

MARXIST

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Theoretical Quarterly of the Communist Party of India (Marxist)

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AMAR FAROOQUI

Indian History

The Dilemma of Periodization

The conventional periodization of Indian history—ancient, medieval, modern—has until very recently made it possible to perpetuate the periodization scheme in colonial narratives about India's past. Colonial historiography since the early nineteenth century divided pre-British Indian history into periods labelled in terms of religious identity: Hindu and Muslim. Thus, the entire period prior to circa AD 1200, was labelled as the 'Hindu Period' of Indian history. The period from the beginning of the Delhi Sultanate, 1206, was broadly referred to as the 'Muslim Period' of Indian history, lasting till the first half of the eighteenth century. This period was further subdivided into the era of the Delhi Sultanate (1206–1526), which was followed by the Mughal era. The Mughal empire began to disintegrate after the death of Aurangzeb (1707). The conquest of Bengal by the East India Company was regarded as marking the beginning of the British period. This periodization has been attributed to James Mill whose work on Indian history remained the most authoritative colonial text on the subject throughout the nineteenth century and thus exercised enormous influence, and still continues to do so often in pernicious ways.¹

¹ 'Mill, writing his *History of British India* in the early nineteenth century, was the first to periodise Indian history. His division of the Indian past into

James Mill (1773–1836) was an official of the East India Company, being employed in its service in England from 1819 onwards. He published his influential *History of British India* in 1817, in which he put forth many of his ideas about British rule being superior and enlightened. Indian society was portrayed as backward and it was the historical responsibility of Britain to put it on the path of progress. In this work he emphasized the changelessness of Indian society. Pre-British India did not really have a history, and no significant achievements.

Mill was writing at a time when history was emerging as a new discipline. Scholars in this field, which at that time was confined to the history of Europe and Europeans in the Americas, had embraced a tripartite division of historical time. As a distinct academic discipline, history is a product of modern times. It came to be located in institutions of higher learning in the nineteenth century.² It is generally recognized that intellectual trends of the eighteenth century, especially ideas associated with the Enlightenment, played a significant role in the evolution of history as a discipline with its specific protocols, terminology, jargon, and as Marc Bloch put it, ‘methods of investigation.’³ In the latter half of the eighteenth century ‘various traditions of historical thinking which until then [had] existed relatively, although not

the Hindu civilization, Muslim civilization and the British period has been so deeply embedded in the consciousness of those studying India that it prevails to this day. It is at the root of the ideologies of current religious nationalisms and therefore still plays a role in the politics of south Asia. It has resulted in a distorting of Indian history and has frequently thwarted the search for causes of historical change other than those linked to a superficial assessment of religion.’ Romila Thapar, *The Penguin History of Early India, from the Origins to AD 1300*, Gurgaon: Penguin, 2002, p. 5.

² For a useful outline of the emergence of history as a professional discipline, see Robert Harrison, Aled Jones and Peter Lambert, ‘The Institutionalisation and Organisation of History’, in *Making History: An Introduction to the History and Practices of a Discipline*, ed. Peter Lambert and Phillip Schofield, Abingdon: Routledge, 2004, pp. 9–25.

³ Marc Bloch, *The Historian’s Craft*, New York: Vintage Books, 1953, p. 18.

totally, apart from each other began to interact.⁴ These traditions included practices of history writing in India without which early colonial scholarship on India's past would not have been possible, notwithstanding the disdain that nineteenth-century British historians had for these traditions.

As the new discipline came into its own, its practitioners in Europe found it useful to study the human past by dividing it into three periods: ancient, medieval and modern. Already by the seventeenth century this tripartite scheme had acquired a fairly precise chronology, proposed by the German scholar Christoph Cellarius in a book published in 1683. The 'ancient age' was the entire epoch from the beginning to AD 476, when the last (Western) Roman emperor was deposed, marking the end of the Roman empire. The 'middle age' encompassed the period from 476 to 1453, the year in which Constantinople/Istanbul was captured by the Ottomans. The period after 1453 was the 'new age'. As the discipline evolved, this tripartite division came to be accepted widely, with some minor modifications as to the dates for the medieval period, and thereby for the other two periods as well.

