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Introduction

History and the Politics of Periodization

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In concluding the second volume of *The History of Bengal*, the doyen of Indian historians, Sir Jadunath Sarkar, lyrically wrote about the demise of the independent Nawabi of Bengal and the emergence of Company rule. As the final episode of Mughal rule in the province, Nawabi rule had brought only misery all around, he argued. As the ruling class indulged in debauchery, factionalism, sadism, and the pursuit of self-interest, the common people had been plunged into 'deepest poverty, ignorance and moral degradation'.[1] Articulating textbook pro-British sentiments, he went on to say that the victory of the English East India Company had released 'the rational progressive spirit of Europe' upon this 'hopelessly decadent society'.[2] Through the gradual establishment of British civil administration, military power, economic structures, and general stabilization of law and order, the region had begun to flourish. This had ushered in an era of rejuvenation of every sphere of social, cultural, and political life. Sarkar argued:

> It was truly a Renaissance, wider, deeper, and more revolutionary than that of Europe after the fall of Constantinople ... under the impact of the British civilization it [Bengal] became a pathfinder and a light-bringer to the rest of India.... In this new Bengal originated every good and great thing of the modern world that passed on to the other provinces of India.[3]

Published in 1948, these lines echoed what another historian Susobhan Sarkar had put down just two years back in a political pamphlet for leftist activists operating in Bengal against the backdrop of the impending partition of India. Here he had outlined his thesis about the 'Bengal Renaissance' – a term he had used to designate what he saw as a religious, intellectual, cultural, and political reawakening in nineteenth-century Bengal. For him, it had been produced by the 'impact of British rule, bourgeois economy and modern western culture' and had heralded the advent of modernity in and the beginning of modernization of India.[4] What Susobhan Sarkar wrote for a non-academic readership, Jadunath Sarkar

articulated for an academic one. Together, their arguments represent some of the early interpretations of a set of historical processes that had engulfed Bengal for most of the nineteenth century. These arguments eventually became something of a canon as the idea of this Renaissance as the harbinger of Indian modernity grew roots in academic circles and broader society alike, especially in the decades immediately following India's independence.

Since the 1970s, however, this idea of the Bengal Renaissance came to be fiercely critiqued, mainly by Marxist historians. For instance, Sumit Sarkar criticized its strong elitist orientation. He argued that as a part of the Hindu social elite seeking in British colonial government its deliverance from the ostensible tyranny of Muslim rule, they had facilitated the transformation of South Asia's pre-capitalist society towards a weak and distorted version of colonial, bourgeois modernity in course of the nineteenth century. Patronized by this social group, the scope of the so-called Bengal Renaissance had remained limited to a small elite Hindu social circle and a colonial intellectual framework, and it had failed to make any enduring contribution towards genuine social transformation.[5]

By the beginning of the 1990s, scholars informed by postcolonial theory started analysing the nature of colonial power and the meanings of nationalism. In turn, this led to the problematization of the very idea of the modernity that the Bengal Renaissance was supposed to have inaugurated. Moving away from the Enlightenment optimism about modernity, alternate perspectives about the rise of modernity in South Asia began to emerge around this time. Partha Chatterjee's work from these years, for example, focuses on how the emergent Indian elite of the early nineteenth century started fashioning a new modern self for the nation, one that was modern and non-Western at the same time. They did this by bifurcating the sociocultural world into two realms – the 'material' and the 'spiritual'. While the former related to the public domain where Indian political, military, and economic institutions had already yielded to Western superiority, the latter comprised a private sanctum where traditional forms of Indian culture and spirituality thrived in isolation from Western influence.[6] Chatterjee developed these ideas further subsequently to argue against the idea of there being one universal modernity; instead, he suggested that it is more historically accurate to think in terms of multiple modernities, themselves produced by the geographical, political, and cultural specificities of different societies.[7]

These new histories of colonial India problematized the earlier notion of modernity as a progressive, beneficial, civilizational advancement that had arrived in South Asia through British colonialism. As a result, the haloed idea of the Bengal Renaissance heralding a new age of rationality and modernization also

ended up being sharply critiqued. Yet what went unchallenged in these revisionist histories of modernity in the Indian subcontinent is the temporal association of the emergence of modernity in this part of the world with the onset of British colonialism – something that itself is an inheritance of the colonial discourse. This association was finally broken in the late 1990s with the introduction of the category of early modernity, not by historians of colonial South Asia, but by those researching an earlier period.

