

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

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**Transcript from the Video**

Hello everyone, in the previous lecture we discussed the organized attempt on the part of the native intelligentsia to prove that the Indian traditional values are as contemporary and scientific as any modern epistemology. We saw that there were two major 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 was based on the assumption that Western rationalist framework cannot explain the Indian tradition in an effective manner because it lies beyond the comprehension of modern science and technology. This method relied on actual 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 Both approaches, though different in methodology, shared a common goal: to assert that Indian tradition was not outdated, but a dynamic and modern system of thought. 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. Attempts were also made to prove that Indian pre-historic period is not mythical or fictional, but true and authentic.

In this lecture, we are going to examine the way in which colonial masters dealt with the question of classical knowledge. As far as the classical learning was concerned, one can notice two major trends in the colonial period. One was the dissemination of the knowledge about classical epistemologies and the other was the reconstruction of many classical texts from India's past from the available fragments. First, let us take a look at the process of the dissemination of knowledge about classical works. The dissemination of the knowledge about classical works happened primarily through the translation of these texts into English and the other vernacular languages. The vital force behind this process was obviously the publishers of classical series such as Bibliotheca Indica, Gaekwad Oriental series, Nirnayasagar press, Motilal Banarsidass, Anandashram Sanskrit Series, Trivandrum Sanskrit Series and so on. They published a lot of rare Sanskrit books which were available only in manuscript form till then. The translations of many key texts in classical studies into English and other vernacular languages played a vital role in disseminating knowledge about this field among modern scholars who could not read and understand the original texts written in Sanskrit.

These translations of key classical texts significantly contributed to making knowledge more accessible to a wider audience. The translation of these texts also facilitated the scholars to engage with classical studies beyond traditional Sanskrit scholars. This has not only enabled

the broader dissemination of ideas, but has also enriched newer fields of knowledge like comparative studies, interdisciplinary research, and the integration of classical Indian thought into global intellectual discourses.

Above all, translations also played a crucial role in the democratization of traditional knowledge. In the past, many important classical texts were written in Sanskrit, a language that not everyone could read or understand. As a result, these texts were mostly studied by a small group of scholars and elites. However, when these texts were translated into English and other regional languages, more people could read and engage with them. This helped spread knowledge and allowed students, researchers, and the general public to learn from these classical works. Instead of being restricted to a few, classical ideas became available to a much larger audience. This was a significant epistemological shift that was taking place in the realm of classical studies in 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. One of the key initiatives was, the Benares Sanskrit College, which was established by Jonathan Duncan in 1784. The Benares Sanskrit College promoted Sanskrit learning and Hindu philosophy. Another major institution meant for the promotion of classical knowledge was the Asiatic Society of Bengal. Established by William Jones in 1791, Asiatic Society of Bengal became a centre for researching Indian history, languages, and literature. These significant institutions played a vital role in shaping and moulding the study of classical texts. They helped to bridge Indian and European scholarship and influenced the translation and reinterpretation of classical works.

Yet another major event in the field of classical learning was the reconstruction of many classical texts that were thought to be lost forever. Here we should particularly need to note that although the attempts to reconstruct the classical past started in the colonial period, the completion of many of these activities happened only the postcolonial period. A glance at the various stages through which Kuntaka's *Vakroktijīvitā*, a seminal text in Sanskrit poetics, was reconstructed bears witness to the amount of energy and meticulous research that went into this process. Kuntaka's *Vakroktijīvitā* which was long thought to be lost, and known only through the citations in later texts of *kāvyaśāstra* is now available to us primarily through the efforts of S.K De and Krishnamoorthy. S.K De brought out a copy of Kuntaka's *Vakroktijīvitā* in 1923, based on two Devanagari transcripts of a Malayalam manuscript (which was also lost at some point) from the Oriental Manuscripts Library, Madras. The manuscript seemed to have contained four chapters, but the last chapter in the manuscript broke off without any conclusion. The third chapter also contained a lot of gaps in it. So De was unable to publish a readable text. However, he brought out an edition of Kuntaka's *Vakroktijīvitā* with the first two chapters and a resume of the contents of the last two chapters. This arrangement was still necessary even in the second edition in 1928 when a new edition of *Vakroktijīvitā* was brought out after a new manuscript was found in Jaisalmer. Despite these limitations, his edition was quite crucial in introducing Kuntaka's idea of *vakrokti* to the readers of modern India. A coherent and readable text of *Vakroktijīvitā* along with a translation came out in only 1977 through the efforts of Krishnamoorthy. For this edition, Krishnamoorthy collected a transcript of the last two chapters of the Madras manuscript, and combined it with the same portions of the new Jaisalmer manuscript and the *Vakroktijīvitā* extracts in the *Kalpalataviveka*. For the first two chapters, he made use of the Jaisalmer manuscript along with De's 1928 edition. These efforts finally came to fruition in the form of a readable text for *Vakroktijīvitā* (Richard W Lariviere 323). Almost all other key texts of Sanskrit poetics that we now have access to have gone through similar processes of editing

