

How Important are Dates?

There was a time when historians were fascinated with dates. There were heated debates about the dates on which rulers were crowned or battles were fought. In the common sense notion, history was synonymous with dates. You may have heard people say, "I find history boring because it is all about memorising dates." Is such a conception true?

History is certainly about changes that occur over time. It is about finding out how things were in the past and how things have changed. As soon as we compare the past with the present we refer to time, we talk of "before" and "after".

Living in the world we do not always ask historical questions about what we see around us. We take things for granted, as if what we see has always been in the world we inhabit. But most of us have our moments of wonder, when we are curious, and we ask questions that actually are historical. Watching someone sip a cup of tea at a roadside tea stall you may wonder – when did people begin to drink tea or coffee? Looking out of the window of a train you may ask yourself – when were railways built and how did people travel long distances before the age of railways? Reading the newspaper in the morning you may be curious to know how people got to hear about things before newspapers began to be printed.



Fig. 1 - Brahmins offering the Shastras to D'Arriac, frontispiece to the first map produced by James Rennel, 1782

Rennel was asked by Robert Clive to produce maps of Hindoostan. An enthusiastic supporter of British conquest of India, Rennel saw preparation of maps as essential to the process of domination. The picture here tries to suggest that



Fig. 2 - Advertisements help create taste

Old advertisements help us understand how markets for new products were created and new tastes were popularised. This 1922 advertisement for Lipton tea suggests that royalty all over the world is associated with this

All such historical questions refer us back to notions of time. But time does not have to be always precisely dated in terms of a particular year or a month. Sometimes it is actually incorrect to fix precise dates to processes that happen over a period of time. People in India did not begin drinking tea one fine day; they developed a taste for it over time. There can be no one clear date for a process such as this. Similarly, we cannot fix one single date on which British rule was established, or the national movement started, or changes took place within the economy and society. All these things happened over a stretch of time. We can only refer to a span of time, an approximate period over which particular changes became visible.

Why, then, do we continue to associate history with a string of dates? This association has a reason. There was a time when history was an account of battles and big events. It was about rulers and their policies. Historians wrote about the year a king was crowned, the year he married, the year he had a child, the year he fought a particular war, the year he died, and the year the next ruler succeeded to the throne. For events such as these, specific dates can be determined, and in histories such as these, debates about dates continue to be important.

As you have seen in the history textbooks of the past two years, historians now write about a host of other issues, and other questions. They look at how people earned their livelihood, what they produced and ate, how cities developed and markets came up, how kingdoms were formed and new ideas spread, and how cultures and society changed.

Which dates?

By what criteria do we choose a set of dates as important? The dates we select, the dates around which we compose our story of the past, are not important on their own. They become vital because we focus on a particular set of events as important. If our focus of study changes, if we begin to look at new issues, a new set of dates will appear significant.

Clive, Wellesley, Bentinck, Dalhousie, Canning, Lawrence, Lytton, Ripon, Curzon, Harding, Irwin. It was a seemingly never-ending succession of Governor-Generals and Viceroys. All the dates in these history books were linked to these personalities - to their activities, policies, achievements. It was as if there was nothing outside their lives that was important for us to know. The chronology of their lives marked the different chapters of the history of British India.

Can we not write about the history of this period in a different way? How do we focus on the activities of different groups and classes in Indian society within the format of this history of Governor-Generals?

When we write history, or a story, we divide it into chapters. Why do we do this? It is to give each chapter some coherence. It is to tell a story in a way that makes some sense and can be followed. In the process we focus only on those events that help us to give shape to the story we are telling. In the histories that revolve around the life of British Governor-Generals, the activities of Indians simply do not fit, they have no space. What, then, do we do? Clearly, we need another format for our history. This would mean that the old dates will no longer have the significance they earlier had. A new set of dates will become more important for us to know.

How do we periodise?

In 1817, James Mill, a Scottish economist and political philosopher, published a massive three-volume work, *A History of British India*. In this he divided Indian history into three periods - Hindu, Muslim and British. This periodisation came to be widely accepted. Can you think of any problem with this way of looking at Indian history?

Why do we try and divide history into different periods? We do so in an attempt to capture the characteristics of a time, its central features as they appear to us. So the terms through which we periodise - that is, demarcate the difference between periods - become important. They reflect our ideas about the past. They show how we see the significance of the change from one period to the next.

Mill thought that all Asian societies were at a lower level of civilisation than Europe. According to his telling of history, before the British came to India, Hindu and Muslim despots ruled the country. Religious intolerance,



Fig. 2 - Warren Hastings became the first Governor-General of India in 1773

While history books narrated the deeds of Governor-Generals, biographies glorified them as persons, and paintings projected them as powerful figures.

Activity

Interview your mother or another member of your family to find out about their life. Now divide their life into different periods and list out the significant events in each period. Explain the basis of your periodisation.

this it was necessary to introduce European institutions and laws in India. Mill, in fact, suggested that the British should conquer all the territories in India to ensure the enlightenment and happiness of the Indian people. For India was not capable of progress without British help.

