
‘Medieval’ in the Eyes of the ‘Modern’: A Critique on the Construction of Medieval Period of Indian History

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Abstract

Presently, varied schemes of periodization of history are prevalent in historical studies, the most common being the tripartite scheme of ancient-medieval-modern periods. In European history, ancient, medieval and modern eras have remained the dominant standard epochal frontiers since the eighteenth century. In the wake of colonial rule, this scheme was applied by the European historians and orientalist to the colonized regions in Africa and Asia, including India, for historiographical purposes.

The concept of medieval period in Indian history is not without problems and limitations. First, not only there are conceptual intricacies involved in it, the whole process of periodization has been politicized. Moreover, the chronological frontiers of medieval India have become conceptual barriers, which restrict historical imagination. Secondly, the medieval period in Indian history, as in European history, is often referred to as the ‘Middle Ages’. It is understood as a post-classical age denoting a radical shift from ancient or classical period. Moreover, there seems to be an inherent bias in it, as it implies decline and degeneration in medieval times as opposed to the splendor and glory of the ancient era.

Thirdly, despite its common usage, there is no consensus among historians as to what constitute medieval India, though the construction of ancient and modern India is also controversial. As for the ancient India, almost all historians begin it with an account of the pre-historic times followed by the Aryan invasion and the Vedic age, but the problem arises where to bring ancient India to a close and

commence medieval period of Indian history. The indicators or variables determining the transition from the ancient to the medieval in Indian context have been a subject of heated debate and controversy among historians, who have identified different chronological reference points and varied chronological span for these periods. Similarly, the closing of medieval India and the beginning of modern period in Indian history is also contentious. In addition, medieval India has also been further divided into various sub-periods, such as the early and later medieval periods, which are also controversial among historians.

Last but not the least, with the passage of time, a thick layer of meaning has been deposited on the term 'medieval', making it much loaded and biased, and it has lost its neutrality as a concept. The term, far from its usage as a concept in historical studies, has come to denote derogatory connotations in everyday speech and language. References to the medieval psyche of Talibans, medieval mindset of feudal lords, and medieval Islam are common examples in point. For these and many other reasons, some historians advocate for altogether discarding the concept of medieval, while others suggest its use on concessional grounds. Nonetheless, it clearly shows the misgivings regarding the use of the concept of 'medieval' in periodization.

The proposed study critically analyzes the construction of the concept of medieval period in Indian history. While bringing out the limitations and problems in it, the study urges the need for exploring alternative schemes of periodization of Indian history.

In order to render history and time intelligible, past is periodized or divided into different units of time variously called eras, epochs or periods. They serve as important conceptual tools to grasp and comprehend the vast temporal stretch of human history. However, periodizing history is not a simple task. First, there are conceptual difficulties in abstraction and generalization. The problem revolves around the question of locating indicators or variables that determine change in history, which also help draw a dividing line between eras, and thus demarcate one historical period

from another. Here it does not seem out of place to recall M. Morony's note of caution to historians, who maintains that the apparent cultural and institutional inertia that is generally taken to be continuity in history, is nothing but a slow and gradual change.¹

Secondly, the whole process of periodization has been politicized.² At times the criterion of periodizing history might be consciously or unconsciously politically driven. So the construction of a historical period may reflect the hidden biases of its formulators. Since historical periods are generally taken for granted, their uncritical usage becomes a source of perpetuating the biases and prejudices.

Thirdly, since the historical periods are firmly rooted in academic traditions, they restrict historical thinking and imagination, and one finds oneself confined in their conceptual barriers. As generally people tend to think within their given categories, it becomes difficult to transcend the conceptual categories of periodization and go beyond them. Referring to this 'rigidifying power of periodization', William Green has rightly argued: "Once firmly drawn and widely accepted, period frontiers can become intellectual straitjackets that profoundly affect our habits of mind—the way we retain images, make associations, and perceive the beginning, middle and ending of things."³

Lastly, some of the labels of historical periods have gained common currency. With the passage of time, a thick layer of meaning has been deposited on them, making them loaded, biased and politically-charged. They have lost their neutrality as concepts. Their non-academic usage complicates their scholarly usage for historiographical purposes.