We need to bear in mind that this division had its roots in Christian theological notions going back to St. Augustine's 'six ages' of historical time. However, Cellarius's periodization avoided any direct allusion to religion, which made it attractive in a secular context, and was quickly adopted by historians of the nineteenth century. The term 'Middle Ages', denoting the medieval period of European history, was frequently used in a deprecatory sense, 'instituting a negative period between the glorious past and the contemporary period'.⁵ This was a reflection of the survival of Renaissance attitudes towards the past. Renaissance scholars had a high regard for the achievements of ancient Greece and Rome.

⁴ Georg G. Iggers and Q. Edward Wang, *A Global History of Modern Historiography*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2018, p. 3.

⁵ M. Sato, 'Time, Chronology and Periodization in History', in *International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 2001, pp. 15,686–692.

In this perception, classical antiquity was followed by a long dark age of decline. The Renaissance endeavour had as its object the recovery of the culture and learning of Graeco-Roman antiquity; hence the denigration of the more recent, 'medieval', age. Medieval implied inferiority and backwardness. By contrast, the ancient was superior, brilliant and worthy of emulation.

The tripartite division, in its modified form, is the prevalent periodization for European history today, with the term 'medieval' being applied to the thousand years from circa 500 to 1500, 'with a range of ca. one hundred years plus and minus'. This conventional marker 'still dominates in academe'.⁶ For pedagogical purposes then, 'ancient' covers the entire period from the evolution of humans to AD 500 (end of the Roman empire; Germanic migrations; transition to feudalism), 'medieval' continues till the end of the fifteenth century (fall of Constantinople; Christopher Columbus's 'discovery' of the Americas, 1492; or beginnings of the Reformation, 1517). This is followed by the 'modern' period. Needless to say, the periodization is specific to western and central Europe. Today, national histories in these parts of Europe allow for adjustments based on variations in the trajectories of different regions, and sub-periods are added to make developments within a period more comprehensible or meaningful.⁷ The crucial point is that this has been the mode of thinking about history academically for quite some time.

Given that the emergence of history as a discipline coincided with the colonial subjugation of India, it is not surprising that initial attempts to produce histories of the subcontinent should have been profoundly influenced by the traditions of history writing that were evolving in German-speaking states, France

⁶ Hiram Kümper, "The Term "Middle Ages", in *Handbook of Medieval Studies: Terms, Methods, Trends*, ed. Albrecht Classen, Berlin: De Gruyter, 2010, p. 1312.

⁷ Some of these 'national' chronological variants are listed in Kümper, "The Term "Middle Ages", p. 1315.

and Scotland. It is in this intellectual milieu that Mill wrote his *History of British India*. Mill, who was Scottish, must have been familiar with the massive *The History of England* by David Hume, a stalwart of the Scottish Enlightenment. Hume's six-volume *History of England* was published between 1754 and 1761. The modern Scottish historiographical tradition was further enriched by William Robertson's *The History of Scotland, During the Reigns of Queen Mary and of James VI* (1759), and *The History of the Reign of the Emperor Charles V* (1769). The first volume of the latter work is devoted to a lengthy survey of what was by then widely recognized as the medieval period of European history, from the disruption of the Roman empire by the Germanic tribes, and the beginnings of the 'feudal system', to the inauguration of the reign of Charles V in the first decade of the sixteenth century, and the expansion of the Turkish empire under Charles's contemporary, Suleyman.⁸ The volume concludes with a favourable assessment of Ottoman rule.⁹

Mill's understanding of history came to be imbued with the secularist tendencies of Scottish Enlightenment thought, tendencies which had significant implications for history writing in Scotland.¹⁰ As Anna Plassart has pointed out in her study of

⁸ William Robertson, 'A View of the Progress of Society in Europe, From the Subversion of the Roman Empire, to the Beginning of the Sixteenth Century', in *The History of the Reign of the Emperor Charles V*, vol. I, London: W. Strahan, T. Cadell, 1769.

⁹ 'Solyman ... who is known to the Christians chiefly as a conqueror, but is celebrated in the Turkish annals as the great law-giver who established order and police in their Empire, governed during his long reign with no less authority than wisdom.' Robertson, *History of the Reign of Charles V*, vol. I, p. 191.

