

Developing Time – Sense in History

SEEMA S. OJHA*

Abstract

An understanding of time and chronology is indispensable to the study of history, which is the record of change through times. But teaching time concepts and dates in isolation without the accompanying development of context of the dated events is of no significance. It is true that children's sense of a period is largely shaped by visual images of individuals, clothing, homes or events. But development of time sense in students depends mostly on the kind of teaching and learning strategies we adopt while dealing a particular topic. This paper focuses on how graphical representations of time concept in the form of timelines, time charts help students develop a sense of time and chronology.

Introduction

What is time? Is a question generally asked by young minds in the preparatory stage when large sweeps of time and chronology are covered by way of stories and biographies? Imparting a sense of time amongst young children though admitted difficult and abstract, but is highly desirable whereby the child develops a proper perspective of chronological sequence. The importance of time and a sense of chronology are important not only for living in the present but also for the understanding of the present as past, present and future are interwoven. The present is the result of the past and forerunner of the future. In this context, time and chronology attempts to indicate the

characteristics of events, achievements, developments at various points of time either of the same country or of different countries.

History is one of the few learning's that is not shared to a great extent with any of the other school subject. It makes a great contribution among all school subjects towards the development of a mature sense of time and chronology. An understanding of time and chronology is indispensable to the study of history, which is the record of change through times. The history teacher often asks "when did this happen? What is its relation to the present day? Where does it fit in with other things in the past? How does it relate to the present and the future?" For children to develop an

* Senior Lecturer, DESSH, NCERT, New Delhi.

understanding of the past and to see its relation to their own lives, they have to move back and forth along a base time line. In no other way can they build a sense of perspective or formulate for themselves significant time concepts. History therefore bears the greatest responsibility for developing time sense.

This is also a controversial area of history teaching in schools. Several researchers and academicians have pointed out that understanding time concepts is very difficult for younger children (especially under the age of 11), and that it is important for teachers not to underestimate these difficulties or assume the understanding of basic time concepts. Bradley (1947), Jahoda (1963), Blackie (1967), Wood (1995) have stressed that the past before the living memory is a nebulous idea for younger children. Pistor and Jahoda felt that additional emphasis to teach time concepts to younger children might not be a productive idea. While others have raised questions like: is there any purpose or gain in understanding from the sequence involved, is there any connection between the events being sequenced; does it matter if children know whether the battle of Plassey or the revolt of 1857 occurred first? These ideas undoubtedly influenced teaching-learning approaches in history. History methodologists such as West (1986) and Blyth (1989) advocated for a number of years the avoidance of dates and thereby emphasise statements such as 'today' 'long ago' and 'a very long time ago', But in recent times these phrases have been criticised as possibly causing temporal confusion. Antony Beevor (1998), author of the best seller *Stalin grad*, asserts that

the move from traditional "through the ages" syllabi has left children without a well-developed chronology or mental map of the past. So for overall grasp of the framework of the past a sense of time is required. Tim Lomas says, "Without a grasp of the concept of time, there can be no real understanding of change, development, continuity, progression, and regression.... if development/change are to be properly understood, there must be some idea of the order in which things happened," Sydney Wood has also suggested that, "the ability to sequence is a fundamental feature of historical understanding. The past is chaos to children, until sequenced." Stow (1999) and Hoodles (1996) also suggested that teaching with the use of historical images and timelines can develop children's sense of time and ability to sequence periods. Hodkinson (2001) makes the interesting analogy between dates and historical knowledge and coat pegs being historical time. He states: "Without the pegs the coats become a confusing mass and extracting any one coat for examination, becomes difficult if not impossible". Therefore chronology provides a mental framework or map, which gives significance and coherence to the study of history.

The Concept of Time in History

The essence of the concept of time in history is the sense of location, distance and duration. Location means pointing out a person or an event in time. This kind of location or in other words giving dates to persons and events in time is useful because we cannot measure the distance between two things unless we

first spot them. But this location becomes significant only when we relate persons and events to other persons and events. Isolated and unrelated dates mean nothing to the students. Distance is the length of time between the present and the past. Sequencing provides meaningful connections for students in terms of their sense of the past, in addition to locating persons or events in the right order. They are required to understand the distance between them, and to have some contextual understanding of the events or persons being sequenced. Ghate emphasised that, "the history teacher must realise that history has got to be measured in terms of life and activity and not in terms of abstract numbers called years." Researches have suggested that duration is both more difficult and more important for students to grasp. To realise fully the significance of the history of our past and to derive benefit from it we need to know accurately what was the duration of historical movements, processes, epochs, dynasties, etc.

