

Revision Notes Class 8

Social Science - History

Chapter 1 - How, When and Where

The Place of Dates in History

As discussed above, history tells us about how the world looked in the past and how it looks now. So, there is a comparison between the past and the present. As soon as we establish any kind of relationship between 'now' and 'then,' we have to skip the timelines and periods out of the picture. For example, today you are 15 years old but how do you know that? It is because you know the history of your birth. It is due to your knowledge that 15 years ago you took birth so you know you are 15 years old today.

Precise Date vs A Period of Time

If you pick up any history book, you will find two ways of talking about a time in history. First, you will see the precise dates on which certain incidents happened. Then there are the timelines during which something began to happen. Ask your mother exactly when you started speaking. Your mother will obviously say that it was a long process. You did not just start speaking fluently one fine morning. You learnt one word, then two, three and so on. Similarly, in Europe, industrialisation did not happen at once. It was a process that spanned over years. So, we say that the first industrial revolution started from the 18th century and we have no exact date.

Traditional history uses exact dates. Traditional historical discourse takes big events like the coronation of a king, start or end of a war, birth of somebody famous etc. as the standard against which the events of these periods are told. Because a decisive battle was fought between the Indian King Hemu and the Mughal forces.

The Demerits of the Date-Based History

Traditional date-based history has a severe flaw that it takes the major incidents like wars, coronation of a king etc. as the focal points and then talks about the incidents surrounding these focal points. But history is not made up of these big incidents alone. It is made up of the actions of ordinary people like you and us. Traditional history has no place for these ordinary laymen. Neither does this kind of history show things in different perspectives.

For example, when history talks about the Second Battle of Panipat, it tells the story of how the Mughal forces won Delhi after defeating Hemu. But it does not

tell us a thing about how he had driven the Mughals out of Delhi to Lahore and how he had captured the entire Gangetic Plains in less than a year. He also ruled Delhi and issued coins in his name, as Hemchandra Vikramaditya.

Who Gets to Decide Which Dates Are Important?

History is filled with dates and years. It is not feasible to talk about each one of them. So, who decides which year is important and which year isn't? If a country is ruled by foreigners, they will try to tell its history from their point of view. It is only when the countrymen take the responsibility of telling their own history that we get the real picture.

The history book talks about how the history of India written from a British perspective tends to give importance to the years that mark the rule of various governor-general of British India. All the other dates were considered secondary. Let us take another example. In the higher classes, you will read about the Independence of America - how it fought against the British. But did you know that the Americans were mostly the British and European settlers? Before these settlers came to America, it was inhabited by the Native Americans.

A Vox article rightly says that if the foreign settlers had not forcibly marginalised the Native Americans - depriving them of their own land, it is the Native Americans who would have built the nation-state that we call America today. The history of North America has ignored the existence of Native Americans.

Which Periods Are Important?

As we said, we cannot use dates everywhere. So, we use periods. Here too, we have the same problem of deciding what historical incidents we should use to mark the start and end of a particular period.

James Mill, a historian who supported the British rule in India, divided the Indian history into Hindu, Muslim and British periods. The assumption was, during the reign of the Hindu and Muslim rulers, India was in the dark ages. It is the British rulers who pulled India out of the darkness. The ancient Sanskrit language is deeply intertwined with mathematics.

Then there is the question, why should we categorise periods based on religions. There are many aspects of history apart from the religious angles.

To banish this bias, modern historians started dividing Indian history into ancient, medieval and modern. But the Indian civilisation did not advance chronologically. It was during the so-called 'ancient' times that the Indians were at the prime of socio-political growth.

Only when the British came in the so-called modern age that India plunged into darkness. So, this chronological way of periodicity is wrong.

The Colonial Period

Because India plunged into darkness during British rule, modern historians refuse to term that age as the modern age. The British came to India and sucked the very life force of the country reducing it to a poor, socially divided nation.

During their 190 years of rule, they replaced the Indian customs, culture, language and even the thought process with their own versions. To this date, we shake hands when we greet people.

When a country subjects another country to forceful rule leading to an annihilation of the local culture, traditions, language, customs, and the original thought process - we call that colonialism. That is exactly what happened when the British came to India.

Where Do Historians Get the Info?

Historical incidents of the last 250 years had the fortune of being written down. So, what are the sources of this historical info?

Official Documents

The British were of the opinion that every instruction, plan, execution of the plan, research etc should be written down so that these things could be studied and analysed in the future.

So, every government department in the British Raj - like the courts or the village Tahsildar's office made it a point to create documents stating their works and plans.

Surveys

The surveys of the topography, number of people in a region, density of forests, number of people belonging to a particular religion or gender etc produced historically significant records.

Then there were archaeological, Zoological or Botanical surveys. However, official documents were official. These documents spoke the language of the government. The lives of ordinary people, tribal and marginalised, were never in the focus.

Frequently Asked Questions and Answers

1. Can we get a 360-degree view of history from the official records?

Ans: Official documents were mainly written by the British officials or the people who worked for the British. So, they hid many dark things that the British did. To give you an example - the official records of the British said that only 379 people died in the Jallianwala Bagh Massacre. But actually, the number was as high as 1000.

Again, during the rule of Hitler, the books and properties of the Jews were destroyed. But still, we have the personal accounts of the Jews like the diary of Anne Frank from where we get the dark details of that time.

2. What is the flaw in Mill's way of periodisation of Indian history?

Ans: Based on this assumption, he divided the Indian history into - Hindu, Muslim and British. This kind of periodisation is wrong because:

- It groups together the entire history of India based on religion and politics. It is not that during the Hindu rule, Muslims were not living in India and vice versa.
- This kind of periodisation ignores cultural or scientific advancements.
- It is during the Hindu rule that scientists like Aryabhata or Sushruta existed.

3. How are newspaper reports different from the official records?

Ans: Official records spoke favourably of the government. But the newspaper reports presented the truth. So much was the power of newspapers that the British had to come up with the Vernacular Press Act.

4. Can we use paintings made by the British as a historical source?

Ans: No, we can't. Most of the paintings commissioned by the British psychologically tried to hammer in the notion that the British Raj was good and the Indians needed it. The picture drawn by James Runnel that we have in our history book shows that the Indians wilfully submit the Indian Shastras to Britannia. This painting is actually an example of cultural colonialism. So, we must take the paintings drawn during British rule with a grain of salt.

5. Is history all about dates?

Ans: History is not about dates. Let's start the discussion from an evolutionary point of view. Suppose you went to a village. While you were roaming around, you saw a tiger sufficiently far from you. What would be your natural reaction? You would quickly take shelter and hide from the view of the tiger. Why would you do that? Because you know tigers attack humans.

Now, think, how did this knowledge come to you? You have seen on TV, read in books about this basic characteristic of tigers. In the past, men were attacked by the tigers. So, this knowledge about the past improves your life in the present.

Can you now see, History is not just about memorising dates? We learn from history. Avner Seagal rightly says that history shows the students the world as it was, the world as it is. Most importantly, History makes us wonder how the world should be.

As soon as we establish a relationship between the past and the present, we usher in the concepts of 'yesterday', 'today' and 'tomorrow'. These concepts are intrinsically connected with dates and years. So, history has to include dates.