Presently, varied schemes of periodization of history are prevalent in historical studies, the most common being the tripartite scheme of ancient-medieval-modern periods. In European history, the ancient, medieval and modern eras have remained the dominant standard epochal frontiers since the eighteenth century. In the wake of colonial rule, this scheme was applied by the European historians and orientalists to the colonized regions in Africa and Asia, including India, for historiographical purposes.

In South Asia, at the turn of the twentieth century, the ancient-medieval-modern division of Indian history was adopted, which replaced the orientalists' triadic formulation of Hindu, Muslim, and British periods of Indian history. The term 'medieval India' has been equated with 'Muslim India', particularly in the works of orientalists. In fact, the so-called Hindu, Muslim and British periods

roughly correspond with the ancient, medieval and modern eras of Indian history. In contemporary South Asian historiographical traditions, the latter chronological constructs are now commonly used as convenient labels.

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Despite its common usage, there is no consensus among historians as to what constitutes medieval India, though the construction of ancient and modern India is also controversial. As for the ancient India, almost all historians begin it with an account of the pre-historic times followed by the Aryan invasion and the Vedic age, but the problem arises where to bring ancient India to a close and commence the medieval period of Indian history. The indicators or variables determining the transition from the ancient to the medieval in Indian context have been a subject of heated debate and controversy among historians, who have identified different chronological reference points and hence, varied chronological span for these periods.

According to some historians, ancient period continued till sixth / seventh century A.D.,⁴ whereas to some it continued till the close of the twelfth or the beginning of the thirteenth century.⁵ According to the former scheme, the chronological reference points seem to be the Arab invasion of Sindh and Gujarat in 711, whereas according to the latter mode of periodization, the establishment of Delhi Sultanate in northern India in the wake of Sultan Muhammad Ghori's death in 1206 seems to mark a watershed in the history of India. Being reinforced by textbooks, the latter scheme is more commonly accepted among the students of history. It is significant to bring out that historians who accept the first decade of thirteenth century as marking a dividing line between ancient and medieval period have not overlooked the historical importance of the Arab invasion of Sindh and Gujarat. It is for this reason that ancient India has been further sub-divided by some historians into two periods; first up to 711, and second from 712 to 1206.⁶

For most of the historians, medieval India commences from the establishment of Muslim rule on the Indian soil. The origin of this notion goes back to the medieval historians such as Mulla Abdul Qadir Badauni,⁷ the author of *Muntakhab al-Tawarikh*, to whom

the Muslim conquest of India served as a convenient dividing line for historical periodization.⁸ Again there is no consensus regarding the actual commencement of the Muslim rule in India. Badauni, for instance, begins his account with the conquest of north-western regions of India by Sultan Mahmud of Ghazna, which resulted in the establishment of Muslim political power in regions like the Punjab, Multan and parts of Sindh, whereas most of the contemporary historians have drawn the dividing line at the establishment of Delhi Sultanate in northern India in the first decade of the thirteenth century.

Harbans Mukhia opines that it was under the influence of the Arab historiographical traditions that most of the Muslim historians of medieval India had employed the '*jahiliya*-Islam dichotomy' for periodization of Indian history.⁹ It may be true for the historians of medieval India, Badauni being an example in point, for whom the conquest of north-western regions of India by Sultan Mahmud of Ghazna was primarily a religious phenomenon, as it facilitated the spread of Islam in the conquered regions. But it may be added here that the contemporary historians, who accept the establishment of Delhi Sultanate as a dividing line between ancient and medieval India, have referred to it as a historical phenomenon primarily of political significance, not of religious one.

