

Effects of Enlightenment and Romanticism on Historiography:

The Enlightenment was an eighteenth-century movement in Europe that brought about a revolution in intellectual terms. The era witnessed tremendous development in varied branches of knowledge ranging from natural sciences and philosophy, to religion and theology. The Enlightenment period in European history is also called the Age of Reason, since this era is marked by the application of reason or rationalism to the study and understanding of human beings and society, and to almost all the branches of knowledge. The seventeenth-century philosophers such as Bacon, Descartes, Baruch de Spinoza (a Dutch philosopher; d. 1677), Gottfried Leibniz (a German philosopher and mathematician; d. 1716) and Vico were the precursors of the movement. The Enlightenment thinkers and intellectuals had complete trust in reason, and that was why, for them, reason was the sole criterion for assessing the validity of human thought and action. Consequently, many of the medieval beliefs and ideas which could not stand the test of reason were questioned and rejected. The worldview of the medieval thinkers-and philosophers, their views about the nature of human beings and their relationship with the universe, the role of religion in human life, the nature of religion and society, and human history were redefined. In this era, many new ideas and concepts were developed, while those of the past were discarded.

These changes in the realm of ideas brought about a revolt against religion, since the Enlightenment thinkers and intellectuals thought all religions to be social constructs, created by human beings, and devoid of any revelation value. It eventually led to the rise of secularism. The term secular stands in contrast to the sacred, while secularism refers to an approach to life without the influence of religion, which is largely determined by worldly concerns. In fact, the enlightenment thinkers conceptualized religion and reason/science as two irreconcilable binary opposites. It led to the secularization of all aspects of life and human thought, accompanied by a crusade against religion. Faith, feelings and emotions were devalued, since they were considered to be unreliable, and hence, invalid by the Enlightenment thinkers. Thus, religion and religious concerns were relegated to the background, whereas reason reigned supreme.

Impacts of the Enlightenment Ideas on the Discipline of History

What follows is a critical analysis of the impact of the Enlightenment ideas on the discipline of history in Europe:

1. Secularization and Rationalization of Historical thought

The ideas and views of the Enlightenment thinkers considerably influenced historical thinking, and consequently, history-writing. The historiographical traditions of medieval Europe were set aside, since most

of the medieval European historians were associated with the Church. Theo- centric explanations were completely rejected in favor of anthrop- centric or humanistic interpretation of historical events. Human beings were the focus of human thought. The role of divine providence or divine plan in history was denied, while any reference to God or divine factor in historical causation was considered derogatory to the art of history- writing. In this way, the discipline of history, historical thought and historiography were secularized. Moreover, the historians of the Enlightenment era tried to offer a rational interpretation of history by seeking rational explanations for historical events. In addition, the historical development of human mind and reason through the ages became one of their primary foci. For instance, the eighteenth- century French- thinker and historian, Marquis de Condorcet (d. 1794) wrote the history of the development of human mind and reasoning in his work *A Sketch of a Tableau of the Progress of the Human Spirit*, published in 1749, which foresaw a utopian future ahead. Similarly, another French thinker, Voltaire (d. 1778) also focused on the development of human mind from barbarism of the middle Ages to civilization of modern times in his work *The New History*, published in 1757.

2. The Idea of Progress and Human Perfectibility

The Enlightenment thinkers and philosophers were greatly inspired by the tremendous development in the field of natural sciences, which affirmed their belief in human reason. They believed that in the past, the people did not use their rational faculty or reason freely, but later, they started using it, and thus, human reasoning developed gradually in a progressive manner through the ages. The Enlightenment thinkers not only assumed human thought to be gradually progressing-and improving in a uniplanar pattern, they also believed that in their contemporary times, i.e. the eighteenth century or the Enlightenment era, the development of reason had reached its zenith or peak. In other words, the human reasoning faculty had become fully developed and attained perfection. This idea also gave them a sense of completion and perfection, since they assumed that human thought had grown to its maximum, making the human beings perfect. They also argued that human reasoning would not and could not develop any further. However, some of them saw the peak of human reason in coming future, marked by the fullest development of rational knowledge and sciences.