¹⁰ Even though the union of the crowns of Scotland and England had taken place in 1707, it took nearly a century for a measure of integration to be achieved before a composite 'British' identity could emerge. Linda Colley has shown that it was during the latter half of the reign of George III (r. 1760–1820) that the English and the Scots (at least a large number of them) began to see themselves as 'Britons.' Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707–1837*, London: Pimlico, 1994.

Mill and the Scottish Enlightenment, 'In contrast to their English contemporaries, who retained a broadly Christian interpretation of history, Scottish writers followed Montesquieu in inscribing natural histories of religion within a secularized analysis of societal progress'.¹¹ In this context Hume's treatise 'The Natural History of Religion' (1757) had a more profound influence on Mill's *History*: 'Mill's discussion of India's "rude" religions was directly based on Hume's natural history of religion as he traced "the ideas concerning Divine power which the natural faculties of our race suggest to them at the various stages of their career"'.¹²

More importantly, Mill was an advocate of Utilitarianism, intellectual 'lieutenant' and personal friend of Jeremy Bentham. The main philosophical notion formulated by Bentham was that the utility or usefulness of actions depends on the extent to which these promote general happiness. A society should ideally make it possible for individuals to engage in the pursuit of happiness. In the long run the interests of individuals would coincide with those of other members of society, making it possible for general happiness to be achieved. In politics this would mean policies of reform that advanced the common good. Such policies would be ethical: 'the greatest happiness of the greatest number that is the measure of right and wrong'. According to Mill, the usefulness, if any, of British rule lay in the historical opportunity it provided for transforming Indian society through enlightened government. British governance ought to promote the common good and be generally beneficial for Indians. It was in the interest of India that it should have British rule. Moreover, policies had to be pursued which would decisively alter Indian society for the better. James Mill's son, John Stuart Mill (who also joined the service of the East India Company in England), took forward many of the Utilitarian

¹¹ Anna Plassart, 'James Mill, The Scottish Enlightenment, and the Problem of Civil Religion', *Modern Intellectual History*, online version, Cambridge University Press, October 2017, p. 4.

¹² Plassart, 'James Mill, Scottish Enlightenment', p. 22, especially n88.

ideas of Bentham and James Mill. He refined and popularized their arguments, forcefully advocating the continuation of British rule in India. More specifically for him this meant the continuation of Company rule.¹³

A closer look at Mill's *History* would show that he does not actually refer to 'Hindu' and 'Muslim' periods of Indian history. This is understandable. For Mill and his contemporaries non-European societies had no history. Indian society had been changeless before British rule was introduced. Since India had no history, it could not therefore have had any historical epochs; the past could not be conceived in terms historical periods. Unlike European history which had distinct phases, Indian society had no discontinuities indicating change—the end of one period of history and the beginning of another. The book is a history of British India, as the title indicates, from the 'commencement of the British intercourse with India' to the East India Company's ascendancy in the latter half of the eighteenth century. Mill brought the narrative down to 1805 (he began writing the book in 1806), which marked the end of the Second Anglo-Maratha War (1802–1805) and the end of Richard Wellesley's term as governor-general. Of its roughly 2,200 pages spread over three volumes, nearly three-fourths are about the East India Company and the British conquest of India. It should

¹³ John Stuart Mill forcefully argued for the continuation of the Company's rule when after the revolt of 1857 had been suppressed, the Bill for the assumption of the government of the Indian empire by the crown was being discussed in the British parliament in the middle of 1858. Mill's arguments were set forth in a pamphlet on the subject, which also presents a strong defence of the East India Company's governance (John Stuart Mill, *Memorandum of the Improvements in the Administration of India During the Last Thirty Years, and the Petition of the East-India Company to Parliament*, London: W.H. Allen, 1858). Mill was reiterating many of the arguments that had been articulated by senior officials of the Company such as Thomas Munro and John Malcolm. See, Amar Farooqui, 'Colonial Governance, British Politics and the East India Company', in *Clio and Her Descendants: Essays for Kesavan Veluthat*, ed. Manu V. Devadevan, Delhi: Primus, 2018, pp. 577–78.

be borne in mind that only eastern India (Bengal and Bihar) and southern India (including parts of the Deccan) had come under the control of the Company when the book was written.

