

NPTEL
Nation and Narration

Dr. Sreenath V S
Department of HSS, IIT Madras

Week 2 Lecture 12
Transcript from the Video

Hello everyone, in the previous lecture we discussed the nature of alternative modernity in the Indian context. We saw that while the idea of modernity in the west was a very strong clash between the traditional values and progressive values, the notion of modernity in the Indian context was a negotiation between tradition and liberal values. In other words, the idea of modernity in the Indian context was a very curious combination of certain select traditional Indic values and the modern western values. While the traditional values governed the domestic realm of the country, the western values influenced the public realm. This model came out of the general feeling that India's traditional or spiritual values are superior to the Western ones, and hence they are best suited to govern the domestic sphere. Similarly, it was believed that it was the material prowess of the West which enabled it to conquer the rest of the world. Therefore, we should necessarily follow the west in the material sphere. The nationalist intelligentsia in the country believed that the Indian modernity should be the combination of the best of two worlds—the spiritual values, governing the domestic sphere, and the material values governing the public sphere. In the last lecture, I also told you that while tradition or Indian spirituality was chosen to govern the domestic or the private realm, there was a growing tendency among many nationalist intelligentsias to prove the 'contemporary relevance' of the tradition. That is to say, there has been an organized attempt on the part of the intelligentsia to prove that the Indian traditional values are as modern and scientific as any modern epistemology. Attempts were also made to prove that Indian pre-historic period is not mythical or fictional, as many Western scholars argue, but as true and authentic as the contemporary time. In today's lecture we will be examining this aspect in connection with certain literary representations from the colonial period.

This effort found expression in many aspects of life. First, let us explore the attempts on the part of the creative writers to prove that Indian traditional values and knowledge systems are as valid and authentic as the modern epistemology. An interesting example in this regard can be found in the early Malayalam novel "*Indumathiswayamvaram*" written by Ammaman Raja. The novel makes many attempts to champion and prove the efficacy of the traditional values related to the spiritual realm. It states that the Indian traditional values and epistemologies are as scientific and modern as the contemporary western epistemology. One such instance in the novel is in the form of a debate between the characters Sukumaran and Chandranath Banerjee. While the character Sukumaran embodies a typical anglicized native who has scant regard for Indian tradition, the character of Chandranath Banerjee represents a native Indian who believes in the sanctity of the Indian spiritual values. The debate between these two characters, that I am referring to, is about the efficacy a traditional discipline called astrology. This debate clearly showcases the contemporaneity of Indian spiritual values that concern the domestic realm.

One day the character Sukumaran shared a difficult situation in his life with Chandranath Banerjee who was well versed in astrology. I hope you all know what astrology is. But still, for others who do not know about it, I will briefly explain it. Astrology is a traditional

knowledge system that examines the positions and movements of celestial bodies, particularly planets and stars, to examine how they influence individuals' personalities, behaviors, and even future events. So, Chandranath Banerjee, after hearing about the difficult life situation that the character Sukumaran is going through, tells him that the reason for latter's plight is the current position of his birth star. According to Banerjee, Sukumaran's birth star is not in a favorable position. Banerjee opines that according to the current position of the star, Sukumaran will certainly encounter various hardships in his life. Sukumaran, an anglicized native who is rational and modern, immediately rejects this prediction. He says that astrology, which is a traditional knowledge system, is a fake discipline, and does not have any value in the modern world. For Sukumaran, it is totally absurd to depend on a discipline like astrology in the contemporary times. But, Chandranadh Banerjee, who was quite confident about the superiority of the Indian spiritual realm, tells Sukumaran that within six hours, Sukumaran would receive some good news, and if his words do not come true, he will burn all his books on astrology and stop practicing the discipline altogether. Sukumaran, who does not believe the claims of Banerjee, makes fun of him and jokingly asks him, "Have you not heard the story where an astrologer was beaten up by people for saying false things like this?" Sukumaran's contempt soon gives way to respect, as Banerjee's words come true within six hours. Sukumaran unexpectedly receives some good news, and his problems are all quickly resolved. This makes Sukumaran accept the efficacy of astrology. He tells Banerjee, "What is left more to be astonished of? I accept you and all the astrologers who are proficient in this field."