The development of time sense in student occurs neither quickly nor easily. Children gradually develop a time sense through clearly targeted teaching and learning strategies. Thornton and Vukelich (1988) pointed out that time concepts need to be explicitly addressed with children, and taught in a systematic way that children abilities in the area of time are crucially dependent upon instruction. Teaching has a significant influence on the development of time sense. Teaching style matters! But of course, sets us a challenge: what should be the mode of teaching to develop time sense and how should it be taught?

Development of Time Sense

Development of time sense depends largely on the development of the vocabulary of chronology if children are to fully appreciate historical people, periods and events. The vocabulary of chronology incorporates:

- Descriptive vocabulary, e.g. before, after, a long time ago, a very long time ago, ancient, old, new, decade, century, millennium, modern.
- Technical vocabulary, e.g. AD, BC, the use of nineteenth century for 1857.
- Conceptual vocabulary e.g. change, continuity, sequence, duration, period, chronology.

However, teachers should also ensure that while employing phrases like long time ago and the past, students understand what period of time is being referred to. Otherwise, childrens understanding of the phrase 'a long time ago' can easily range from one month ago to 10 billion years.

We will have to keep in mind that isolated dates are of no significance to students. Geoffrey Partington (1980) warns against teaching time concepts and dates in isolation, without the accompanying development of context of the events, which are dated. In Partington's words: "Unless children have...some knowledge 'from the inside of a person' or group, unless there is some genuine three dimensionality of understanding there is no point in representing ill defined figures, half-understood events or pictures which do not tie up with children's grasp of character and plot. If children cannot

envisage an Iceni...in any way 'from the inside' there could be no purpose in their being able to place them in correct order in a time chart, let alone to space them accurately". Dates related to a person or an event justifies in our scheme of time and history, only when that person or event is related with other persons and events. Another problem related to dates is the large numbers. Several dates are being given. We should consider dates like milestones. The stones mark the miles and give us an accurate idea of distance between different places mainly because they are not too near one another. But imagine if these stones are placed at each yard it would create a problem. Dates are required, but only a few, to serve as milestones and not as yardstones. A few selected related dates carefully chosen will definitely help to build up the time sense.

Children have a greater chance of developing an enduring map of the past if it builds on a deeper sense of period. How a sense of period develops is depicted in Fig. 1.

The spider diagram suggests the different elements of knowledge that make up a 'sense of period'. It is quite likely that children's sense of period is shaped with visual images of individuals, clothing, homes or events-as a form of introductory mental package. Once such package is mentally established, other details can now be added. Sense of period needs to be taught explicitly through specific activities and by using explicit language about 'sense of period'.

In order to make time relations intelligible in history, we represent them as space relations so that they can be seen, comprehend and compared. Timelines, time graphs and other

What ideas did people have then?

For example, how much say did people have in government?
 What religion did they follow and how tolerant were they?
 Were all people equal? What did they know about ...Science, Geography, etc.

What would you have seen?

For example, what did they wear?
 How did they travel/communicate?
 What kind of houses and buildings?
 What kinds of work did they do?
 How did they use their leisure time?
 How did they punish crimes?

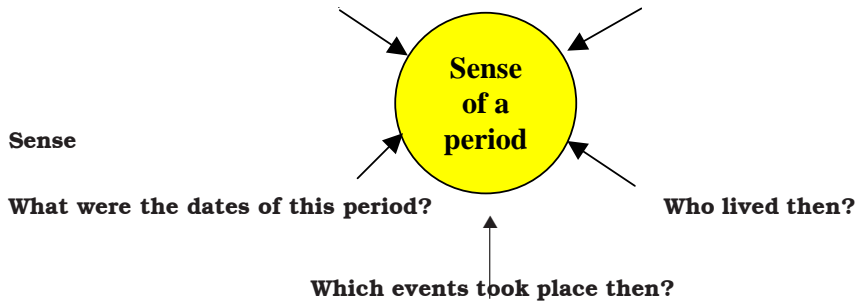


Fig. : 1

<i>Dates</i>	<i>Africa</i>	<i>Europe</i>	<i>Asia</i>	<i>South Asia</i>
6 mya – 500,000 BP	Australopithecus fossils (5.6 mya) Evidence of use of fire.		Use of fire (700,000 BP, China)	Stone age site in Riwat (1,900,000 BP, Pakistan)
500,000 – 150,000 BP	Homosapiens fossils (195,000 BP)	Evidence of use of fire (400,000 BP)		
150,000 – 50,000 BP			Homosapiens fossils (100,000 BP, West Asia)	
50,000 – 30,000		Homosapiens fossils (40,000)		
30,000–10,000	Paintings in caves/rock shelters (27,500)	Paintings in caves/rock shelters (especially France and Spain)	Domestication of dog (14,000, West Asia)	Cave Paintings at Bhimbetka (Madhya Pradesh); Homosapiens fossils (25,500 BP, Sri Lanka)

Fig.: 3

(Source: NCERT Class XI History Textbook), March 2006.