For most of the historians, barring few exceptions, the medieval period in Indian history stretches from twelfth to the eighteenth century A.D. They have attempted to explore some variables, which distinguish the medieval era from the ancient period. Regarding this historiographical abstraction of period frontier of medieval India, J. S. Grewal observes that it is based on a few assumptions including the hegemony of Muslim political power in Indian politics, the presence of two distinct communities—the Hindus and the Muslims—in India, and interaction between the Hindu and Muslim societies in religious, social, cultural and political spheres. Moreover, the intellectual and institutional differences between the age to which these contemporary historians belonged, and the times about which they were writing also conditioned their conceptualization of medieval India.¹⁰

As for the first characteristic of medieval India, i.e. the hegemony of Muslim political power, it can be said to be true for the northern part of India. In its first phase, in addition to the Sultanate, there existed powerful rival kingdoms of Chola in south India, and Chalukya, Vijaynagar and Bahmani Kingdoms in Deccan. Excluding the Bahmani Kingdom, rest of them were ruled

by Hindu rajas. Moreover, there existed other kingdoms in Jaunpur, Malwa and Gujrat, but they were not as powerful as other kingdoms. However, the chronological label of medieval is not only used in relation to the Sultanate in north India alone, it is also used for the Cholas in south India and the Chalukyas in Deccan as well.

¹¹ As for the question of Muslim political hegemony, it was under Sultan Ala al-Din Khalji (r. 1296-1316) that the Muslim rule expanded to the south in Deccan, ¹² only to be overthrown after some time. Later, the Mughal Empire enjoyed considerable territorial stretch, and under Aurengzeb Alamgir the vast areas of Deccan were annexed, and the Muslim rule was established there.

In short, the hegemony of the Muslim political power in entire India was neither absolute and complete, nor consistent and unvarying throughout the medieval period. Regarding the second characteristic of medieval India, interaction between the Hindu and Muslim societies in various spheres did occur, but the phenomenon of the Hindu and Muslim communities existing side by side in India reflecting communal harmony and tolerance has also been a subject of controversy among historians.

Other characteristics of Indian 'medievalism', according to N. Ray, include emergence of regional dynasties, transition from a money economy to a natural economy, crystallization of regional characteristics in language and literature, proliferation of sects and sub-sects in religious sphere, and development of regional schools in art. ¹³ Criticizing Ray, Chattopadayaaya argues that Ray has tried to draw parallels from European history, and his explanation is based on the Indian feudalism model. ¹⁴ It should be borne in mind here that the medieval period of Indian history does not exactly correspond with the Middle Ages of Europe.

The debate on the transition from ancient period to medieval era has been closely linked to the issue of the rise of feudalism. Indian feudalism has found numerous advocates as well as critics among Indologists. ¹⁵ Feudalism, in fact, originated in Western Europe in post-classical age or medieval times, and for this reason, 'feudal' and 'medieval' are mistakenly used as interchangeable terms in non-academic speech and writing. The European experience of feudalism as an economic, social and political order was largely different from that of the Indian society. Usage of the term 'feudal' in non-European contexts has problematized the issue of periodization. Since the conceptualization of periodization in Indian history is largely Euro-centric, 'Indian feudalism' has mistakenly

been used as an explanatory model to describe the transition from the ancient times to the medieval ages.

Medieval era, like ancient period, has too been sub-divided into eras. According to Niharranjan Ray, for example, medieval India stretches from 7th to 18th centuries, with three sub-periods: (i) 7th to 12th centuries; (ii) 12th to the first quarter of the 16th centuries; and (iii) first quarter of the 16th to the close of the 18th centuries.¹⁶ Nonetheless, the most common sub-divisions are the early and later medieval periods. Again, there are differing views of historians regarding their chronological span. 1206-1526 was assigned the label of Early Medieval India by Indian History Congress.¹⁷ Early medieval is used for referring to the period stretching from the Arab invasion of Sindh and Gujarat in early eighth century to the decline of Delhi Sultanate by Professor Mohammad Habib.¹⁸ Chattopadayaaya, however, treats six hundred years stretching from the seventh and to the thirteenth centuries as early medieval India.¹⁹ Andre` Wink includes 7th to 11th centuries in Early Medieval India.²⁰ As for the later medieval era, those who treat pre-Sultanate times as early medieval period, refer to the Sultanate of Delhi as later medieval India, but others include Mughal Dynasty in later medieval period. For instance, A. B. Pandey starts later medieval era from the advent of Babur in India and the establishment of Mughal rule in India (1526), and covers till 18th century.²¹