and careful textual scrutiny. I explained the various stages through which *Vakroktijivita* was reconstructed first in the colonial period and later in the postcolonial period just to give you a sense of meticulous attention that has gone into the construction of classical texts during this period.

Colonial scholars gave a lot of importance to Sanskrit texts to the point of treating them as the sole representatives of Indian knowledge. Such an approach, even though it resulted in the dissemination and democratization of knowledge about classical epistemologies, often led to the neglect of many traditions in vernacular languages like Tamil, Malayalam, Telugu, Bengali, Marathi and so on which had equally valuable philosophical, literary, and scientific works. For example, while Sanskrit texts like the *Manusmṛti* or the Vedas were thoroughly translated and studied, traditions like Bhakti poetry and regional historical accounts received very less attention. In short, the colonial masters who were interested in the Oriental knowledge could give only an incomplete picture of India's intellectual tradition. We should here particularly note that the love of the colonial masters for Sanskrit and other classical epistemologies was not without any ulterior motives. As the East India Company held considerable sway over different parts of India, it became necessary for the colonial administrators to understand Indian customs and traditions to manage the colony effectively. This led them to study many Indic languages like Sanskrit, Persian, Bengali, Tamil, and other Indian languages. Many of these colonial administrators even wrote grammar books in English to help others learn these languages.

We should here particularly need to note that the European interpretation of India's past was deeply influenced by colonial interests as well as European ideas about history, civilization, and the East. Although the orientalist scholars in the colonial machinery worked closely with Indian scholars to study classical languages and texts, they hardly made any attempt to understand the cultural perspectives of the traditional preceptors who were teaching them. As a result, their interpretations were often disconnected from the traditional Indian ways of understanding the past. One of such prominent European notion about Indian history was that Indian society was progressively declining from its apotheosis of glory. European historians and the orientalist historians saw early India as once glorious, while the contemporary Indian as degenerate. G.N Devy's observation is a case in point in this context. In his *After Amnesia*, Devy observes, "The attitude of history implicit in Indological works ranging from Halhed's *Grammar of Bengali* (1780) to Max Müller's *India: What can It Teach Us?* (1882), considers the Indian heritage as once glorious but now decadent force." The European historians, especially those with the orientalist lineage, held the view that there is nothing in contemporary India that is worth preserving.

During the course of time, the colonial perspective on history became dominant through print capitalism, university education, and school curricula. The widespread printing of colonial histories of India's past and civilizations shaped even the natives' perspectives about their own past. Educational institutions such as schools and universities, designed along Western interests, often reinforced this interpretation by teaching Indian history through a European lens. As a result, the native Indians slowly began to view own history and culture through the framework set by colonial scholars.

