

**NPTEL
Nation and Narration**

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**Week1 Lecture 4
Transcript from the Video**

Hello everyone,

We saw that the key feature of modernity in Europe was the rejection of old medieval ideas and the adoption of new practices that emphasized rationality and scientific thinking. This defining aspect of European modernity, that is the complete rejection of traditional values to embrace new liberal ones, was noticeably absent in Indian society. While rationality and scientific thinking from Europe influenced India's educated class, they were not ready to completely give up their traditions and conservative beliefs. In other words, an alternative form of modernity began to take shape in the country. As a result, in India, modernity and progress were not simply a clash between those who supported liberal ideas and those who defended traditional orthodox beliefs. This clearly shows the rise of an alternative modernity. In the Indian context, this alternative modernity, carefully shaped by nationalist thinkers, was a deliberate negotiation between Western, modern values and India's traditional beliefs. What is the nature of this alternative modernity? We will explore this in this lecture

In this lecture, we are going to talk about how the Western modernity was replaced with the alternative modernity with a nationalist imprint on it. A blind imitation of the model of modernity based on Western norms was an important issue. The issue was that a total assimilation with the Western form of modernity will mean one's absolute transformation into Western culture. Here, the natives will not get an opportunity to ascertain their national identity. In other words, if everybody here follows the ways and manners of Europe, then it means that we have subscribed to Western culture and identity. In such a scenario, what goes down the drain is the attempt to claim an Indian identity. But at the same time, the idea of modernity had to involve certain aspects of modernity in the West. In short, there was a growing demand for a special kind of modernity that is modern, but not western.

The alternative modernity, developed by the intellectual elite in the country, represented a unique blend of select Indian traditional values and Western material values. This fusion of Eastern and Western values was not arbitrary but emerged from a specific rationale. It was recognized that Western civilization's strongest claims were in the material sphere, and this material strength had enabled European nations to subjugate non-European people and establish their dominance worldwide. To overcome this dominance, many nationalist intellectuals believed that colonized people needed to learn and incorporate these superior techniques for organizing material life into their own cultures.

Partha Chatterjee observes,

“It was in the material sphere that the claims of Western civilization were the most powerful. Science, technology, rational forms of economic organization, modern methods of statecraft—these had given the European countries the strength to subjugate the non-European people and to impose their dominance over the whole world. To overcome this domination, the colonized people had to learn those superior techniques of organizing material life and incorporate them within their own cultures” (Colonialism, Nationalism, and Colonialized Women” 623).

However, this did not imply a wholesale imitation of the West in all aspects of life, as doing so would erase the distinction between the West and the East, threatening the national cultural identity. The nationalists firmly acknowledged Western superiority in the material domain and were willing to carefully study and replicate Western accomplishments in this sphere. Yet, they were reluctant to integrate Western values into their domestic realm, where they continued to uphold traditional values. They declared the spiritual domain as their sovereign territory, resisting colonial intervention in that sphere.

According to Chatterjee,

“But this could not mean the imitation of the West in every aspect of life, for then the very distinction between the West and the East would vanish—the self-identity of national culture would itself be threatened. In fact, as Indian nationalists in the late 19th century argued, not only was it undesirable to imitate the West in anything other than the material aspects of life, it was even unnecessary to do so, because in the spiritual domain the East was superior to the West. What was necessary was to cultivate the material techniques of modern Western civilization while retaining and strengthening the distinctive spiritual essence of the national culture” (Colonialism, Nationalism, and Colonized Women” 623).

This approach endorsed the idea that as long as they retained the spiritual distinctiveness of their culture, they could make the necessary compromises and adjustments to adapt to the demands of a modern material world without losing their true identity. In this way, the nationalists sought to strike a balance between embracing modernity's material aspects and preserving their spiritual and cultural heritage. This ideological framework can be clearly seen in many aspects of Indian culture. We will do a close examination of these areas in the subsequent lecture.