In two articles published separately in 1997, John Richards and Sanjay Subrahmanyam redefined the idea of South Asian modernity by introducing a new category – early modern – to designate roughly the sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries. Richards argued that in keeping with the tendencies visible in other parts of the world, the Indian subcontinent too experienced an increase in the pace and magnitude of historical change during this period. The category of the early modern, he argued, represents and captures the materiality of the speedy and colossal changes in the way humans organized themselves and interacted with other humans and the natural world.[8] Subrahmanyam, on the other hand, focused more on ideological, religious, and cultural processes that manifested across the world during this period. South Asia, he argued, was an integral part of these global processes.[9] We will have an opportunity to discuss these ideas in greater detail soon.

For several years following these interventions, historians of South Asia – especially those employed in universities within the subcontinent – remained sceptical about the category of early modernity. The sixteenth through eighteenth centuries, after all, had long been considered an integral part – the pinnacle even – of the South Asian medieval. However, the last decade has seen an explosion of research that deploys this category to study this segment of South Asian history. In part, this has been a response to global historical scholarship, where the category of the early modern has become firmly established in course of the last three decades and has opened entirely new analytical pathways. It also has to do with the transformation of our understanding of the idea of modernity itself in the last few decades as well as when and how exactly it emerged in South Asia and, indeed, the whole world. Finally, it also emanates from a postcolonial critique of the meanings of modernity, colonialism, and the discipline of history, in particular the politics of periodization.

This recent intellectual ferment makes this an opportune moment to pause and reflect on the meanings and implication of the category of early modernity. Many of the works that have used it in studying South Asian history have done so merely as a convenient shorthand to refer to a particular time period; few have gone into teasing out the theoretical aspects of the nature of the early modern

condition itself. What did early modernity mean and entail exactly? What was the nature of the historical processes that set this period of South Asian history apart from the times before or after so as to justify the use of this new category? If modernity emerged in South Asia in the sixteenth century as early modernity, then how was this modernity different from what was ushered in by colonial rule in the nineteenth century? The present volume is one of the first collaborative ventures to directly address these theoretical questions. It brings together 10 chapters that investigate various spheres of the South Asian historical experience roughly between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries. The themes range from religion to law, warfare to economy, environment to violence, and philosophy to politics. The chapters are bound together by their common quest to define the meanings of early modernity in the individual fields they investigate.

In this introduction, we chart out the wider historiographical context of this intervention and set a new intellectual agenda for South Asian historiography, one that contributes to the process of decolonizing historical periodization and rewriting the history of this part of the world. Since the sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries have traditionally formed a part of the South Asian medieval, exploring the meanings of early modernity must begin by unpacking the category of the medieval itself and by analysing what all it means in this historical context. This is what the first three sections are dedicated to. The first explores the origins of the category in European historical thinking, the second studies its myriad uses in other parts of the world, and the third focuses on the career of the category in South Asian historiography. Next, we turn to the question of modernity in the fourth section, since this is an issue the category of early modernity directly connects with. In the fifth and sixth sections, we shift our focus to the category of early modernity, explore in some detail its various meanings in different contexts, and address some of the scepticisms surrounding it. The final section lays down the structure of the volume, introduces the 10 chapters, and outlines the broader intellectual agenda. Overall, this introduction is a journey to understand the idea of early modernity in relation to questions of historical periodization and the changing politics of history-writing.

European Origins of the Medieval

In the introduction to a special issue of the *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, John Dagenais and Margaret Greer explore the relation between the rise of the category of the Middle Ages and the development of western European modernity.[10] Focusing on the writings of Francesco Petrarca (1304–1374), the authors argue that the category of the medieval emerged in the fourteenth century