The validity of using the very term 'medieval' has too been questioned by historians. Timothy Reuter, for instance, in his article 'Medieval: Another Tyrannous Construct?' argues that the term 'medieval' is too conventionalized to be of much use for the purpose of dialogue between medievalists of different geographical locales, since "it does not clearly define either a social formation or a stage of development."²² On the contrary, Chattopadayaaya, in his work on early medieval India, contends that "continuing with the term 'early medieval', rather than using terms such as 'late Hindu' or 'late classical', has an advantage. This term goes beyond the narrowly political and cultural dimensions of history, and further, it clearly projects continuities in the operation of major societal processes well into later phases of Indian history."²³ So one finds historians on both sides of the fence; some advocating for discarding the concept of medieval, and others suggesting its use on concessional grounds. Nonetheless, it clearly shows the misgivings regarding the use of the concept of 'medieval' in periodization.

As for the closing of medieval India in or around eighteenth century, it is evident that this century witnessed the rise and growth

of the British power in India. For historians, from eighteenth century onwards begins the modern era, which continues to date. For instance, Stanley Lane-Poole has brought medieval India to a close in eighteenth century, with the British victory and defeat of the Mughals in the Battle of Buxar in 1764 as a dividing line, indicating the fall of the Mughal Empire and the Hindu Revival in India.²⁴ In this case, Battle of Buxar has been taken as a chronological reference point, as it signified the first major step towards political domination and control by the British.

Last but not the least, with the passage of time, a thick layer of meaning has been deposited on the term 'medieval', making it much loaded and biased, and it has lost its neutrality as a concept. The term, far from its usage as a concept in historical studies, has come to denote derogatory connotations in everyday speech and language. References to the medieval psyche of Talibans, medieval mindset of feudal lords, and medieval Islam²⁵ are common examples in point. All this clearly shows the misgivings regarding the use of the concept of 'medieval' in periodization.

In conclusion, periodization of history is indispensable for historiographical purposes. Nevertheless, instead of being used as systematic concepts, the chronological labels of ancient, medieval and modern have become ordinary terms used in everyday speech and writing without much ado. The chronological construction of medieval India is not an exception. Having been jargonized, it has acquired specific connotation with the passage of time, which has divested it of its academic neutrality. Therefore, some historians advocate for altogether discarding the concept of medieval, while others suggest its use on concessional grounds. In a nut shell, alternative schemes of periodization of Indian history and alternative chronological constructs may usefully be explored.