The way in which credibility of Indian astrology is established in the novel is of great importance here. Here, we need to particularly note that Sukumaran's so-called rationalist doubt about the efficacy of astrology is not refuted through mere debate. It is conversely destabilized through an actual event. Here the validation of Indian traditional wisdom is established through actual lived experience. Instead of proving astrology's credibility through abstract reasoning or scriptural authority, the novel foregrounds direct, tangible experience as the ultimate test of truth. Sukumaran's initial skepticism is not countered by theoretical arguments, but by an event that unfolds in real time.

This also suggests that Western rationalism is not the right framework to test the veracity of indigenous knowledge systems, and Western knowledge systems demand their own internal mechanisms of proof and validation. In other words, Indian tradition is authentic, valid and efficient, and is as modern as any modern epistemology. But the Western rationality and scientific framework cannot be considered the sole or definitive standard for validating knowledge systems. This also presents a challenge to the overarching claim of Western rationalism as the ultimate standard of knowledge. This asserts that Indian traditions possess their own inherent validity and modernity, independent of external validation.

This can also be considered a powerful narrative of an anglicized native realizing the validity of his own native tradition. On a closer look, we realize that this event also functioned as a 'persuasive force' to convince the readers about the greatness and the contemporaneity of this traditional branch of knowledge.

This is just one of the many examples in this regard. While the example we saw demands for a system of authenticity-check outside the framework of Western rationalism, attempts were also made to prove the efficacy of traditional systems of knowledge by putting them in direct comparison with their Western counterparts. Just as the saying goes, "All roads lead to Rome," although these two approaches differed—each operating within distinct frameworks—they ultimately shared the same goal: to assert the contemporaneity of Indian tradition. In other words, while the first method that we just saw showed that Indian

traditional epistemologies do not require approval from Western rationalism to prove its modernity and contemporaneity, the second method sought to compare Indian epistemology directly with Western systems to show that traditional Indian epistemologies are as effective and modern as their modern counterparts. Even though these approaches were different, they both had the same goal—to prove that Indian traditions are modern and meaningful.

An excellent example that I can cite in this regard is the comparison between Sanskrit literary theories and Western formalism. It is significant to note that Sanskrit *kāvyaśāstra* in its canonical form is very much similar to Russian Formalism in the Western critical praxis. Formalism, like Sanskrit literary science, sees literature as a special mode of language, distinctly different from ordinary language. Drawing on this similarity, many attempts were made to bridge these two epistemologies, showing that Indian and Western knowledge systems need not be seen as opposites, but can instead be connected and understood in relation to each other.

A glance at some of the attempts in the comparativist direction will prove this point. For example, in his article, “Rasa and the Objective Correlative,” Krishna Rayan attempts to show that there is a consensus of opinion between the *rasa* school of Sanskrit literary theory and T.S Eliot’s idea of objective correlative on the question of how a poem presents or conveys an emotion. Similarly, P.S Sastri in his essay “Indian Poetics and New Criticism” presents Cleanth Brooks’ ‘Paradox’ and ‘Empson’s ‘ambiguity’ as ideas already anticipated by Kuntaka’s *Vakrokti*. He opines that “the search of modern criticism for irony, paradox, and ambiguity was anticipated in India hundreds of years ago.” R.S Pathak, in his “The Indian Theory of *Vakrokti* in Relation to the Stylistic Concept of Deviance” identifies the interfaces between the canonical reading of Kuntaka’s *vakrokti* and the modern Formalistic practice of deviant utterance. Pathak observes, “The Indian theory of *vakrokti* and the stylistic concept of deviance in Western criticism refer to this very central aspect of poetic language. The two concepts are complementary to each other. There may be differences in their priorities and approaches, but they treat the same linguistic phenomenon in poetry.” This sort of a comparison was often drawn between many other Indian traditional epistemologies and modern western disciplines to prove the efficacy and contemporary value of traditional epistemologies. This tendency also came out of a strong desire to cleanse Indian epistemologies of Western influence. In other words, this was an attempt to decolonize ourselves. Bill Ashcroft and others talk about this tendency in their famous work *Empire Writes Back*.