as a by-product of the rise of a new modern consciousness. They argue that it was Petrarca who introduced the basics of the idea of the medieval, which were expounded by other scholars subsequently – a dark and depressed period that occupied a linear stretch of time between Roman Antiquity and his own times.[11] This can be seen as the beginning of the process of 'temporalization (Verzeitlichung) of history' that Reinhart Koselleck argues comprised a key intellectual process that heralded modernity.[12] It was at this moment of the emergence of Humanism in western Europe in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries that the tripartite division of European history was conceptualized for the first time.[13] Between the glorious Classical Age and a so-called modern reawakening, a thousand years of 'darkness', 'squalor', 'barbarism', and 'primitiveness' were identified.[14] Incidentally – as Dagenais and Greer point out – these adjectives were similar to those used to characterize the indigenes of the various lands western European armies started making forays into since the late fifteenth century.[15] This is revealing of how the colonized other was perceived as being similar to people living in a different temporality – the non-modern or pre-modern – and were hence relegated by the white man to the status of the primitive. At the same time, the association of the category of the medieval with all similar sorts of negative attributes meant that for western Europe, this time period gradually emerged as what Carol Symes calls a 'penal colony', where all things that did not fit within the mainstream idea of the emergent modern would be relegated.[16] The medieval thus became a temporal and cultural other that contained everything that new-age Europeans found repugnant, regressive, and backward – 'systemic persecution, witch-hunts, irrationality, torture, "radical" Islam'.[17] The subsequent colonization of territory across the world by Europe – a process that unfolded rapidly since the early sixteenth century – was accompanied by this simultaneous colonization of the past.[18]

In the fifteenth century, various humanist scholars contributed to this idea of a dark Middle Age. Leonardo Bruni (1370–1444) and Flavio Biondo (1392–1463), for instance, portrayed it as a dark era that followed the demise of the Western Roman Empire at the hands of barbarian invasions.[19] However, as Timothy Reuter points out, the idea of the medieval was initially more a part of passing cultural and aesthetic judgement on the preceding centuries than a device of periodization of history. It was in course of the sixteenth through eighteenth centuries that this idea of a dark age, separating a glorious ancient past and a revived modern era, gradually crystallized into a schema of periodization that was increasingly favoured in the writing of academic history, which itself gradually emerged as a distinct intellectual field during this period. The key figure there was the German scholar Christoph Cellarius (1638–1707), who articulated this schema in his *Historia Medii Aevi*

in 1688.[20] Drawing upon several already existing ideas, Cellarius conceptualized history in terms of an ancient (*historia antiqua*) that stretched up to the fourth century, a modern (*historia nova*) that commenced at the fall of Constantinople in 1453, and a medieval (*historia mediii aevi*) that separated the two.[21] According to Koselleck, it was around this time, or shortly afterwards, that a second decisive intellectual shift occurred in conceptualizing historical time. He argues that by this juncture (late seventeenth century), scholars had started gaining some distance and perspective on the first moment of rupture in thinking about historical time – symbolized by the reflections of Petrarca in the fourteenth century on the novelty of his own times and the backwardness of the medieval. The whole process between these two historical moments comprised what Koselleck calls the 'temporalization of history'.[22] 'Since then,' he writes, 'one has lived in Modernity and been conscious of so doing.'[23]

Over the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, this tripartite schema of periodization emerged as the dominant one in historical thinking in much of western Europe.[24] Scholars who played key roles in the process include Edward Gibbon (1737–1794) in the eighteenth century and Jacob Burckhardt (1818–1897), Jules Michelet (1798–1874), and Lord Acton (1834–1902) in the nineteenth.[25] However, something else of enormous significance happened around this time. In his *Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, Burckhardt propounded the thesis of the Renaissance as a revolutionary cultural movement that first unfolded in Italy in the fifteenth century and then spread northward from there to other parts of western Europe. Within such a framework, the historical processes designated as the Renaissance were recognized to bring about a decisive break between the medieval and the modern.[26] In effect, this argument by Burckhardt signified the arrival of the modern man of the nineteenth century – well after the era of Koselleck's 'temporalization' – who looked back at the time of Petrarca and interpreted that now-distant moment of early humanism as the point of commencement of his own time. This idea of the Renaissance was the final step in the conceptualization of the medieval in the context of the history of western Europe.

Writing the Medieval outside Europe

As modern academic history-writing was coming of its own from older discourses about the past in western Europe during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, European nation-states were also founding new colonies across the world. It was through the violent process of European colonization that the discipline of history as well as the notion of the medieval reached most non-European parts of the world. Along with territory, western European civilization thus also came to colonize the

pasts of these regions and their peoples. Since then, the dissemination of the idea of the medieval has produced curious results in different places. In China, for instance, the concept failed to take roots. Timothy Brook and T. H. Barrett argue that the idea of the medieval as a dark intermediate phase of the past has simply not worked in case of Chinese history.[27]