Obviously, as this was a book about British India, or those parts of the Indian subcontinent over which the British held sway, it had to give an account of the subjects of the empire. These subjects were reduced to two large internally undifferentiated communities, 'Hindus' and 'Muslims'. The first volume is divided into three parts. Book I traces the history of English/British presence from 1527 onwards when a preliminary proposal was made to explore a new North Western route from England to India in the wake of Vasco da Gama's voyage to the Indian Ocean via the Cape of Good Hope (nothing came of this proposal). The story of the prehistory of the Company's rise to power ends in this volume at 1711, a date that is relevant for the Company's organizational history rather than to India.¹⁴ Books II and III of the first volume are more in the nature of a digression, in which Mill interrupts the narrative of the first part to talk about the people of India and provide some idea about their past. Book II bears the title 'Of the Hindus'; Book III is simply entitled 'The Mahomedans'. The narrative is resumed in Volume II, which covers the period from circa 1708 to 1784. Again, 1708 is a date relevant in this context to the reorganization of the Company and was not chosen, as one might assume at first glance (going by the periodization of standard textbooks), because it marked the beginning of the post-Aurangzeb era of the eighteenth century. Volume III covers the period from 1784, when Pitt's India Act of that year came into force, to 1805.

'Of the Hindus' begins with an examination of the possibility of recovering the 'Ancient History of the Hindus', which is eventually found to be an exercise in futility:

This people, indeed are perfectly destitute of historical records.

¹⁴ James Mill, *The History of British India* (3 vols.), vol. I, London: Baldwin, Cradock and Joy, 1817, pp. 2–90.

Their ancient literature affords not a single production to which the historical character belongs. The works in which the miraculous transactions of former times are described, are poems. Most of them are books of a religious character, in which the exploits of the gods, and their commands to mortals, are repeated or revealed. In all, the actions of men and those of deities are mixed together in a set of legends, more absurd and extravagant, more transcending the bounds of nature and of reason, less grateful to the imagination and taste of cultivated people, than those which the fabulous history of any other nation presents to us.¹⁵

Mill then goes on to argue that since in any case Indian society has been in a 'stationary condition' before the coming of the British, their past is the same as their present. He was not thinking in terms of a 'Hindu' period precisely because India's past was its present as well. Mill's approach is summed up in the following passage, which it would be worthwhile to quote at length:¹⁶

From the scattered hints contained in the writings of the [ancient] Greeks the conclusion has been drawn that the Hindus, at the time of Alexander's invasion, were in a state of manners, society, and knowledge exactly the same with that in which they were discovered by the nations of modern Europe; nor is there any reason for contradicting this opinion. It is certain that the few features of which we have any description from the Greeks bear no inaccurate resemblance to those which are witnessed at present. From this, from the state of improvement in which the Indians remain, and from the stationary condition in which their institutions first, and then their manners and character, have a tendency to fix them, it is no unreasonable supposition that they have presented a very uniform appearance from the visit of the Greeks to that of the English.

¹⁵ Mill, *History of India*, vol. I, p. 99.

¹⁶ Mill, *History of India*, vol. I, pp. 100–1.

By utilizing resources for studying their institutions, laws, manner, arts and occupations, made available through 'the meritorious researches of the modern Europeans', the historian could 'show how they lived together as members of the community; and of families; how they were arranged in society; what arts they practised, what tenets they believed; what manners they displayed; under what species of government they existed; and what character as human beings they possessed'.¹⁷

Book III of the first volume, dealing with 'The Mahomedans', is very brief, about 160 pages, two-fifths the length of Book II (of these the last twenty-three contain an analysis of the 'state of civilization among the Mahomedan Conquerors of India' as compared to that 'among the Hindus'). This is essentially a political history of north India, from Sultan Mahmud's forays into the subcontinent, to the accession of Shah Alam II in 1759. It begins with the assertion that the Hindus had 'for a number of ages been subject to a race of foreigners', the Muslim rulers being the most recent. At the time of Vasco da Gama's voyage, 'the political state of India ... consisted of a Mahomedan government, supported by a Mahomedan force, over a Hindu population'.¹⁸ This was the key formulation picked up by early nationalist historians who sought to contest the colonial construction of India's past by postulating that India had a glorious ancient civilization which was disrupted when 'Hindu India' came under Islamic foreigners.¹⁹ This subjection to Muslim rulers lasted for nearly eight hundred years, reckoned from the incursions of Mahmud. In articulating such an understanding of pre-colonial India early nationalist historians laid the foundations of communal political assertions about India's past. We shall have more to say on this issue later.

