

**NPTEL**  
**Nation and Narration**

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**Week 2 Lecture 11**  
**Transcript from the Video**

Hello everyone, welcome to the second week of the course nation and narration. In this lecture, I wish to give you an overview of the major lessons we are going to discuss this week. You can begin by watching this introductory lecture, which provides a clear overview of the themes and questions explored throughout the course. This will help familiarize you with the key concepts, historical contexts, and critical frameworks that shape the discussions in the main lectures. Watching the introduction first will make the subsequent lectures easier to follow and more engaging, as you will already have a sense of the broader narrative and purpose of the course. It will definitely serve as a useful orientation, easing you into the material with clarity and direction. There are five lectures this week, each running into some 30 minutes.

The first lecture in this week will deal with the idea of the modernity or contemporaneity of the tradition. In the last lecture, we talked about how modernity in India was different from modernity in the West. In the West, modernity meant a sharp break from traditional values. But in India, it was more of a mix — a negotiation between old traditions and new liberal ideas. In India, people tried to combine traditional Indian values with modern Western values. Traditional values were kept for family and home life, while Western ideas were used for public life and progress. This came from the belief that Indian spiritual values were better than Western ones, so they should guide our private lives. At the same time, many believed that the West was powerful because of its focus on material success, so India should follow the West in that area. At the same time, many believed that the West was powerful because of its focus on material success, so India should follow the West in that area. During this time, many native intellectuals tried to show that Indian traditions were still useful and important, even in modern times, because they were still relevant and meaningful. So, the first lecture of this week will explore these attempts to prove the modernity of the Indian tradition.

There were two main ways people tried to show that Indian traditions were still valuable. The first approach proposed that the contemporaneity of the Indian tradition should be understood in terms of its real impact upon the lives of people. In such cases, traditional knowledge, whether astrology, Ayurveda, or Sanskrit poetics, was not justified through Western scientific reasoning but through its direct impact on people's lives. The idea was that these systems were valid in their own right and did not need approval from Western epistemology. The second approach tried to prove the contemporary relevance of Indian tradition by finding the common interfaces between Indian knowledge systems and their Western counterparts. Even though these two methods looked different, they both had the same goal: to prove that Indian traditions were not old-fashioned but still useful and modern. In addition to these two methods, there was a strong desire to prove that Indian pre-historic period is not mythical or fictional, but true and authentic. This desire got manifested in many forms such as literary representations, anthropological narratives, historical accounts, etc. Here, many attempts were made to prove the authenticity of the Indian puranic or so-called mythical past with the help of the western scientific tools. All these trends will be explained in detail in the first lecture with the help of literary and cultural representations.

The second lecture of this week will the way in which colonial masters dealt with the question of classical knowledge. During the colonial period, there were two main activities that were happening with classical knowledge. First, scholars were spreading knowledge about classical Indian texts and ideas through the translation of these texts into English and other vernacular languages. Second, they were trying to rebuild many classical texts that were thought to be lost forever. Translating important classical texts helped make this knowledge available to more people. These translations allowed scholars from outside the traditional circle of Sanskrit experts to study classical works. As a result, ideas from these texts reached a wider audience and helped develop new areas of study like comparative literature, interdisciplinary research, and the inclusion of Indian classical thought in global academic discussions. Above all, translations also played a crucial role in the democratization of traditional knowledge. Earlier, most classical texts were written in Sanskrit, which only a small group of scholars and elites could read. This meant that classical knowledge was limited to a few people. But when these texts were translated into English and other regional languages, many more people could access and understand them. Students, researchers, and even the general public began to engage with these works. This made classical knowledge more widely available and marked an important shift in how classical studies were approached during colonial India. During this period, the spaces of learning also underwent a radical transformation. New institutions were established for the study and preservation of Indian knowledge systems. Colonial scholars focused heavily on Sanskrit texts, often treating them as the only source of Indian knowledge. While this helped spread and make classical knowledge more accessible, it also meant that many important traditions in regional languages were ignored. In this lecture, we will also see that although colonial Orientalist scholars worked closely with Indian scholars to study classical languages and texts, they made little effort to understand the cultural viewpoints of the traditional teachers who guided them. It is also important to note that, for colonial historians, the term “classical” mostly referred to two things: early Indian history and Sanskrit. As a result, learning about the classics largely meant studying Sanskrit texts from ancient times. Even when Sanskrit knowledge was included in school and university curricula, the focus remained on early texts, with very few selections from the medieval period and almost none from the contemporary colonial period.

The third lecture of this week will deal with the idea of reform vis-à-vis women’s question. Reform movements in colonial India were often celebrated for modernizing traditions and improving the status of women. However, in practice, they often ended up limiting women’s freedom. The educated Indian elite aimed to change certain social customs while still holding on to what they saw as the core of tradition. They believed tradition should adapt to modern times. But instead of truly empowering women, many of these reforms actually reinforced patriarchal ideas and reduced women’s independence. A closer look at these reform movements shows that, despite their progressive goals, they often placed women in even more restricted roles.