In this idea of history, British rule represented all the forces of progress and civilisation. The period before British rule was one of darkness. Can such a conception be accepted today?

In any case, can we refer to any period of history as "Hindu" or "Muslim"? Did not a variety of faiths exist simultaneously in these periods? Why should we characterise an age only through the religion of the rulers of the time? To do so is to suggest that the lives and practices of the others do not really matter. We should also remember that even rulers in ancient India did not all share the same faith.

Moving away from British classification, historians have usually divided Indian history into 'ancient', 'medieval' and 'modern'. This division too has its problems. It is a periodisation that is borrowed from the West where the modern period was associated with the growth of all the forces of modernity – science, reason, democracy, liberty and equality. Medieval was a term used to describe a society where these features of modern society did not exist. Can we uncritically accept this characterisation of the modern period to describe the period of our study? As you will see in this book, under British rule people did not have equality, freedom or liberty. Nor was the period one of economic growth and progress.

Many historians therefore refer to this period as 'colonial'.

What is colonial?

In this book you will read about the way the British came to conquer the country and establish their rule, subjugating local nawabs and rajas. You will see how they established control over the economy and society, collected revenue to meet all their expenses, bought the goods they wanted at low prices, produced crops they needed for export, and you will understand the changes that came about as a consequence. You will also come to know about the changes British rule brought about in values and tastes, customs and practices. When the subjugation of one country by another leads to these kinds of political, economic, social and cultural changes, we refer to the process as colonisation.

You will, however, find that all classes and groups did not experience these changes in the same way. That is why the

decision, agreement, investigation had to be carefully written up. Once this was done, things could be properly studied and debated. This conviction produced an administrative culture of memos, notings and reports.

The British also felt that all important documents and letters needed to be carefully preserved. So they set up record rooms attached to all administrative institutions. The village *tahsildar's* office, the collectorate, the commissioner's office, the provincial secretariats, the lawcourts - all had their record rooms. Specialised institutions like archives and museums were also established to preserve important records.

Letters and memos that moved from one branch of the administration to another in the early years of the nineteenth century can still be read in the archives. You can also study the notes and reports that district officials prepared, or the instructions and directives that were sent by officials at the top to provincial administrators.

In the early years of the nineteenth century these documents were carefully copied out and beautifully written by calligraphists - that is, by those who specialised in the art of beautiful writing. By the middle of the nineteenth century, with the spread of printing, multiple copies of these records were printed as proceedings of each government department.

museums established by the British collected plant specimens and information about their uses. Local artists were asked to draw pictures of these specimens. Historians are now looking at the way such information was gathered and what this information reveals about the nature of colonialism.

religions and occupation. There were many other surveys – botanical surveys, zoological surveys, archaeological surveys, anthropological surveys, forest surveys.

What official records do not tell

From this vast corpus of records we can get to know a lot, but we must remember that these are official records. They tell us what the officials thought, what

Question 1:

State whether true or false:

a) James Mill divided Indian History into three periods- Hindu, Muslim, and Christian

Ans. False

b) Official documents help us to understand what the people of the country think.

Ans. False

c) The British thought surveys were important for effective administration.

Ans. True

Question 2:

What is the problem with the periodisation of Indian History that James Mill offers?

Solution:

James Mill divided his book into three period, namely: Hindu Muslims and British. According to his prejudiced version of Indian history, the British rule represents all the forces of progress and civilisation, while the period before British rule represents darkness, ignorance, despotism, religious intolerance, caste taboos, superstitious practises, etc.

The view of Mill has several problems which is not acceptable due to reasons:

(i) All the Asian societies were less civilised than the European ones. So the British could civilise India by conquering all the territories of India.

(ii) The Hindus and the Muslims are not capable of ruling India.

(iii) All rulers in ancient India did not share the same faith. So naturally there wouldn't be religious tolerance. This will be a hindrance to the progress, enlightenment and happiness of the nation.

Thus the problem with the periodisation Indian history that James Mill offers is that the subjective account of a historian distorts the facts.

Question 3:

Why did the British preserve official documents?

Solution:

The British preserved the important official documents because these served as records of what the officials thought, what they were interested in and what they wished for. According to the British, writing was more important than speaking as the documents in archives and museums could be utilized for reference at a much later date.

Question 4:

How will the information historians get from old newspapers be different from that found in police reports?

Solution:

Information is essential for writing history of a time which can be gathered from various sources. Apart from official documents in the archives, historians gather information also from old newspapers, diaries of people, accounts of pilgrims, autobiographies of important personalities and booklets etc.

Information found in newspapers is varied, based on incidents that have happened across the country. They may be showcasing incidents based on the views and thinking of the correspondents, news editors etc.

Whereas, the police reports are true, pragmatic, limited and localized. Because of this fact, sometimes the information historians get from the old newspapers, are not as useful as it is from that found in police reports. However, for any incidence the newspaper may not quote all the reasons behind it and it would be biased as per the thinking of reporter while in police records we could find some evidences for an incident and unbiased reports.