Chatterjee presents Bankim Chandra as one of the first representatives of this new nationalist thought. According to him, Bankim “was one of the first systematic expounders in India of the principles of nationalism” (54). In 1888, Bankim wrote a fascinating work titled "The Theory of Religion." He presents his ideas as a dialogue between a teacher and a student—just like how Plato or the Upaniṣads frame their content! Now, here's where it gets interesting. Bankim sees three types of knowledge that shape human understanding: The first one is the Knowledge of the World. This includes subjects like mathematics, astronomy, physics, and chemistry. He argues that India should learn these from the West because they have made great advancements in these areas. The second one is the knowledge of the self. It covers disciplines like biology and sociology, helping us understand human life and society. Again, Bankim acknowledges that the West has developed these sciences better. Finally he talks about knowledge of God or spiritual knowledge. But here's where Bankim takes a bold stand. He declares that India is far ahead of the West when it comes to spiritual wisdom. Where does this wisdom lie? According to Bankim, it lies in Upaniṣads, Darśanas (philosophical systems), Purāṇas, Itihāsas (history-epics like the Mahābhārata and Rāmāyaṇa), and, the Gītā. So, what's Bankim's grand vision? A union of Western materialism and Indian spirituality! He believes we shouldn't reject Western scientific progress, but rather combine it with the deep spiritual insights of India. The result? A harmonious, holistic worldview that integrates reason and faith, science and spirituality, the material and the divine. A new nationalist culture that integrates reason and faith, science and spirituality, the material and the divine. Bankim presents this grand plan through the character of the teacher in the tract. The following conversation between the teacher and the pupil is really interesting in this regard.

Teacher: The day the European industries and sciences are united with Indian dharma, man will be god . . .

Pupil: Will such a day ever come in the life of man?

Teacher: It will if you Indians are prepared to act. It is in your hands. If you will it, you can become master and leader of the whole world. If you do not aspire to it, then all my words are in vain.

This conversation highlights the kind of national culture that Bankim wants to establish. The teacher emphasizes the potential for the convergence of European industrial and scientific advancements with Indian spirituality, suggesting that such a union could lead to a new culture that suits the modern time. But how this national culture could be achieved? This is where Bankim proposes his idea of *anuśīlana*. Anuśīlan which is based on the concept of bhakti implied the unity of knowledge and duty. According to Bankim, if this knowledge has to be developed into a national culture, then it has to be connected with bhakti and duty. While bhakti demands unquestioning acceptance of the knowledge, duty or dharma will strongly inspire one to put the practice in one's life.

We saw that the alternative modernity emphasised the retention of traditional values in the domestic realm. Does it mean that a blind imitation of the tradition as it was existing in the 19th century was encouraged? We have to answer this question in the negative. Although the alternative modernity that the elite intelligentsia in the country developed laid considerable emphasis on tradition, they never attempted a blind imitation of the Hindu culture as it existed in the early nineteenth century. The nationalist intelligentsia felt that "If India was to progress, she would have to change her archaic beliefs and outmoded social institutions" (Chatterjee, "The Fruits" 78). So, the reformation of the outdated tradition, especially the Hindu tradition, was the first phase of the development of the alternative modernity.

The easiest possible way in front of the nationalist intelligentsia was to urge the colonial government to reform society and religion through legislation. But Bankim was against giving a free hand to the colonial administration in bringing about reformation in social institutions. While he agreed with the reformers' criticism of certain Hindu customs and practices, he disagreed with their methods and beliefs about how reforms should happen. He opposed the idea of asking the British government to pass laws based on reason and rationality to fix social issues. He didn't think that laws alone could bring real change and strongly believed that for reform to truly succeed, it had to come from a new moral consensus among people. This new morality would naturally arise as society changed, making laws unnecessary for social reform. For example, he saw polygamy (having multiple wives) as something that was naturally declining in Hindu society, even without any laws or religious instructions. He believed this change was a result of shifting social and economic conditions, and its eventual end was inevitable. This is where his notion of *anuśīlan* becomes really important. Anuśīlan is the act of the natives adopting the new national culture, developed by the elite intelligentsia, with full confidence in its feasibility, as if practicing it in their lives is their dharma. The national-cultural ideal of the complete and perfect man was something to be aspired to and approached through practice, or *anusilana*. However, as Bankim himself acknowledged, it was unlikely that the vast majority of people would ever attain this perfection.