The abolition of matriliney in Kerala and the devadasi system in Tamil Nadu are the two cases that I will be examining in this lecture. These two reforms, that is the abolition of matriliney and that of devadasi system, were both hailed as progressive reforms during the colonial period, but in reality, they ended up limiting women’s autonomy and reinforcing patriarchal control. In the case of Kerala, matriliney among the Nairs allowed women significant social and economic agency. Women retained property within the matrilineal line, lived in their ancestral homes, and were central to the family structure. Closely tied to this system was the practice of sambandham, which enabled Nair women to form multiple alliances, often with men from outside their household. These relationships could be dissolved at the woman's

will, and the children remained within her family, not the father's. While this arrangement granted women considerable independence, it was deeply unsettling to colonial authorities and emerging native elites who viewed it through the lens of Victorian morality. Sambandham was disparaged as 'concubinage,' and the matrilineal structure was seen as a threat to the modern patriarchal family ideal. For Nair men, this system posed a serious dilemma. In a matrilineal household, a man could not claim authority over his wife or children, as both remained under the control of the woman's natal kin—particularly her elder brother. This created a sense of emasculation and social disempowerment among Nair men, who began to view patriliney as a means of regaining control and asserting modern masculinity. Thus, the move toward abolishing matriliney was not simply about gender equality but was rooted in the desire to establish patriarchal authority, leading to the erosion of women's rights to property and marital autonomy.

Similarly, the abolition of the devadasi system in Tamil Nadu was framed as a move to liberate women from exploitation. The colonial and reformist discourse painted devadasis as victims of temple-based sexual slavery, ignoring the complexity and cultural significance of the role they played as artists, custodians of temple traditions, and often financially independent women. Many devadasis held land, patronized the arts, and participated in public life. With the abolition of the system, devadasis were cut off from their traditional sources of livelihood and cultural expression, and were pushed into the margins of society. The so-called reforms, rather than offering them alternative avenues of empowerment, stigmatized their identities and restricted their agency even further. Both these reforms, though presented as morally and socially progressive, were deeply implicated in establishing colonial-modern ideals of gender and family. In doing so, they stripped women of the spaces of power and freedom that tradition, in its own complex ways, had once offered them. These two cases will be examined in detail in this lecture, with the help of representations from literary and cultural texts from the period.

The fourth lecture this week focuses on the colonial prison as a complex and contested institution in India. Far from being a straightforward instrument of discipline and reform, the colonial prison was marked by deep contradictions and structural limitations. British administrators attempted to model Indian jails on emerging European ideals of penal reform—emphasizing discipline, uniformity, and constant surveillance. These reforms drew heavily on the conception of the prison as a space for producing "docile bodies" through internalized discipline and normalization. However, the Indian context proved resistant to such ideals. Instead of functioning as closed systems of control, colonial prisons often mirrored and even reinforced the very social hierarchies of caste and religion that they were meant to erase under the banner of administrative neutrality.

Caste played a central role in shaping everyday life inside prisons. The caste identities of the inmates influenced the food they could eat, the tasks they were assigned, the clothes they wore, and even their physical placement within the prison. One of the ambitious reforms of the colonial administration was the introduction of the common messing system. It was designed to break down caste-based barriers by having all prisoners eat together. This initiative, intended as a mechanism of discipline and homogenization, frequently triggered strong opposition. In many instances, it led to protests and even riots, exposing the limits of colonial control. These moments of defiance were not isolated incidents but rather reflected a broader pattern of resistance against colonial authority, even in an environment that was supposed to eliminate such resistance.

Moreover, the very infrastructure of colonial prisons worked against the ideals of total surveillance and control. Many jails were repurposed buildings not originally designed for incarceration, leading to logistical challenges in enforcing discipline. Chronic issues like

inadequate staffing and poor surveillance capabilities further weakened the administration's ability to create a truly modern carceral system. As a result, the prison in colonial India was less an embodiment of reformist ideals and more an instrument of racialized governance and deterrence. It was primarily a tool of control, rather than a space for rehabilitation.

In essence, colonial prisons in India failed to live up to the European vision of a disciplined, self-regulating institution. Instead, they became sites of negotiation, contestation, and compromise—where indigenous social structures, imperial logic, and everyday acts of resistance all collided. Rather than erasing difference, the prison reproduced it, making incarceration in colonial India a deeply fractured and politically charged experience.

The last lecture of the week will outline how the colonial administration, particularly under the East India Company, disrupted the traditional sense of time that governed rural India. Before colonial rule, time in agrarian society was closely tied to the natural rhythms of life. The cycle of the seasons, the timing of sowing and harvesting, and the availability of labor shaped the social and economic life of villages. Taxes and rents were usually collected in alignment with these patterns. This system was not only practical but also sensitive to the uncertainties of agriculture. Local rulers or landlords often showed restraint and adjusted tax collection based on crop yield or natural disasters. In this way, the system maintained a balance between authority and the needs of the peasantry.

The East India Company introduced a new kind of temporal order that was completely different from this earlier, more flexible system. Driven by commercial interests and the need for regular revenue, the Company imposed a fixed fiscal calendar for tax payments. This calendar was bureaucratic and rigid, and it paid no attention to the agricultural cycles or the difficulties faced by peasants. For instance, even in years of drought or failed harvest, peasants were still expected to pay taxes on time. The Company's system replaced the organic understanding of time with a mechanical and standardized version, where punctuality became the highest priority.

This change had serious consequences. It broke the earlier "custom of forbearance" that had given peasants some protection during difficult times. Under the new system, there was little room for negotiation or delay. If a peasant could not pay on time, he could lose his land or be taken to court. This created intense economic pressure on rural households and pushed many into debt. The British administration treated punctual payment as a measure of good governance and legal fairness, but in reality, it placed an unbearable burden on the agrarian population.

This analysis shows that the shift from a flexible, seasonal structure to a fixed and punctual one was not simply a matter of improved efficiency. It was part of a larger colonial logic that prioritized revenue over the well-being of local communities. The colonial understanding of time, imposed through administrative systems, completely ignored the lived experiences of peasants. Instead of fostering development, this new model disrupted village life, weakened traditional systems of care and responsibility, and introduced a harsh economic discipline that favoured the colonial state's interests over those of the people it governed.