¹⁷ Mill, *History of India*, vol. I, p. 101.

¹⁸ Mill, *History of India*, vol. I, p. 431.

¹⁹ That 'Muslim rule' marked a crucial break is implicit in the exclusive focus on 'Ancient India' in the writings of major early nationalist historians such as R.G. Bhandarkar, R.C. Dutt and K.P. Jayaswal.

Significantly, quite unlike later writings within the colonial historiographical tradition, Mill's assessment of governance under the 'Mahomedans', as compared to that under the 'Hindus' (a broad category used for all communities in India other than the Muslims), was fairly positive. With reference to Mughal rule he states that

... among the Moguls, even at their first irruption into Hindustan, the arts of government were considerably advanced; and that the Hindus had much to gain by a change of masters. In the hands of some of the most eminent of the Mogul princes, the Emperor Akbar for instance, the powers of government were distributed, and employed with a skill which would not disgrace a period of considerable knowledge and refinement.²⁰

He then makes a larger statement which is illustrative of his ability to go beyond stereotypes and be more nuanced as a historian. 'Though in a pure despotism', he observes, 'much depended on the qualities of the sovereign, yet when a good plan of administration was once fully introduced, a portion of its excellence always remained for a time; and had a strong tendency to become perpetual.'²¹ Such an evaluation was also a product of Mill's view that 'the more advanced religions could wield beneficial influence on neighbouring religions, and therefore on neighbouring societies.'²² Hence, as Plassart notes, from Mill's perspective, 'Hinduism had benefited from its proximity with Islam, which was itself intellectually indebted to the superior Judeo-Christian religions.'²³

Mill's book had no serious competitor for a quarter of a century. As a general modern history of India, purporting to be a

²⁰ Mill, *History of India*, vol. I, pp. 635–36.

²¹ Mill, *History of India*, vol. I, p. 636.

²² Plassart, 'James Mill, Scottish Enlightenment', p. 23.

²³ *Ibid.*

history of the entire subcontinent, it was the only book of its kind. It was indispensable for teaching to civil service probationers, spending time at the East India College (Haileybury), something about the society they were being sent out to administer. These were boys in their late teens, who had acquired some sort of school education, possessed of very little knowledge about the history of their own country and none whatsoever about India or its past. Whatever information they would have picked up about the colony during their two-year course would have largely come from Mill's *History of British India*. The influence of the work on these young minds can hardly be overestimated. It remained essential reading for several decades.²⁴ Nevertheless it would be an oversimplification to suggest that in writing his history, Mill's aim was to produce a textbook. It took him over a decade to complete the work, and as Javed Majeed has argued, the project was closely intertwined with ideological conflicts in Britain between 'the revitalized conservatism of the early nineteenth century, which had emerged in response to the threat of the French revolution' and Utilitarianism. In this struggle opposing positions came to 'be defined in relation to a set of conflicting attitudes towards British involvement in India'.²⁵ Mill was unconvinced that the acquisition of colonies served a useful economic purpose. Ultimately, they enhanced the status and power of the ruling elite, especially the aristocracy, in Britain.

It may be mentioned that James Mill and the Utilitarian ideological trend which he represented, had to contend with the views of British scholar-officials such as William Jones who had some admiration for India's ancient past. These scholar-officials were part of a distinct tradition of British Orientalist learning that had developed during the last quarter of the eighteenth

²⁴ In the early 1840s, Mill's account was updated by the prominent Indologist H.H. Wilson, who extended the narrative to 1835.

²⁵ J. Majeed, 'James Mill's "History of British India" and Utilitarianism as a Rhetoric of Reform', *Modern Asian Studies*, vol. 24, no. 2 (1990), p. 209.