In contrast, the tripartite division of history as well as the equivalence of the medieval with a dark age struck roots quickly in Japan, although the country was never colonized by Europeans. Yet, as Thomas Keirstead points out, the imagery of the gloom of the medieval being followed by the light of modern civilization was used by Japanese historians of the early twentieth century in the service of Japanese nationalism. Faced by the racial disdain of the Europeans, Japanese nationalist historians used history-writing as a means of proclaiming their national glory and a status equal to that of the Europeans.[28] In the process, they discovered multiple parallels between aspects of the European and Japanese medievals, including foreign invasions, an ostensible loss of masculinity of a society, and the subsequent emergence of a class of warriors. Not unlike Europe, in Japan too, the medieval emerged as the 'penal colony' Symes talks about; everything that did not fit the nationalist narrative of the rise of a modern Japanese nation was dumped there. By discursively producing a Japanese medieval that neatly matched the European medieval, these histories claimed that if Europe could proceed from its dark Middle Ages to the dawn of modernity and progress, then so could Japan.[29]

Iran presents yet another interesting case. Here, some chroniclers and historians appropriated the idea of the 'medieval' to a limited degree to argue a case for a pre-Islamic 'golden age' in Iran, one that was brought to a close by Arab Muslim conquest in the seventh century. The middling period in such a formulation occupied the position between the fall of the Sassanid dynasty to the Arab armies in the seventh century on the one hand and the recent times on the other. Although not exactly a dark age, this intermediate phase has been sometimes portrayed as one where the glorious pre-Islamic ancient civilization of Iran was subverted to the will of the barbaric Arabs. The meanings associated with this phase once again finds remarkable similarity with the European idea of the medieval – foreign invasions and domination, suppression of indigenous culture and values, and the loss of a golden era. In recent times, such an interpretation of Iranian history has fuelled certain nationalist sentiments and has sometimes inspired a push towards a de-Arabization of the Iranian language and culture. Yet, since it was the Arab conquerors who brought Islam to Iran and since the country continues to be an Islamic republic at present, it finds it impossible to completely disavow of its Islamic past or vilify the post-Sassanid period as an unqualified dark age. The result,

as Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi argues, is a cultural and historical schizophrenia in thinking about the so-called medieval past of Iran.[30]

In the case of South Asia, the idea of the medieval has been a loaded and contested one. The first academic histories of the subcontinent were written by Orientalists, British scholars, and colonial officials since the early nineteenth century. Their work reflected a prejudice against the pre-colonial period. Here, periodization remained garbed in a religious-civilizational framework, which divided the historical time of South Asia between a Hindu classical antiquity and a Mohammedan dark age that preceded the British period – divided by civilizational boundaries that are statist, essentialist, and rigid in nature. The tripartite division time was expounded first by the Scottish historian James Mill (1773–1836) in his *The History of British India* (1817). He interpreted the South Asian past as per the interests of British imperialism. The glorious golden age of South Asian antiquity, he maintained, had been interrupted by Muslim invasions. Mill defined the pre-colonial period of the Indian sub-continent not simply in terms of the religion of the ruling dynasties but also in terms of a new idiom for imperial control – oriental despotism. Implicit in this was a denial of any sense of history, rationality, and modernity for South Asia. For him, it was only the civilizing mission of the British that could liberate and modernize the Indian subcontinent.[31] Thus, in the early nineteenth century itself, the so-called Mohammedan period of the South Asian past – middling as it was between the so-called Hindu and British periods – was conceptualized as a dark age. It was imbued with the familiar tropes – foreign invasions, subjugation of indigenous society, and cultural, intellectual, and moral decay – that have characterized the medieval not only in Europe but also in several other parts of the world. In the garb of the Mohammedan period, the creation of the idea of a dark medieval period in South Asian history prepared the perfect stage for justifying British imperialism and for projecting colonial rule as the harbinger of modernity.

Politics of the Medieval in Twentieth-Century South Asia

Following its uses within the colonialist-imperialist intellectual framework of the nineteenth century, the category of the medieval yielded itself to new historiographical and political approaches in the twentieth. This section explores three of them.

Around the beginning of the twentieth century, British historians like Stanley Lane-Poole started using the terms 'ancient', 'medieval', and 'modern' to revise the nomenclature of the nineteenth-century tripartite schema of periodization as Hindu, Mohammedan, and British, respectively. This was one more step in

using the European prism of history-writing to study the South Asian past. By the early twentieth century, the first generation of professional Indian historians embraced this new terminology of periodization.[32] While politically they moved away from the early British historians, these Indian historians – despite their best intentions – were not able to undo the colonization of the South Asian past that had started a century back. Even as they gradually moved away from the Hindu–Mohammedan–British nomenclature in favour of the ostensibly more secular ancient–medieval–modern format, the original cultural and political baggage associated with each of three temporal categories remained.

