

Historiography during Renaissance and Scientific Revolution in Europe:

In the mid-sixteenth century, Renaissance ushered a new chapter in European history. It became the precursor of many other intellectual movements in Europe. The ideas generated in the wake of Renaissance greatly influenced the understanding of history and historiography in many countries of Europe.

5.1 Impact of Renaissance on European Historiography in European history

The movement called Renaissance (literally meaning revival), which started from the mid-sixteenth century, marked the closure of medieval period and the beginning of modern period. Renaissance was characterized by the revival of classical Greek traditions and knowledge of ancient times. It tremendously influenced the historiographical tradition in Europe. Prior to Renaissance, the medieval European historiography was largely a contribution of the Christian priests, whose main frame of reference was theology and the concept of God. Their approach to history was Theo-centric. None the less, Renaissance marked the beginning of modern historiographical tradition in Europe. Like the ancient Greek historians, human beings once again became the focus of human thought, and the historiographical approach

once again became anthropo-centric. Moreover, the role of the divine factors in human history became insignificant for the Renaissance historians.

One of the prominent Renaissance figures of the early sixteenth century was Niccolo Machiavelli (b. 1469-d. 1527), an Italian (Florentine) politician, historian and political philosopher. His famous political treatise titled *The Prince* is chiefly remembered for its political realism: He also authored many other books including a book on the history of the city-state of Florence, and the *Discourses on Livy* about the early history of Rome. His works reflect his approach, which was marked by anthropo-centrism, wherein the role of human emotions, passions and desires, particularly lust for power, were highlighted. Machiavelli did not assign any role to God or 'divine providence' in history. He also believed that people could learn from history and draw lessons, guidelines, and principles from it, which could be applied for the benefit of humanity.

5.2 Beginning of Critical History in Europe

The sixteenth century witnessed the beginning of critical and analytical history, when historians started critically analyzing the prevalent misconceptions and misconstructions. Polydore Virgil (b. 1470-d. 1555), an Italian historian, wrote the history of the early Tudor dynasty that ruled England from 1485 to 1603. His work *The History of England* questioned the

myth of the foundation of Britain by the famous legendary figure, Brutus of Troy, the eponymous first king of Britain, from whom the country derived its name as well. In this way, Virgil laid the foundation of a critical history of England.

Jean Bodin (b. 1530-d. 1596) was a French politician, historian and political philosopher of the mid-sixteenth century, whose work *Method for the Easy Understanding of History* contributed to historiography by challenging many prevalent misconceptions-regarding periodization (the notion of dividing history into periods or eras) of the world history.

5.3 Impact of Scientific Revolution on European Historical Thinking

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Scientific Revolution took place in Europe, which was characterized by tremendous development in natural Sciences, particularly chemistry, biology, physics and astronomy, which provided the base for many modern sciences. In this age, a number of scientific discoveries were made, which challenged many of the medieval beliefs and doctrines. The scientific research and knowledge affected historical thinking in both negative and positive manners.

For instance, in seventeenth century, Francis Bacon (b. 1561-d. 1626), an English philosopher, historian, statesman and scientist, who composed *The*

History of the Reign of King Henry VII, popularized the scientific method (named after him as the Baconian Method). Though he considered history to be the foundation of all knowledge, he confined the scope of history by asserting that it was the realm of memory. In other words, he argued that historians could merely rely on their memory for history-writing. By doing so, he denied that history could be reconstructed by other means such as archaeological exploration. William Camden (b. 1551-d. 1623), an English historian, contributed to historical studies and archaeology. His famous work titled *Britannia*, the first book of its kind on the topographical geographical landscape) and historical survey of Great Britain and Ireland, demonstrated how history could be reconstructed with the help of the surviving data of the past in the form of ancient books and artifacts. He also composed *Annales* on the history of the reign of Queen Elizabethan also known as the Elizabethan Era and remembered as the golden age in English history. His work *Britannia* is regarded as the most famous and most remarkable achievement of its kind', while *Annales* entitles him to be regarded as the "founder of civil history in England', and makes him the 'greatest historian of his age.