century and the first quarter of the nineteenth century. Orientalist scholarship was nurtured through institutions such as the Asiatic Society founded in 1784 (Calcutta), and Fort William College established in 1800 (Calcutta). Due to the intellectual influence of the Orientalists, whose main focus was on sacred texts written in the Sanskrit language and who relied heavily on the interpretations of local upper-caste scholars with whom they worked to comprehend these texts, there was an acknowledgement that there were features of India's ancient civilization which were worthy of respect. In his *History of British India*, Mill attacked Jones for promoting such views. According to him, Orientalist scholarship propagated the myth of India's cultural brilliance 'in order to conceal the actual backwardness of the culture and the need for reform.'²⁶ An important objective then, of *History of British India*, was to demolish the Orientalist myth so as to further the Utilitarian ideological offensive at home: 'It is because he saw empire as buttressing powerful groups at home, that his *History* was a critique of the legal, political, and religious institutions in Britain, and of their influence on British rule in India.'²⁷

The periodization of the history of pre-British India, by specifically dividing this history into a 'Hindu' period and a 'Muslim' period, became entrenched in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Nationalist historiography contributed to this periodization by positing a clear rupture with the emergence of Muslim ruling elites. Of course, the neat compartmentalization of the two periods was already implicit, though as we have seen in a somewhat different way, in the writings of Mill, and of some of his successors. Among these, Mountstuart Elphinstone deserves mention because it continued to use some of the terminology which had become familiar to contemporary readers Mill's history. Elphinstone's work, *The History of India* was published in two volumes in 1841. He dropped 'British' from the title, indicating

²⁶ Ibid., p. 213.

²⁷ Ibid., pp. 213–14.

that the book was not about British India. It does not dwell on the history of the East India Company and the British conquest of India. It ends with the Third Battle of Panipat (1761). As far as the tenor and contents are concerned there are considerable differences between the two works. These need not detain us. What is relevant for our purpose is that it is divided into two parts: 'Hindus'; 'Mahometans'. One major difference is the far greater detail and more systematic treatment of these two themes. Moreover, as Sabyasachi Bhattacharya has noted, 'A remarkable feature of Elphinstone's work was an awareness of the scale or size of the subcontinent he was writing about. He pays attention to regional history and the different trajectories of development in a manner not attempted before'.²⁸

The first volume begins with a brief 'general description of Hindustan' which is followed by the large segment on 'Hindus' (Books I-IV), and an introductory section on 'Mahometans' (Book V), from the early history of Islam, to the Ghurid presence in India. The terminal point is 1206. The segment on 'Mahometans' is continued in Volume II (Books VI-XII). It covers the five and a half centuries from the emergence of the Delhi Sultanate (1206) to the Third Battle of Panipat.²⁹ In other words, the more substantial portion on 'Mahometans' is placed in the second volume, giving the entire period the kind of unity which is the organizing principle for chronological purposes of most textbooks down to the present day. In these textbooks and general histories, the medieval period of Indian history encompasses the period from the beginning of the thirteenth century to the early eighteenth century, and is subdivided into the eras of the Delhi Sultanate and

²⁸ Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, 'A Brief Survey of Colonial Historiography in India', in *History of Science, Philosophy and Culture in Indian Civilization*, vol. XIV, pt. iv, *Different Types of History*, ed. Bharati Ray, Delhi: Pearson Longman, 2009, p. 76.

²⁹ Mountstuart Elphinstone, *The History of India*, 2 vols., London: John Murray, 1841.

of the Mughals. In moving from the rubrics 'Hindu' and 'Muslim', to 'Hindu' period and 'Muslim' period one more step was required for the conventional periodization of Indian history to be worked out. This was achieved by the third edition of Elphinstone's *History of India*, which bore the title *The History of India: The Hindu and Mahometan Periods*.³⁰ It is likely that one purpose of adding the subtitle might have been to distinguish the book from Mill's work, and announce its subject in unambiguous terms. Within the book, titles of the segments themselves were left undisturbed, 'Hindus', 'Mahometans'. Be that as it may, it was clear that these adjectives were not just markers of identity but of historical time.³¹ Elphinstone had already amended Mill's assessment of the 'Hindus', which 'was closer to Sir William Jones's rather than James Mill's evaluation'.³² One strand of this outlook evolved in ways that provided a justification for colonial rule: the accomplishments of

³⁰ Mountstuart Elphinstone, *The History of India: The Hindu and Mahometan Periods*, third edition, London: John Murray, 1849. The second edition, published in 1843, retains the title of the first edition.