We should also need to note that for the colonial historiographers, the idea of classical meant two things—one early India and the other Sanskrit. So, the learning of classic was primarily the study of Sanskrit texts from the early period. Even when the Sanskrit knowledge systems were made part of the university and school curriculum, the texts were mainly chosen from the early period, rarely from the medieval period and hardly from the then

contemporary colonial period. This conception also stems from the Orientalist assumption that India underwent a serious cultural crisis after the early period. But the historical facts prove this wrong. Pollock observes, “The two centuries before European colonialism decisively established itself in the subcontinent around 1750 constitute one of the most innovative epochs of Sanskrit systematic thought (in language analysis, logic, hermeneutics, moral-legal philosophy, and the rest). Thinkers produced new formulations of old problems, in entirely new discursive idioms, in what were often new scholarly genres employing often a new historicist framework; some even called themselves . . . “the new” scholars (*navya*). Concurrently with the spread of European power, however, this dynamism diminished so much that by 1800, the capacity of Sanskrit thought to make history had vanished. The production of moral-legal texts, for example, which was so extensive throughout the seventeenth-century, ceased entirely, and in core disciplines like hermeneutics or literary theory no significant scholarship—that is, significant in the eyes of the tradition itself—was again to be written. (“Indian Knowledge Systems” 1).

What this shows is that classical knowledge systems in India have always been vibrant and evolving, even though Orientalist historians often presented them in a way that suited colonial narratives. These scholars viewed Indian knowledge as something ancient, static, and in decline, rather than recognizing its continuous development. In reality, India’s intellectual landscape was shaped by ongoing debates, reinterpretations, and innovations across different time periods. Yigal Bronner’s observation deserves special attention in this context. Bronner in his essay “What is New and What is *Navya*” challenges this orientalist conception by highlighting the innovations in the field of literary theory. Bronner opens the essay by pointing out that “Modern views on Sanskrit poetics are often biased and focus only on key figures from the early period like Anandavardhana. According to Bronner, the Orientalist perspective overlooked the later precolonial texts and failed to carefully and objectively examine them. He opines that many modern scholars see the work of later literary theoreticians as simply redundant. One Indologist, Bronner continues, maintains that by the sixteenth century “the age of really original or thoughtful writers was long gone by.” Bronner’s essay is a refutation of this popular conception. According to Bronner, the literary theoreticians in the medieval phase attempted to constitute a new relationship with their past. Instead of inventing any radically new critical concept like *dhvani* or *vakrokti*, they directed their energy mainly to critically examine the views of their predecessors and to answer the old questions in new ways. To mark their departure from their predecessors in terms of their mode of operation and views, these new poetics identified themselves as *navya* or ‘new,’ in contrast to their antecedents who they called *prācīna*. There are numerous examples for Sanskrit literary theoreticians from the medieval period creatively engaging with the works of their predecessors. A few cases in this regard include Siddicandra’s *Kāvya prakāśa-khaṇḍana*, Appayya Dīkṣita’s *Citramīmāṃsā* and Kuvalayānanda and Jagannātha’s *Rasagaṅgādhara* and *Citramīmāṃsa-khaṇḍanā*. These remarkable treatises from the medieval period meticulously attacked the claims of their predecessors and come up with innovative approaches.

We have almost reached the fag end of today’s lecture. I will wind up today’s lecture by talking about a different conceptions about India’s classical culture endorsed by the anglicists like James Mill and Orientalists like William Jones. While the orientalists viewed classical literature from the early period of India as the high watermark of India’s cultural legacy, for many anglicists like James Mill, classical texts were embodiments of immorality in Indian culture. James Mill strongly believed that Indian society was backward and irrational and Sanskrit literature was a reflection of lazy and unproductive culture. For example, James Mill

viewed certain elements in *Abhijñānaśākuntalam* like the *gandharva* marriage (where lovers marry without rituals), Durvasa's curse, etc. as signs of India's superstition and decline.