Time Charts

The time chart is used to provide a chronological framework. The events and developments are recorded in it. Time charts are of two types viz. pictorial time charts and panorama time charts. A pictorial time chart is a list of pictures pasted on a piece of paper to indicate the development of a particular dynasty. For example if we have to teach about the Mughal Dynasty we should begin with the history of Babur and in a chronological order we may proceed to Humayun, Akbar, Jahangir, Sahjahan, Aurangzeb, etc. In panorama time charts, events of only one century are presented in a pictorial form as used in

pictorial time charts. For example, while discussing Indian National Movement of 19th Century, 1857 can be a starting point.

These time lines do not serve any purpose unless these are taught in a right spirit. So care needs to be taken while drawing and using a timeline. A timeline can be divided into parts of equal length to represent a fixed length of time. For example, an inch should be equivalent to say five years or ten years according to the need of the situation. This division of time into parts of equal length and each part representing the same number of years must be followed throughout the timeline. For example in

Fig.3 major developments in Harappan archaeology have been shown. Here 1 inch is equivalent to 10 years.

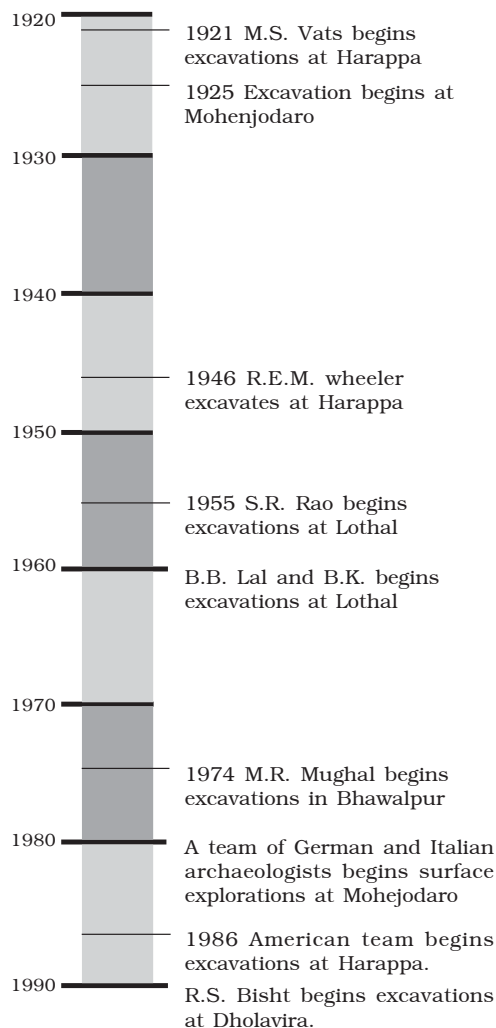


Fig: 4 Major developments in Harappan archaeology

Source: NCERT Class XII Textbook, Part 1, January, 2007.

Listed below are some of the important points we need to remember while drawing and using a timeline:

1. Timeline should contain a few dates covering a long period. So, selected dates with importance can be shown on the timeline.
2. A timeline presents the rise and fall of dynasties, dominance of a particular ideology, etc., therefore, it should not be too small.
3. Attempts should be made to see that the dates presented on the timeline are accurate.
4. Timeline should be drawn artistically to attract the students.
5. A timeline should be properly explained to the students. As a result, they can develop time sense.
6. Teachers should try to use timelines in almost every lesson, so that students can use it.

Conclusion

Developing a sense of time and a sense of chronology is fundamental to the enhancement of learners understanding of history. A thinking that time sense is not developed until adolescence or even at the adult stage is to ignore the fact that the child gradually develops a time sense when helped with such teaching aids and devices. Time lines and time charts are some of the devices, which help to concretize the abstract dates and chronology and make them more meaningful for the child's understanding. However, time devices also have their own limitations. If not handled carefully and properly, they tend to be more mathematical rather than historical. Therefore, they need be used supplemented by vivid description and visualisation.

REFERENCES

- GHOSH, K.D. 1951. *Creative Teaching of History*, Oxford University Press, London.
- HODKINSON, ALAN. 2001. "Enhancing Temporal Cognition, Practical Activities for the Primary Classroom".
- HOODLESS, P. 1996. 'Time and timelines in the primary school,' *International Journal of Historical Learning, Teaching and Research*, Historical Association, London.
- JAHODA, G. 1963. Children's concept of time and history, *Educational Review*, 16, No.1.
- LOMAS, T. 1993. *Teaching and Assessing Historical Understanding*, Historical Association.
- PARTINGTON, G. 1980. *The Idea of a Historical Education*.
- SYDNEY, WOOD. 1995. 'Developing an Understanding of Time-sequencing Issues', *Teaching History*, 79.
- BEEVOR, ANTONY. 1998. *Stalingrad*, Viking Press, London.