During the Scientific Revolution, not only questions related to human society and history were overshadowed by issues in scientific research, the utility of disciplines like history was also challenged by many thinkers. The foremost among them was Descartes.

5.4 René Descartes: Historical Skepticism and Discrediting History

René Descartes (b. 1596-d. 1650) was a French philosopher and scientist, who is considered to be the father of modern philosophy. His views are said to have discredited the discipline of history. He argued that historians were too interested in what went on in the past that they had become extremely ignorant of their present. He asserted that history cannot claim truth. Since the events of the past never happened the way they have been recorded or narrated by the historians. In other words, he challenged the authenticity of historical works, and argued that historical narratives are exaggerated accounts of the past. In this way, he rejected history as a branch of knowledge, and also doubted its utility and value per se.

Descartes' critique to history has been dubbed as 'historical skepticism'. Skepticism refers to a distinct school of ancient Greek philosophers, who believed that absolute knowledge was unattainable. They argued that knowledge of how things really were might be sought but could not be found. Descartes also believed that sure and undoubted knowledge of the past happenings could not be attained through history.

5.5 The 'Cartesian' School of Historiography

During the latter half of the seventeenth century, a new school of historical studies emerged, which Collingwood calls the Cartesian School of historiography as it was, quite paradoxically, inspired by and critical of the views of Descartes simultaneously. The historians belonging to this school were quite critical of their written or documentary sources, which they subjected to criticism and analysis. The renowned historians of this tradition included, among others, Tillemont (b. 1637-d. 1698), the French ecclesiastical historian, who composed the history of the Christian Church. In his other work, *History of the Roman Emperors*, he tried to reconcile the conflicting statements of different authorities. Moreover, he paid considerable attention to the accuracy of historical events in his narrative. In this way, it was the first historical work of this kind in Europe. As pointed out above, the tenth-century Muslim historian Ibn Jarir Tabari had devised a similar method of narrating all the available conflicting versions of a historical event while writing the history of controversial happenings in the early Muslim history.

The Bollandists, named after a seventeenth-century scholar, Jean Bolland, was a school of Benedictine philologists (the experts who study languages) and historians, who composed the biographies of the Christian saints. They critically assessed the existing hagiographical sources, i.e. the writings on the lives of the holy people such as saints. The most renowned work of the Bollandists is *The Lives of the Saints*.

In addition to critically evaluating the documentary sources of history, the historians of the era also paid attention to the study of non-documentary sources such as numismatics (the study of coinage) and epigraphy (the study of old inscriptions). In this regard, the early eighteenth century British archaeologist, John Horsley (d.1732), who composed *The Roman Antiquities of Britain*, made a remarkable contribution by systematically studying the Roman inscriptions in Britain.

5.6 Vico-A Representative of Anti-Cartesian School of Historiography, and, the Founder of Secular Philosophy of History in Europe

The views and the approach of the historians of Cartesian School were countered by many historians and philosophers, but the foremost among them was Giambattista Vico (b. 1668-d. 1744), the famous eighteenth-century Italian philosopher historian, also known as Giovanni Batista Vico. Born in Naples in Italy, Vico taught at the University of Naples. His famous work *La Scienza Nuova* (The New Science) was published in 1725, which marks an important shift in European historiographical thinking. He was the first European thinker to call history a Science, i.e. a science of society.

Vico is considered to be the founder of secular philosophy of history in the European historiographical tradition since he broke away with the medieval

historiographical traditions. His work marked the beginning of a gradual secularization of philosophy of history. Unlike Augustine's Theo-center philosophy of history, Vico rejected the exclusively theocratic or Theo-centric explanation of historical events. He established the causal links between events by both theocratic and humanistic interpretations. He argued that the course of human history is Independent of supernatural interventions, and the Divine Providence or God acts in history only indirectly, through the rational human nature, which He has created and guided. He wrote that history or the "New Science must be a 'rational civil theology of divine providence new science must therefore be a demonstration, so to speak, of the historical fact of providence.