The belief in the completion and perfection of human reasoning led the Enlightenment thinkers to believe that human beings had the capacity to shape their own destiny, and thus, be the architects of their own fate. They asserted that human beings had attained complete control over themselves, over all human affairs as well as over history. It signified the

zenith of anthropo- centrism in human thought. However, the critics of the idea of progress and human perfectibility assert that it is impossible to be sure that humanity and civilization is moving in the right or desirable direction.

The idea of progress and human perfectibility greatly influenced the historical thinking in eighteenth-century Europe. Historians devoted themselves to the study of human past, which they interpreted as the growth and evolution of human mind and reason, as reflected in the historical approach of Condorcet and Voltaire.

3. Development and Systematization of Secular Philosophy of History in Europe

Ssu-Ma Ch'ien, the grand historian of China, was probably the first philosopher of history in human history. Saint Augustine's philosophy of history, which he propounded in the fifth century, was based on the fundamental doctrines of Christianity, and for this reason, it has been regarded as a Christian philosophy of history. Among the Muslim historians and thinkers, Ibn Khaldun of fourteenth century is considered to be the first philosopher of history. The philosophies of history of Ssu-Ma Ch'ien and Ibn Khaldun were secular, and not based on religious doctrines like Augustine's. In European historical thought, Vico was the founder of

the secular philosophy of history. The Enlightenment era was marked by further development of secular philosophy of history. The philosophies of history propounded by Hegel and Marx, for instance, were secular in nature. The term philosophy of history was also coined by the renowned Enlightenment thinker, Voltaire in the eighteenth-century.

Philosophy is a branch of knowledge which takes an overall or general view of phenomena including the nature and meaning of universe and human life. Philosophy of history is a distinct branch of history, which takes an overall or general view of the human past. It attempts at philosophizing the human past, whereby it speculates and reflects on the general pattern of human past, and then hypothesizes on the basis of inferences made thereby. It involves a philosophical reflection upon the human past as a whole (and in some cases future as well). It tries to offer a philosophical explanation and interpretation of the past. In other words, it is an attempt to philosophically view the human past in a holistic manner, which includes speculation, and reflection on the general pattern of human history. In the words of Alfred Stem, it seeks to "understand history in its wholeness, the principles by which it is governed and the meaning it may conceal. The totality of the endeavors to understand history and to integrate it into the wholeness of human existence...is called philosophy of history.

Philosophy of history searches for some regularities and continuities, or regular and recurrent patterns in human history in order to, first, hypothesize or make some generalizations about the past, and about the causes of change in the past; secondly, search for a singular or unitary principle, which could explain all human history in its entirety; and lastly, periodize history in varied stages, periods or epochs if possible on the basis of watersheds or distinct changes in human past. Often, it not only involves a philosophical reflection upon the human past, but includes future in its scope as well. Thus, it tries to offer a philosophical explanation and interpretation of the past, and often predicts and foresees a trajectory for future in the light of- inferences and generalizations drawn from the past.

4. De-romanticization of the Past

Generally speaking, the Enlightenment historians and thinkers had a disregard and disrespect for the past, including the past ideas and knowledge as well as past institutions. The human past was defamed and devalued by them. The past was de-romanticized by rejecting the idea of 'golden past', and by dubbing the medieval times as dark ages'. It has been pointed out that the spirit of the Renaissance, the core idea of which was the revival of classical Greek knowledge, learning and traditions, had died out by the time of Enlightenment. According to critics, the Enlightenment

thinkers got inspiration from the past, and later disowned it after grinding their own axe.

5. Anti-historical Attitude of the Enlightenment Historians

According to Collingwood, a truly historical view of human history sees everything of the past as having its own reason or rationale. The Enlightenment historians generally viewed past as a history of irrationality. All human actions of the past appeared to them to be irrational acts, such as religious practices, and thus, unworthy of historical investigation. They did not search for the rational causes behind the events of the past. Therefore, the general outlook of the Enlightenment historians has been considered to be anti-historical.

6. Less Emphasis on the Development of Research Methodology

The Enlightenment historians paid less attention to the improvement of the methods of historical research or research methodology, unlike the Renaissance historians who had contributed to the development of the principles of historical criticism (such as the critical study of sources) and archaeology.