³¹ The first edition of Vincent Smith's *History of India*, which effectively superseded the histories of Mill, Elphinstone, and of historians of the latter half of the nineteenth century, had a fairly elaborate periodization scheme which did not merely divide the entire pre-British phase of India's history into a 'Hindu period' and a 'Muslim period'. Vincent A. Smith, *The Oxford History of India, From the Earliest Times to the end of 1911*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1919. Smith passed away in 1920. Curiously, later editions of the work grouped the sections of the book into three periods, 'Ancient and Hindu India'; 'India in the Muslim Period'; 'India in the British Period', an arrangement that is absent in the original edition. The third edition of the book, published in 1958, was a substantially revised edition, Part III being entirely rewritten by Percival Spear. This edition continues to be in print, and is still used especially for competitive examinations including those for the civil services. Some of the prominent historians of an earlier generation did not find any problem with this altered format, which went back to the strict nineteenth-century tripartite division. An example of this is K.A. Nilakanta Sastri's review of the third edition, which offers no comment on the periodization, critical or otherwise (*Journal of Asian Studies*, vol. 19, no. 1, 1959, pp. 94–96).

³² Bhattacharya, 'A Brief Survey of Colonial Historiography', p. 76.

the 'Hindu' period had been wiped out by Muslim invasions; it was the British who rescued Indian society, placing it firmly on the path of progress. Many of the building blocks for communal propagandist arguments about Indian history were now in place, and would be put to use for promoting ideas which fomented hostility of one community towards another. If Hindus and Muslims did not have a shared past, they could not be expected to have a shared present.

A major problem with the conventional tripartite division is the assumption that it is possible to have a uniform periodization and chronological framework for the entire Indian subcontinent. A modified, and perhaps more acceptable, periodization is Ancient India (prehistoric times to AD 600); Early Medieval India (600 to 1200); Medieval India (1200 to 1750) and Modern India (1750 to 1947). The period from 600 onwards saw the formation of several regional polities, such as those of the Rashtrakutas, Chalukyas, Palas, Pallavas, Pandyas, Cheras and Cholas. Their emergence was a manifestation of developments at local and regional levels, which the respective polities incorporated giving to them specific regional characteristics expression in political structures, culture, language, religious practices, ideas, art and architectural styles. Some Marxist scholars see elements of feudalism in the period from 600 onwards.

Most of the traditional schemes are by and large are based on dynastic changes, and are centred on developments mainly in the north Indian plains. There is an assumption in this approach that the Ganga-Jamuna Doab constitutes the core of the Indian subcontinent. Hence, the emphasis on this zone. However the social formations of large parts of southern India have a distinctive historical trajectory, as do those of the north-eastern parts of the subcontinent. The debates on the Harappan civilization, for instance, are not relevant for these regions. Moreover, forest-dwellers are virtually excluded in all these chronological schemes. This is a major gap, especially in the context of the pre-colonial

period, given that large areas of the subcontinent, as for example central India, are inhabited by these communities. Unfortunately, it is not easy to fill this gap immediately due to the paucity of published research on these societies.

The fact remains that it has been difficult, if not impossible, to substitute circa AD 1200 with another date around which there could be a scholarly consensus. Shifting the date to 1300 is not really a viable solution, though it does have the advantage of taking into account some of the shifts in peninsular India, and assumes that the more significant historical transformations in northern India belong to the fourteenth rather than the thirteenth century.³³ This remains a dilemma, the more so as the date coincides with the emergence of the Delhi Sultanate and the political processes this set in motion. Whereas the label 'Early Medieval' (circa AD 600 to 1200, +/- 100 years) has acquired considerable acceptability in recent years, particularly due to the interventions and researches of B.D. Chattopadhyaya, Hermann Kulke and Bhairabi Prasad Sahu, this has not resolved the problem of the commencement of the medieval period. To add to the problem, there have been suggestions that the Mughal era (early sixteenth to mid-eighteenth centuries) belongs to the 'Early Modern' period.³⁴ There is as

³³ In most of the important scholarly works of synthesis which cover a large span of the history of pre-colonial India, 1200/1300 marks the beginning of a new period, usually designated as medieval. Romila Thapar and Ranabir Chakravarti prefer to use the term 'Early India' for the entire period up to 1300 (Thapar, *Early India*; Ranabir Chakravarti, *Exploring Early India, up to c. AD 1300*, third edition, Delhi: Primus, 2016). The Vijayanagara and Bahmani kingdoms in the south, and the Khalji and Tughlaq states based in north India, were political entities that emerged in the fourteenth century. Upinder Singh's exhaustive account which otherwise terminates with developments of the late thirteenth century, includes some discussion on the fourteenth century, as for instance, evidence pertaining to Tamil merchants in East Asia. Upinder Singh, *A History of Ancient and Early Medieval India: From the Stone Age to the 12th Century*, Pearson Longman, 2009, p. 603.