To be fair, there was hardly any escape in sight. By this time, the modern western European discourse of History had delegitimized all the other forms of historical traditions and had established itself as the sole legitimate, scientific discourse about the past. As practitioners of the discipline, Indian nationalist historians bought into this colonial discourse and operated within it. The first generations of nationalist historians dedicated their lives to revising the racist colonial interpretation of South Asia's past. In their writings, the medieval emerged as a site for a liberal nationalist struggle to reclaim South Asia's past from colonial hegemony. For the nationalists, the medieval was not a time when Muslim rule forced Hindu civilization into a dark age, but rather one where enlightened Muslim rulers like Akbar brought various communities together to forge something like a united nation. By locating the birth of the nation in the pre-colonial period, the nationalists thus denied their colonial masters the agency they claimed in creating a nation out of the South Asians through their administrative measures and technological innovations.

A second major shift in the understanding of the South Asian medieval unfolded over the 1950s through the 1970s. Under the influence of the Marxian framework of analysis, the medieval emerged as a site of heated scholarly debates over how well it fit the scheme of Karl Marx's historical materialism. The thrust of historical inquiries in these debates remained squarely on the nature of political economy. One major topic of the heated arguments was whether or not medieval South Asia had experienced feudalism.[33] The other main intervention was to go beyond the debates about the regressive or progressive nature of Muslim rule and understand the dynamics of medieval South Asia in terms of the surplus-extraction by agrarian-bureaucratic states, the exploitation of the peasantry by a revenue-hungry parasitical class of warrior-aristocrats, and the class struggle – in the form of insurgencies – waged by peasants against their politico-economic oppressors.[34] Through their writings, Marxist historians like Irfan Habib, R. S. Sharma, and Harbans Mukhia challenged the cultural stereotype of an unchanging, static pre-colonial South Asian society subservient to autocratic

despots – ideas that were as much enshrined in colonial ideologies of power as Marx's idea of the Asiatic mode of production and Karl Wittfogel's notion of oriental despotism. Collectively, the social and economic histories produced by these Marxist scholars and some of their non-Marxist colleagues changed many of the basic assumptions about the South Asian medieval and recast the period by introducing entirely new questions and categories of historical analysis.

Since the 1980s, a third interpretation of the medieval increasingly emerged in India's public domain, largely outside the realm of professional history-writing. The politically ascendant Hindu right in India went back to the colonial discourse of the association of the medieval with the notion of Muslim rulers oppressing the Hindu majority of the Indian nation. Resurrecting colonial discursive tropes, this political rhetoric focused on identifying Muslims – and to a lesser degree the British – as foreign invaders of the subcontinent. Similar to the Iranian idea of reviving the lost pre-Islamic golden age by a national movement and de-Arabization of Iranian culture, the political right in India started advocating a national awakening and empowerment of the Hindus as a means for restoring the ancient golden era and ending the dark times they believe to have set in with the so-called Muslim invasions during the medieval period.[35]

Emanating from radically different political positions, these three major approaches to the South Asian past have revised the colonial imagination of the Mohammedan or medieval period in many ways. Yet, at the end of the day, there is an element of commonality among all these positions towards the idea of the medieval – they all find the category useful in pursuing their presentist goals. For the liberal-nationalists, the medieval signifies the site where the modern harmonious nation of Hindus and Muslims – something they want to see in the present India – was forged through the benevolent, tolerant, and inclusive reign of Muslim sovereigns like Akbar. Marxist historians put the South Asian medieval to the litmus test of historical materialism at a juncture of the twentieth century when leftist politicians and intellectuals were debating the nature of the dominant mode of production of postcolonial India and the prospects of transforming its society and economy through political action. Finally, for the Hindu right, the medieval conjures an image of a dark age of oppression of the Hindus by tyrannical Muslim rulers. While these three positions represent radically different political orientations and hence offer very different interpretations of the medieval, the fact that they all use the category validates and perpetuates the colonization of the Indian past. At the end of the day, all these different versions of the South Asian medieval are little more than what Partha Chatterjee calls 'derivative discourse', the terms of which were set by the colonial order of knowledge.[36]