Geographical Interpretation of History by Montesquieu

Montesquieu (b. 1689-d. 1755), a French liberal political philosopher and historian, tried to offer a geographical interpretation of history in his

famous work, *The Spirit of Laws*, published in 1748. To him, two factors determine the character of a nation: (i) geography or physical environment, and (ii) government or political environment. Khaldun had made similar attempts at correlating geography and history. However, for Montesquieu, the differences between various cultures-and communities were the result of the differences in climatic and geographical conditions. He tried to explain the characteristics, political system, social and religious traditions, customs and occupation of the people of the past civilizations with reference to their peculiar geographical features and climate. For instance, he argued that monarchy is more frequently found in countries with fertile land, and republican government in those where the soil is not good." In short, one finds an over-emphasis on geography and natural environment as the most important determinants of human history. Another renowned work of Montesquieu was *Consideration of the Causes of the Grandeur and Decadence of the Romans*, in which he discussed the causes of the rise and fall of the Roman Civilization.

Voltaire and Gibbon as Enlightenment Historians

The famous French political thinker, poet, historian and philosopher, Voltaire (b. 1694-d. 1778), who had coined the term 'philosophy of history', was a prolific author. He contributed to historiography by writing a number of historical works. His famous works include, inter alia, *The*

History of Charles XII and The Age of Louis XIV. He tried to offer a philosophical interpretation of human history, and saw rationality as the panacea for all the ills in society. To him, the human history was the development from barbarism to civilization.

Edward Gibbon (b. 1737-d. 1794) is a very renowned English historian, whose six-volume masterpiece was *The History of the Decline and fall of the Roman Empire* (1776-88). It was marked by rationalist approach, wherein historical interpretation is blended with philosophical explanations. It is considered to be 'the culmination of post-Renaissance European historical writing.'" He held Christianity responsible for the weakening of the Roman Empire. However, he chose the military and administrative history to be the primary locus of his narrative, while ignoring the cultural and social aspects of history.

Romanticism and its Impact on Historiography

Towards the close of the eighteenth century, Romanticism emerged as a counter-movement of Enlightenment, which challenged the notion of reason and rationality, as well as the intellectualism and skepticism of the Age of reason. It was an intellectual movement that richly contributed to arts, literature and music. It symbolized revolt against the rationalization of human nature, the idea that human beings were inherently rational by

nature, articulated by Vico for the first time. The Enlightenment had not only devalued faith, emotions and feelings, it had also de-romanticized the past. As a reaction to these views, the Romanticists romanticized the human past, and stressed the role of imagination, fantasies, emotions and feelings.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau (b. 1712-d. 1778), a renowned eighteenth-century thinker and political philosopher, is considered to be the father of the movement. As a critic of Enlightenment, he challenged the idea of progress, and argued that the Age of Reason was, in fact, degeneration, and the development of civilization had increased corruption and adversely affected the morality of people. His famous works include *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences* and *Social Contract*. Rousseau was a philosopher, who did not author any book on history per se, but his ideas had considerable impact upon subsequent social and political thought as well as historiography.

Edmund Burke (b. 1729-d. 1797), a statesman, political theorist and philosopher, and David Hume (b. 1711-d. 1776), a Scottish philosopher-historian, supported Rousseau's attacks on the rationalist thinkers. Immanuel Kant (b. 1724-d. 1804), a famous German philosopher, highlighted the limitations of reason in his work *Critique of Pure Reason*.

The Romantic Movement influenced the views of many historians. The foremost among them was Johann Gottfried von Herder (b. 1744-d. 1803), a German Romanticist historian. His two works on history are one more Philosophy of History and ideas for the Philosophy of the History of Mankind. He argued that human beings, who had gradually been evolved, were a product of nature. While discussing the evolutionary development of human beings, his main Unit of analysis or frame of reference was culture or Civilization, for which he used a biological analogy. He asserted that the civilization goes through the same cycle of birth, maturity, decline and death like a plant. Moreover, like a plant which has its specific stages of development, and its own type of fruit and flower, every civilization also has its inherent character and specific qualities, its own language, religion, moral laws, arts and literature, which are different from those of other civilizations.