³⁴ This is the periodization scheme followed in Herman Kulke, *History of Precolonial India: Issues and Debates*, English edition, revised and ed.,

yet no scholarly consensus on this revised periodization, which would confine the medieval period to just two to three centuries between 'Early India' and 'Early Modern India'. The point is that unless the notion of 'Late Medieval' (circa 1200 to 1500) gains currency, the early medieval is unlikely to be regarded as part of the medieval period, and will continue to be seen as a later phase of the ancient period. This is the case with those universities in which specializations still matter and have not been abandoned. 'Early Medieval' courses are taught by ancient specialists, rather than medieval specialists who in turn deal with the period c. 1200 onwards. Many of the professional organizations of historians such as Indian History Congress, Punjab History Conference, or Haryana History Congress follow the conventional scheme. In their survey of debates on the question of periodization and its current status, Kulke and Sahu have noted that, 'This periodization has been able to maintain its official validity, at least as far as the basis of specialisation in Indian history across universities in the country and the arrangement of the sessions of the Indian History Congress are concerned'.³⁵ Some professional bodies such as the South Indian History Congress (SIHC) and the Tamilnadu History Congress (TNHC) have been more innovative in that they divide their sections thematically (Political History/Social History/Economic History/Historiography and Maritime History, in the case of SIHC; Political and Administrative History/Social and Economic History/Historiography/Archaeology, Art and Cultural History in the case of TNHC).

Marxist scholarship of the 1950s seeking to avoid the pitfalls of a periodization which had the potential to reinforce communal

Bhairabi Prasad Sahu, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2018, chapter six, 'The Early Modern Period: India during the Mughal rule', pp. 112–38. The rationale for regarding the two and a half centuries from the beginning of the sixteenth century to British ascendancy in the mid-eighteenth century, as the 'Early Modern' period of India's history, is spelt out (pp. 150–51) in the detailed discussion on periodization in the book (pp. 141–52).

³⁵ Kulke and Sahu, *History of Precolonial India*, p. 144.

ideologies, and at the same time questioning the validity of the Asiatic Mode of Production, had put forth alternative criteria for a more meaningful way of understanding historical change. The foundational text was D.D. Kosambi's *An Introduction to the Study of Indian History*, first published in 1956. This was followed by R.S. Sharma's *Śūdras in Ancient India* (1958). Together these works laid the foundations of a Marxist understanding of India's past, especially its pre-colonial past, based on rigorous historical research and Marxist methodology, and incorporating the most recent studies having a bearing on the subject. These writings showed that the history of the Indian subcontinent, as that of societies elsewhere, could be studied in terms of a succession of modes of production altering over a period of time through class conflicts at various levels and changes in technology and forms of surplus extraction. Both Kosambi and Sharma (who followed up his 1958 book with another major work, *Indian Feudalism*, which was published in 1965), considered the appearance of features leading to the emergence of feudalism as constituting the crucial change that occurred in the transition from the ancient to the medieval. Many of these characteristics continued well beyond the thirteenth century. The religious identities of rulers, or the mere establishment of Turkish rule in a part of the subcontinent, did not determine change. Although many scholars subsequently made use of these insights to enrich Marxist historiography, critiques of the feudalism thesis by several historians of this very tradition had a bigger impact. Eventually, this put paid to the possibility of destabilizing the conventional periodization.

It is not the objective of this paper to offer an alternative scheme, but to suggest that we might try to find a way out of the secular dilemma of periodization by going back to the writings of Kosambi and Sharma (*Śūdras in Ancient India* is particularly attentive to caste as an instrument of oppression), and revisiting their framework to see how together with the rich historical scholarship of the past six decades we might retrieve elements of

the feudalism thesis as a way of evolving schemes of periodization that would allow us to undermine colonial and communal stereotypes, simultaneously taking into account immense regional variations, and the historical experiences of tribal communities and itinerant people.