Chatterjee observes that the problematic of nationalist thought is the reverse of that in Orientalism, while at the thematic level nationalist thought accepts the Orientalist conception about the East. In other words, the nationalist thought that developed in the country resisted the typical Orientalist thought that the East is passive and is incapable of making a transformation on its own. But it did not reject the Orientalist conception that the East needs

to undergo a thorough transformation and need to get modernized. Chatterjee's observation merits attention in this regard.

He observes.

“We find, in fact, that the problematic in nationalist thought is exactly the reverse of that in Orientalism. That is, the ‘object’ in nationalist thought is still the Oriental, who retains the essentialist character depicted in Orientalist discourse. Only he is not passive, non-participating. He is seen to possess a ‘subjectivity’ which he can himself ‘make’. In other words, while his relationships to himself and to others have been ‘posed, understood and defined’ by others (i.e. by an objective scientific consciousness, by knowledge, by reason), those relationships are not acted by others. His subjectivity, he thinks, is active, autonomous, and sovereign. At the level of the thematic, on the other hand, nationalist thought accepts and adopts the same essentialist conception based on the distinction between ‘the East’ and ‘the West’, the same typology, created by a transcendent studying subject, and hence the same ‘objectifying’ procedures of knowledge constructed in the post-Enlightenment age of Western science.”

This effort exhibits profound contradictions. It simultaneously imitates and harbors hostility towards the cultures it seeks to emulate. On one hand, it mimics the values and norms of foreign cultures. However, it also involves a dual rejection that is marked by ambivalence: rejection of the foreign intruders and dominators, whom it aims to emulate and surpass by their own standards, and rejection of traditional customs, perceived as hindrances to progress yet cherished as symbols of identity. This complex, contradictory process is deeply unsettling. In comparison to the nationalisms of Herder and Mazzini, Eastern nationalism is characterized by this disturbance and ambivalence, setting it apart from their more straightforward approaches.

In his article “Nationalism as a Problem in the History of Political Ideas” Chatterjee explains in extenso about this contradiction. His words merit a special attention in context. He says, “This attempt is deeply contradictory. It is both imitative and hostile to the models it imitates. It is imitative in that it accepts the values and standards set by the alien culture. But it also involves a rejection: in fact two rejections, both of them ambivalent: rejection of the alien intruder and dominator who is nevertheless to be imitated and surpassed by his own standards, and rejection of ancestral ways which are seen as obstacles to progress and yet also cherished as marks of identity.’ This contradictory process is therefore deeply disturbing as well. Eastern nationalism is disturbed and ambivalent as the nationalism of Herder and Mazzini were not” (2).

I hope these ideas are clear to you. Before I sign off, let us revise in a nutshell all the ideas that I discussed so far. The model of modernity rooted in Western norms encountered two significant challenges. Firstly, it presented the orient as incapable of self-reform. Secondly, this uncritical imitation meant copying Western ideals without active participation from the local population. In response to this situation, nationalist elites began searching for an alternative vision of modernity, which eventually evolved into the officially sanctioned concept of national identity and modernity within the colony. This model of modernity was a curious combination of the Eastern and Western values. While the nationalist thought imitated the West in the material sphere, it followed the Eastern values in the domestic sphere. The reason for this imitation was that it was material prowess of the West that had empowered European nations to conquer non-European societies and assert their global dominance. So, we should follow the Western values in the material sphere. While it is true

that the West is superior in the material sphere, the East has its superiority in the domestic or spiritual realm. So, the domestic values were copied from the East. Although the elite intelligentsia in the country laid considerable emphasis on tradition in forming the alternative modernity, they never attempted a blind imitation of the Hindu culture as it existed in the early nineteenth century. It was believed that the outmoded traditional practices in the country are to be discarded and the tradition has to be thoroughly reformed to make it look modern. So, the reformation of the outdated tradition, especially the Hindu tradition, was the first phase of the development of the alternative modernity. I hope you have understood all these major points. Thank you!