According to them, “The main drive-in re-employing terms from Sanskrit criticism, such as those listed above [*rasa* and *dhvani*], or from ancient Tamil (Ramanujan 1985) has been in assessing the literature produced in Indian vernacular languages where a direct continuity of some essential ‘indianness’ has been more vigorously asserted. Critics such as K. Krishnamoorthy (1984) claim the existence of a theoretical base common to all Indian literatures, including both post-Sanskrit and non-Sanskrit, a base that is itself the sign of an Indian sensibility. The Kannada-speaking novelist and critic U.R. Anantha Murthy presents a more complex view of the relation between contemporary vernacular texts and the Tamil and Sanskrit canon, a view which takes into account the literatures in ‘english’ as well as those in Indian languages. He suggests that the relationship of the ancient languages (Tamil and Sanskrit) to the modern vernaculars is analogous to that of Latin and modern English (Anantha Murthy 1986). The Kannada terms *marga/desi*; the way and the earth are, he claims, potent metaphors for this with Sanskrit as the way (*marga*) and the vernacular (e.g.

Kannada) as the earth or ground (desi). All texts written in the present mix the two, just as all English texts demonstrate a varying mix of Latinate and vernacular elements (more redolent of the former in the case of, say, Milton, or of the latter in the case of, say, Keats).”

But there was something fundamentally wrong with this kind of a comparativist approach. What is that problem? This approach fundamentally seeks validation from the very system of knowledge it aims to subvert. In other words, although these critics aimed to decolonize themselves from the clutches of western critical concepts, they were constantly comparing the traditional epistemologies to their western counterparts to seek validation. This reveals a paradox—while the goal was to decolonize knowledge and move beyond Western validation, the very act of comparison still positioned Western epistemology as a reference point. Before I move to the next topic that I promised to take in this lecture, I would like to highlight one more aspect here. We should not think that this tendency, that is the tendency to prove the modernity and contemporaneity of Indian knowledge systems, was not a phenomenon that started and died down in the colonial period. This is something that spans over both colonial and postcolonial period. For example, as we saw before, the comparison of Indian and western literary theories to decolonize Indian literary criticism and to prove the modernity of Indian theories of literary appreciation is something which happens prominently in the postcolonial period. Even today, debates on the relevance of Ayurveda, Vedic mathematics, Sanskrit poetics, and Indian logic continue to reflect this nationalist impulse, showing how the question of India’s intellectual modernity remains a key concern in both academic and public discourse.

So far we have been examining the two ways in which attempts were made to prove the modernity of Indian tradition. The first approach sought validation outside the framework of Western rationalism. This method relied on lived experience to demonstrate the efficacy of Indian traditions. 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 attempted to prove the efficacy of traditional knowledge systems by placing them in direct comparison with Western counterparts. Scholars argued that Indian intellectual traditions such as Sanskrit Poetics in literature, or Ayurveda in medicine were as sophisticated and modern as Western disciplines by identifying the common interfaces between traditional knowledge systems and their western counterparts. However, this strategy often resulted in an unintended paradox: while trying to decolonize knowledge, it continued to rely on Western frameworks as a benchmark for legitimacy. Both approaches, though different in methodology, shared a common goal: to assert that Indian tradition was not outdated, but still dynamic and modern. These efforts were not merely academic exercises, but were deeply tied to nationalist aspirations, as they sought to challenge colonial narratives and reaffirm India’s intellectual and cultural heritage.

As I mentioned in the beginning of the lecture, 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. In this lecture, I would like to present before you an example from the literary representation. The text that I am using in this respect is a short-story in Malayalam titled “Dwaraka” by Vengayil Kunhiraman nair.

