Historians and Historiography:* 63-4.
[15] Abul Fazl, *Ain*, I: 578.
[16] Ibid.: 469.
[17] Abul Fazl, *Akbar Nama*, vol. II, Agha Ahmad Ali and Abdur Rahman (eds), Calcutta, 1877: 136.
[18] *Ain,* vol II (tr.): 15.
[19] *Muntakhab al-Tawarikh*, Vol. II: 319. Interestingly, Badauni had actually translated the epic from Sanskrit into Persian.

periods for Indian history in 1817, although the concepts underlying it were in the process of evolution for some time.[20] In some ways, James Mill formalised what had been a long familiar division from medieval times onwards. For, if the notion of a Muslim period of Indian history goes back to the medieval centuries themselves, as we have seen above, it also implies the notion of an anterior Hindu period. In formalising the nomenclature and adding the third, the British period, Mill deliberately made the division asymmetrical in order to emphasize the departure India was making from a long era characterised by the dominance of religion to one which would bring home to it, in his utilitarian view, the character of a modern, secular polity.[21] This nomenclature for the tripartite division remained in force down to the 1960s, and even though another nomenclature, 'ancient, medieval, modern' was first used in the Indian context in 1903[22], the two were continued to be used interchangeably, since they shared the basic premise of equating history with dynasties and dynasties with their religion, except for the British or the modern period. For the modern period too the chronology was determined by the conception of history which was still equated with the history of conquest, battles, administration etc. Thus regnal chapterisation for the ancient and medieval periods was replaced by vice-regnal chapterisation, following the succession of the British ruler's Vice-Roys in India.

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[20] Harbans Mukhia, '" Medieval India": An Alien Conceptual Hegemony?', *The Medieval History Journal*, 1,1, 1998: 91-105.

[21] James Mill, *The History of British India*, H.H.Wilson (ed.), 10 vols., London, 1858 (first published 1817).

[22] Stanley Lane-Poole was the first to divide Indian history into the ancient, medieval and modern periods in his *Mediaeval India Under Mohammadan Rule (A.D. 712-1764)*, London, 1903. Lane-Poole was himself quite clear about the equation between Ancient/Hindu, Medieval/Muslim and Modern/British periods; see his Preface, iii. The equation remained in use until the 1960s.

It was around the mid-50s that a paradigm shift occurred in the concept of history and therefore the boundaries of its temporal divides. This occurred under the growing influence of Marxism in the social sciences. With class displacing reigns as the analytical tool in history and class structure and class struggle competing with battles and enthronement as the emerging and expanding centre of historical concerns, the old chronology defined by dynastic change and change of the religious identities of ruling dynasties was found clearly inadequate. As attention came to be focused on changes in the social and economic structures and the diving forces of this change, i.e., the unfolding of contradictions embedded in the very structure of society and development of the means of production in the sphere of technology and science, a new, broader and a more flexible periodisation was inevitable. Concepts of an 'early medieval India' extending from around the 4th to the 11th century to encompass the notion of an 'Indian Feudalism' were the result of this change of focus.[23]

Even as the temporal boundaries of historical periodisation became more permeable, the tripartite division remained in tact and is the hallmark of the discipline within the university system as well as in professional organisations. It is, however, the emergence of still newer problematiques in the 90s that cut across these divides far more decisively. For, the exploration of themes like the

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R.C.Majumdar uses the term iterchangeably and quite unselfconsciously in his *Historiography of Modern India*: 5-6 and *passim.*

[23] The notion of Indian feudalism, defined in Marxist terms, was firmly placed in Indian historiography by D.D. Kosambi in his *An Introduction to the Study of Indian History*, Bombay 1956 and later by R.S.Sharma, *Indian Feudalism*, Calcutta, 1965. In 1981, Harbans Mukhia's article, 'Was There Feudalism in Indian History?', *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 8, 3: 273-310 questioning the theoretical and empirical grounding of the notion of an Indian feudalism led to an international debate in the same journal in 1985 in a special issue, *Feudalism and Non-European*

changing contours of the history of time and space, of interpersonal relations within a habitat, the history of the family and of ecology, of cultural mores and of the perceptions of the human body – problematiques of these natures would keep nibbling at the borders of the 'ancient, medieval and modern' division; they would forever force a new, expansive and imaginative notion of historical periodisation.

Societies, and later. It has recently been reproduced in India as *The Feudalism Debate*, Harbans Mukhia (ed.), New Delhi, 1999.