While William Jones admired the supreme craft of *Abhijñānaśākuntalam* and praised Kalidasa "the Shakespeare of India, Mill thought that classics like *Sākuntalam* did not have much utilitarian value. He dismissed *Sakuntalm* as shallow and naïve, and held the view that Jones gave into the seductive beauty of the play. Mill indeed shared the view of Jones that *Abhijñānaśākuntalam* was a beautiful pastoral play. But he believed that pastoral literature was written by young or underdeveloped societies where people lived under oppressive rulers. According to Mill, these societies, instead of engaging in serious political or social thought, escaped into light-hearted romances. In other words, Mill considered classical works like *Shakuntalam* as a sign of India's backwardness, rather than a reflection its greatness. Gouri Viswanathan in her "Masks of Conquest" says, "The social values that *Shakuntala* celebrates—superstition, extravagant belief, and arbitrary will—appeared to prove Mill's point. He interpreted exaggeration in art as a reflection of inconsistencies in the laws and institutions of the society from which it springs and for which it is intended. A social practice that he found irreconcilable with the notions of a "refined" people is the marriage that takes place in the forest between the hero and heroine in *Shakuntala* or, in his words, "that kind of marriage which two lovers contract from the desire of amorous embraces" (2).

You will be surprised to note that an Indian classic like *Abhijñānaśākuntalam* was thought to be unfit for teaching in classrooms for a long time in the colonial context. The major criticism against popular forms of Indian literature was that they were filled with immorality and impurity. They were of the view that the Indian mind was not matured enough to distinguish between what was decent and indecent and they may get corrupt by reading classical literature which contained elements that were at war with the Victorian morality. Gouri Viswanathan's words in her famous work "The Masks of Conquest" this respect merit attention here. According to her, "A play like Kalidas' *Shakuntala*, which delighted Europeans for its pastoral beauty and lyric charm and led Horace Wilson, a major nineteenth-century Sanskrit scholar, to call it the jewel of Indian literature, was disapproved of as a text for study in Indian schools and colleges, and the judgment that "the more popular forms of [Oriental literature] are marked with the greatest immorality and impurity" held sway. The inability to discriminate between decency and indecency was deemed to be a fixed characteristic of the native mind, a symptom of the "dulness of their comprehension." Clearly such a statement suggests that it is not the morality of literature that is at issue, but the mental capabilities of the reader. Raising Indians to the intellectual level of their Western counterparts constituted a necessary prerequisite to literary instruction, especially in texts from the native culture, and consequently to forestalling the danger of having unfortified minds falsely seduced by the "impurities" of the traditional literature of the East" (6).

Now let us wind up the class by summarizing all the major ideas that we discussed so far. As far as the classical learning was concerned, one can notice two major trends in the colonial period. One was the dissemination of the knowledge about classical epistemologies and the second one was the reconstruction of many classical texts from the available fragments. These translations of key classical texts significantly contributed to making knowledge more accessible to a wider audience. The translation of these texts also facilitated the scholars to engage with classical studies beyond traditional Sanskrit scholars. This has not only enabled the broader dissemination of ideas, but has also enriched new fields of knowledge like comparative studies, interdisciplinary research, and the integration of classical Indian thought into global intellectual discourses. Above all, translations also played a crucial role in democratization of knowledge. In the past, many important classical texts were written in Sanskrit, a language that not everyone could read or understand. As a result, these texts were

mostly studied by a small group of scholars and elites. However, when these texts were translated into English and other regional languages, more people could read and engage with them. This helped spread knowledge and allowed students, researchers, and the general public to learn from these classical works. Instead of being restricted to a few, classical ideas became available to a much larger audience. This was a significant epistemological shift that was taking place in the realm of classical studies in colonial India. During this period, the spaces of learning also underwent radical transformation. New institutions in the form of schools and universities were established for the study and preservation of Indian knowledge systems. We should here particularly need to note that the European interpretation of India's past was deeply influenced by colonial interests as well as European ideas about history, civilization, and the East. Although the orientalist scholars in the colonial machinery worked closely with Indian scholars to study classical languages and texts, they hardly made any attempt to understand the cultural perspectives of the traditional preceptors who were teaching them. We should also need to note that during the colonial period, for the colonial historiographers, the idea of classical meant two things—one early India and the other Sanskrit. So, the learning of classic was primarily the study of Sanskrit texts from the early period. Even when the Sanskrit knowledge systems were made part of the university and school curriculum, the texts were mainly chosen from the early period, rarely from the medieval period and hardly from the then contemporary colonial period.