The narrator of the story is an Indian engineer working under a supervisor called Martin James. As the story opens, he is aboard a ship named Himavan, which is laying an

underwater telegraph cable between Aden and Bombay. While testing the cable near Bombay, they find a break and attempt to retrieve and repair it. However, in spite of multiple efforts, the cable continues to snap, and they are unable to fix it. While discussing possible solutions, the narrator happens to think of the legendary city of Dwaraka ruled by Lord Krishna, which, according to Indian tradition, was submerged in the ocean after Krishna's time. He wonders if it could be near their current location. That night, as he is about to sleep, Martin James wakes him, and urges him to join an underwater expedition to explore the site. Equipped with new Western diving gear, they prepare for an underwater descent and finally get a chance to see the remnants of the lost city of Dwaraka. But soon the narrator realizes that he saw the city only in his dream and it was not a real incident.

Although the story is in the form of a dream, it cannot be simply dismissed as the random fantasy or a daydream of a native about his own past. It, on the other hand, clearly reflects the desire of the Indian intellectuals to prove that India's ancient history and myths are actually real and authentic. The subject of exploration in the story is the legendary city of Dwaraka, the kingdom of Krishna. By way of discovering the ancient city with the help of Western science, the native Indian counters the allegations of the colonizers against India's past. He also uses the colonizer's own scientific method which the colonizer thinks is universally valid to prove this point.

This event, though it is fictional, holds special significance in the nationalist imagination of the nation's past. In this particular scene, the narrator simultaneously reclaims and defends India's past. This author is indirectly answering the Western colonial scholars who often rejected India's pre-historical traditions as mythical stories, lacking empirical proof. A case in point is the observation of H. H. Wilson in 1854. He in his book "An Introduction to Universal History, for the Use of Schools" opined that "The Hindus have never had any historical writings: all that is known of India is to be gathered from popular poems, or the accounts of foreigners." However, when the narrator of the story discovers a place that is mentioned in epics and puranas with the help of modern archaeological methods which are essentially tools and techniques developed in the West, it prepared a favourable ground for the nationalists to challenge these colonial dismissals on their own terms. By using the very scientific methods that the colonizers claimed as universally valid, the native intelligentsia wanted to demonstrate that their historical narratives were not just myths, but had a factual basis. This served two purposes. First, it directly refuted the idea that Indian history was purely mythical and unreliable by presenting concrete evidence. Second, it allowed Indians to prove the reality of their ancient heritage using methods that even Western scholars had to acknowledge.

While the short story that I just cited showed only the aspirations of the native intelligentsia in literary works, similar activities were later conducted in real life through actual excavations in different parts of the country. I can in fact cite a few examples in this regard. For example, the marine archaeological exploration of Dwaraka, led by Dr. S. R. Rao in the 1980s, sought to investigate the possibility of a submerged city mentioned in the Mahabharata. Similarly, excavations at Hastinapura, conducted by B. B. Lal in the 1950s, aimed to examine the historical basis of the city described in the same epic. Studies on the Sarasvati River, using satellite imagery and geological surveys, attempted to trace its ancient course as mentioned in the Vedas. The excavation at Rakhigarhi focused on uncovering the genetic and cultural continuity of the Indus Valley Civilization.

The excavations and archaeological investigations into sites linked to India's epics and puranas are driven by the desire to establish the modernity of tradition and the historical truth

of prehistoric events mentioned in these texts. These efforts aim to construct a national history that is not just based on faith or mythology but is validated through scientific methods. By uncovering material evidence that aligns with ancient narratives, scholars and researchers seek to demonstrate that India's past is not merely a collection of myths but a historically verifiable reality. This pursuit aimed to challenge colonial and Western claims that India lacked historical consciousness and strengthens the intellectual and cultural foundation of the nation. In doing so, it reinforces a sense of identity, continuity, and legitimacy, proving the authenticity of India's civilizational history in multiple ways.