

Historical Time

History Module
Lecture 2
Introduction to the Human Sciences
Spring 2026

Outline of Lecture

- What Time Period Does History Inhabit?
- What Are Historical Periods?
- Common Markers of Historical Time.
- How Do We Measure Flow of Time?

Past is (not) History

- **Past:** Refers to Time which has elapsed
 - Everything that has happened prior to the present is Past
 - Amorphous; Hold-All Category
- **History:** Refers to a Story/Narrative About Something in the Past
 - Beginning and End
 - Common Thread or Anchor to the Narrative: “History of...”
- Past Exists, History is Created by Humans from the Past

Time Period of History

- History is the Story of Human Society
- Classical Definition: Story of “Civilisation”
 - Settled Life
 - Writing/Script
 - Cities and States
- Pre-History: Society Before Civilisation
 - Mobile Life
 - Oral Knowledge
 - Rudimentary Arts and Creations
- Broadened Definition of History
 - Can we really make a distinction between these two?

Periods of History

- Historians always divide their Narrative into Periods
 - Pre-History
 - Ancient
 - Medieval
 - Modern
- Based on conception of time as an arrow, and not a cycle, or spiral.
- Christian Periodisation; But Secularised

Common Markers of Historical Time

- B.C. and A.D.
 - Before Christ, Anno Domini
 - 252 B.C. A.D. 252
- Secularised to BCE and CE
 - Before Common Era, Common Era
 - 252 BCE 252 CE
- Circa c.
 - Approximate date (c. 250 CE)
 - In B.C. / BCE years count down
 - In A.D. / CE years count upwards
- Decade = 10 years; Century = 100 years; Millennium = 1,000 years

Historical Eras and Ages

- Pre-Historic Period
 - Stone Age
 - Paleolithic (from c. 2,500,000 BCE to c. 3,000 BCE)
 - Mesolithic (from c. 25,000 BCE to c. 2,000 BCE)
 - Neolithic (from c. 10,000 BCE to c. 500 BCE)
- Historic Period
 - Chalcolithic Age
 - From c. 3,500 BCE to c. 1,000 BCE: Indus Valley Civilisation and beyond
 - Bronze Age
 - From c. 3,000 BCE to c. 800 BCE: Indus Valley and Early Vedic
 - Iron Age
 - From c. 1,800 BCE to c. 1000 CE: Late Vedic Age Period / First Empires

Historical Eras and Ages

- **Ancient Period**

- Indus Valley Civilisation; Vedic (Early and Late) Age; Mahavira and Buddha; Mauryan Empire; Saka and Hun Empires; Kushan Empire; Gupta Empire; Harshvardhan...
- Sangam Period; Cholas, Chera, Pandyas; Satvahanas; Chalukyas...

- **Medieval Period**

- Another Long List with regional variations

- **Modern Period**

- 1757: Coming of the British (Battle of Plassey)
- Mughals, Marathas, Mysore, Hyderabad.... All continued

What Decides an Historical Era

- Technology
- Social Organisation
- Strength and Spread of Empire / State
- Most of these periods broken into “Early” “Middle” “Late”
- Different Regions, sub-regions have varying periods / eras

Problems With Historical Periods

- Universal Categories
 - Ancient – Medieval – Modern
- But History of something specific, something local
 - History is of a Place, Person, Dynasty, Event, Process....
- Problems of Fit
 - “Ancient” of China, India, Rome, France, Britain may not be aligned
 - What about History of USA? Or Pakistan?
- After “Modern” What?!
 - Modern is often seen as a universal period globally

Historical Time

- Historical Time is confusing
 - Beginning and end of Indus Valley Civilisation = Two Millennia
 - Emperor Ashoka is closer to us than the establishment of Harappa / Mohenjodara cities
 - Cleopatra, Queen of Egypt is closer to us than the Pharaohs who made the Pyramids
 - Satvahana Empire lasted from c. 200 BCE to c. 300 CE = 500 years
 - 500 years before today there was no Mughal Empire in India
- Large chunks of time are difficult to imagine
 - Spend time consciously thinking of historical time and periods
- Chronology is the Spine of the Historical Narrative
 - Chronology is placing events in their order of occurrence in time
 - Assumes an arrow of time