He also affirmed that history was the evolution of human beings, and the process of this evolution was governed by God. According to Vico, it was due to the Divine Providence that people had progressively achieved the idea of their own natural nature; become civilized and have overcome barbarism. He also tried to search for the 'natural (inherent or made by God) laws of history or the "natural course of human beings themselves". He stated that the evolution of history was governed by laws immanent or hidden in human nature, which was a creation of God. In this way, his philosophy of history was partly theocratic and partly humanistic, though his dominant paradigm was anthropo-centric or humanistic. Moreover, to him, the subject-matter of

history was the study of the origin and development of human societies and their institutions. This is the modern idea of the subject-matter of history, particularly, social history). One can find a correlation between history and sociology in his views.

Though he remained attached to the fundamental Christian conception of history, Vico rejected Augustine's theory about the essentially evil human nature. He asserted that history was not a struggle between the opposite forces of good and evil. Both of these forces were not external entities rather good and evil were within human beings. He stressed that human nature is rational. In this way, like ancient Greek historians, Vico asserted the rational faculty of human beings, and interpreted history in a rational paradigm.

While countering Descartes position regarding the impossibility of attaining absolute truth or sure knowledge of things, Vico pointed-out the-distinction between what could be known and what could not be known. Recognizing the limits of human knowledge, he stressed the need to search for a principle by which one could distinguish between the knowable and the unknowable. Moreover, he distinguished between the natural sciences and history by asserting that nature is a work of God, and therefore, it is intelligible and understandable only to God, who is its Creator. However, the social world or human society is created by human beings, and therefore, history. Which

studies society, is intelligible or knowable to human beings. In this way, Vico countered the historical skepticism of Descartes.

A new scheme of periodization of human history was a major contribution of Vico. He divided the development of history into three periods: (i) Theocratic Age (Age of Gods, or divine age) was the first stage of human history. In this stage, religion was the first institution, and the government was theocratic. Human beings gave up bestiality in favor of a relatively civilized society based on the concept of family life. The rational faculty of human beings had not yet developed in this age. (ii) Heroic Age (Age of Heroes) was the second stage in the historical development of humanity, which was marked by shift from family to city, and the subsequent emergence of city-state as a political unit. Development of knowledge also took place in that age, but still it was not rational knowledge. (iii) Human or Civilized Age (Age of Men) was the third stage of human history, which was marked by full development of human reason, and production of rational knowledge. Moreover, in this stage, nation was the political unit." Vico's scheme of periodization of human history was Euro-centric, since he kept in view the historical developments taking place in Europe, while ignoring the historical developments in non-European societies.

Like Ibn Khaldun, Vico's theory of the rise and fall of civilization and nation was also cyclical spiral, since he maintained that the same cycle of the three

above-mentioned stages of human history were repeated. Owing to corruption, the Age of Men came to a close, and was replaced by barbarism, after which a new Age of Gods, characterized by the rise of Christianity in Europe, began. It was followed by the heroic age, characterized by the emergence of feudalism in Europe. Vico conceptualized the third stage, i.e. the human age, as his contemporary times which witnessed the fullest development of human reason and the new sciences. He also discussed the historical evolution of monarchy, and considered it the last and the final form of government. However, to him, fullest development of human reason was a prerequisite for the establishment of a monarchical system. In this way, he explained the gradual and evolutionary development of human societies and their institutions in recurring cyclical-spiral manner." Despite his tremendous contribution to historiography and historical thinking, Vico failed to get recognition in his own times. Later, the German scholars discovered his works in the nineteenth century.

Following the footsteps of Vico, many other thinkers- and-philosophers countered Cartesians. These included, among others, John Locke (b. 1632-d. 1704), the famous British Enlightenment philosopher, George Berkeley (b. 1685-d. 1753), an eighteenth-century British philosopher, and David Hume (b. 1711-d. 1776), another eighteenth-century Scottish philosopher, economist and historian. Both Locke and Berkeley contributed to the

discipline of philosophy, while the former also contributed to political philosophy. However, Hume who was a key figure in Scottish Enlightenment, contributed to history beside philosophy and economics. He authored History of England, which covered the English history from the invasion of Julius Caesar (d. 44 BC), the renowned Roman political leader, to the Revolution in 1688. Hume widened the scope of historiography by including the history of the intellectual and scientific development in his narrative, in addition to the political and military history, which has been the prime focus of historians ever since.