Notes and References

1. M. Morony, *Iraq after the Muslim Conquest*, Princeton, 1984, pp. 5, 507, as cited in Aziz Al-Azmeh, "Muslim History: Reflections on Periodisation and Categorisation", *The Medieval History Journal*, Vol. 1, No. 2, (1998), p. 197.
2. Tarif Khalidi has analyzed what one might call the 'politics of periodization' in Arabic historiography. Tarif Khalidi, "Reflections on Periodization in Arabic Historiography", *The Medieval History Journal*, Vol. 1, No. 1, (1998), p. 107. For details see pp. 107-24.
3. William A. Green, "Periodization in European and World History", *Journal of World History*, Vol. 3, No. 1, 1992, p. 14.
4. For instance see R. C. Majumdar (et al.), *An Advanced History of India*, London, 1950.
5. For instance, according to the scheme of periodization followed in the Indian History Congress, ancient India came to a close in the first decade of 13th century, when Muslim rule was established in Northern India with Delhi as its capital. See *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, 13th session (Nagpur 1950) and 14th session (Jaipur 1951)
6. *Ibid.*
7. Mulla Abdul Qadir Badauni, *Muntakhab al-Tawarikh*, (ed.), Maulvi Ahmad Ali, Calcutta, 1869.
8. Here the opinion of Lane-Poole seems worth-citing, as he writes that the medieval period "begins when the immemorial systems, rule, and customs of Ancient India were invaded, subdued, and modified by a succession of foreign conquerors who imposed a new rule and introduced an exotic creed, strange languages and a foreign art. These conquerors were Muslims, and with the arrival of the Turks under Mahmud, the iconoclast, at the beginning of the eleventh century, India entered upon her Middle Age." Stanley Lane-Poole, *Mediaeval India Under Muhammedan Rule (A.D. 712-1764)*, Lahore, 1997, (first published 1903) p. iii, Preface.

9. Harbans Mukhia, "Medieval India': An Alien Conceptual Hegemony?", *The Medieval History Journal*, Vol. 1, No. 1, (1998), p. 97.
10. J. S. Grewal, *Medieval India: History and Historians*, Amritsar, 1975, p. 134.
11. Chattopadayaaya, *The Making of Early Medieval India*, p. 6.
12. The nature of political control in the south is worthy of mention here. The Muslim rule in Deccan was nominal, as the conquered areas were not annexed but only subjugated, and the rulers of small kingdoms were allowed to rule on the condition that they would pay annual tribute to the Sultan. Kishori Saran Lal, *History of the Khaljis A.D. 1290-1320*, Karachi, n.d., pp. 259-60.
13. Niharranjan Ray as cited in Chattopadayaaya, *The Making of Early Medieval India*, p. 9.
14. *Ibid.*
15. See D. D. Kosambi, *An Introduction to the Study of Indian History*, Bombay, 1956, chapters 9 and 10, Harbans Mukhia, "Was there Feudalism in India?", *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, Vol. 8, No. 3., April 1981, pp. 273-310, D. N. Jha, *Feudal Social Formation in Early India*, Delhi, 1987, Brendan O'Leary, *The Asiatic Mode of Production: Oriental Despotism, Historical Materialism and Indian History*, Oxford and Cambridge, (Mass.) 1989, B. D. Chattopadayaaya, "State and Economy in North India: 4th century to 12th century" in Romila Thapar (ed.), *Recent Perspectives of Early Indian History*, Bombay, 1995, pp. 309-46, and Ram Sharan Sharma, "How Feudal was Indian Feudalism?" in Hermann Kulke (ed.), *State in India 1000-1700*, Delhi, 1995, pp. 48-85.
16. N. R. Ray, "The Medieval Factor in Indian History", General President's Address, *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, 29th session, (Patiala 1967), pp. 1-29.
17. See *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, 13th session (Nagpur 1950) and 14th session (Jaipur 1951).

18. For instance, see K. A. Nizami (ed.), *Politics and Society during the Early Medieval Period: Collected Works of Professor Mohammad Habib*, Delhi, 1974.
19. Chattopadayaaya, *The Making of Early Medieval India*.
20. Andre` Wink, *Al-Hind: the Making of the Indo-Islamic World*, Volume I: Early Medieval India and the Expansion of Islam, 7th –11th Centuries, New Delhi: 1999.
21. A. B. Pandey, *Later Medieval India*, Allahabad, 1978.
22. Timothy Reuter, “Medieval: Another Tyrannous Construct?”, *The Medieval History Journal*, Vol. 1, No. 1, (1998), p. 25. For a detailed analysis see pp. 25-45.
23. Chattopadayaaya, *The Making of Early Medieval India*, p. 36.
24. Lane-Poole, *Mediaeval India Under Muhammedan Rule*.
25. Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992, see the title of Chap. 6, p. 102.