

NPTEL
Nation and Narration

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Week 2 Lecture 16
Transcript from the Video

Hello everyone, welcome to another lecture of Nation and Narration. In this lecture, we are going to explore how the notion of time was radically tampered with during the colonial period. I know you must be wondering how the notion of time is associated with the idea of nation and its colonial history. Well, there is a connection between the idea of colonialism and the notion of time. Strict adherence to time is generally considered a good quality. But you will be surprised to note that the idea of strict adherence to time and punctuality in reality tampered with the native sense of time in the agrarian context. The text that we are going to read to understand the colonial history of punctuality is Ranajit Guha's famous article "The Advent of Punctuality."

Punctuality is often considered as a reflection of efficiency, discipline, and modern governance. In modern bureaucratic and capitalist systems, it is often viewed as a virtuous value closely associated with qualities like order, predictability, and rational planning. But the implementation of punctuality as a regulatory norm, be it in a colony or in a nation, is neither natural nor universal. In the colonial context, it emerged in tandem with the consolidation of the colonial power, the rise of capitalist economies, and the spread of colonial administration. Thus, punctuality as it was practiced in the colonies was not just a matter of timekeeping. It on the other hand was also a form of power.

In colonial contexts, the enforcement of punctuality was often at direct war with local temporalities, I mean time periods that were organically tied to aspects like seasonal cycles, agricultural rhythms, and customary practices of exchange and subsistence. But the demand for timely revenue payments strictly based on the notion of punctuality, standardized across space and irrespective of ecological or social considerations, imposed a new temporal order on colonized societies. This new order based on new temporalities was effectively enforced through the apparatus of law, bureaucracy, and coercion. It thus reimaged and reconfigured not just economic life of people, but their very cultural imagination of time itself. In this lecture, we are going to examine the colonial history of the idea of punctuality and time in the Indian context.

The East India Company, like any other business enterprises, wanted to quickly move its goods across long distances to make maximum profits. But the collection of goods and its transportation was pretty much slow in the Indian context, primarily because the economy was still based on traditional farming, not modern capitalism. The Company had a lot of hurdles to overcome in India to run its business smoothly. The tax collectors and trade officers often did not cooperate with company's officials. Indian agents further added to the existing problems by holding up processes at their end. Yet another challenge was the transportation which was slow due to the use of conventional methods like bullock carts, slow-moving boats, and poorly maintained roads. As a result, the journey to the ports often took even longer than expected. Finally, natural factors such as unpredictable winds and the constraints of sailing seasons delayed the shipment of goods to Britain.

What you get to see here is an agrarian economy that is not modernized. In other words, India in the colonial period was mostly dependent on a feudal mode of production, which was

based on traditional practices. For example, there was no rampant use of fast transportation in the agrarian sector. Transportation relied on bullock carts. The cultivation depended heavily on manual labour, instead of machines, and there was also a noticeable absence of chemical manures or advanced farming tools. The result was that the production of agricultural and commercial output was extremely slow. Similarly, this pre-capitalist system also made it difficult for the farmers to increase the output at will. This was not the case with the capitalist economies where the producers could scale up their output with the help of machines and efficient infrastructure.

Although the Company to some extent put up with these delays in trade and transport, it could not tolerate any delay in the collection of taxes. The Company always insisted on a very rigid, punctual tax collection from the people. This involved a deeper tension: while the Company did not take any initiative to completely modernize the production of agricultural sector, it insisted on timely collection of land revenue, thereby imposing capitalist time discipline onto a society still governed by seasonal and agrarian rhythms. Now, you may wonder why the company was very much interested in the land tax. The answer is very simple, the East India Company heavily depended on the land revenue collected from the colonies to finance its overseas trade. So, it was absolutely necessary for the Company to collect the taxes regularly and on time. To make this happen, the Company relied on a system of tax collection called *qists*. In this system, the instalments of tax should be paid without fail at fixed intervals. This was not a new system introduced by the Company. It was in practice ever since the time of Akbar. But, while the Mughal system had only 4–6 instalments a year, the British increased it to 10–12.

This was part of a deliberate plan to collect as much revenue as possible from the land. This aggressive approach on the part of the company to collect the taxes at more frequent intervals generated many debates within the Company's administration in Bengal. Officials, like Philip Francis, argued for a more moderate approach towards the natives. He argued that the government should demand only what the government needs, not the maximum that the farmers could possibly pay. He appreciated the Mughal policies, which combined reasonable taxes with simpler collection methods. But this approach was against the commercial interest of the Company. Officials like Warren Hastings outright rejected the idea of moderate taxation proposed by officials like Francis and argued that land revenue assessments during the Mughal-era were totally outdated. He opined that the land in Bengal was always undertaxed, and taxation should be based on the full possible potential of the productive land, as opposed to what it originally produced. His position was eventually backed by James Grant in his 1786 study on Bengal's finances.

Thus, Hastings and his supporters who can be called the "optimalists" prevailed and the maximum tax was imposed on people. Here you should not think that the "optimalists" won because their interpretation of Mughal economic policy was more accurate than their opponents. Their interest was protected solely because their views perfectly aligned with the needs of the time, that is the maximum extraction of land revenue to support the Company's business in the rest of the world. We saw that the British Empire in India was mercantilist which badly required a steady flow of cash to purchase and transport goods across global markets. While the Mughals didn't need to extract all the agricultural surplus, the East India Company wanted maximum revenue to support its trade.

This relentless demand for more revenue from the land meant resorting to a system of tax collection that was stricter, faster, and more regular. The new method of tax collection was

inevitably at war with the older, slower system of the Mughal fiscal order. This change had far reaching impact on the agrarian society in the sense that it completely disrupted the entire rural economy. As the number of instalments went up, it put heavy pressure on both landlords and peasants and disrupted the natural rhythms of the traditional agricultural cycle.

Under the Mughal system of taxation, the frequency of tax collection was in line with the conventional agricultural calendar, especially the slow and seasonal rhythm of rice cultivation, like the *aman* crop in Bengal. This rhythm needed long gaps between the various stages of production, which were decided by natural processes and the environment. This resulted in a production period of around 300 days, while the actual working period was around 90 days. This pre-capitalist structure was really attentive to the notion of subsistence agriculture. In the pre-capitalist subsistence agriculture, the primary goal of farming was to produce just enough food necessary to meet the needs of the farmer as well as his family. It never aimed to generate a surplus for trade or sale. Thus, in this system, there is no marketable surplus, and agricultural practices always remained traditional, depending on conventional practices like manual labour, absence of machines, and natural methods of cultivation. This was characterized by small landholdings, low productivity, and a lack of investment in modern technology. In colonial India, this form of agriculture, that is subsistence agriculture based on feudal modes of productions, posed a serious challenge to British economic interests, which were essentially driven by capitalist motives like surplus, profit, and market exchange.

The East India Company, which wanted finance for its transcontinental trade, imposed a rigid and punctual tax system, completely ignoring the agricultural calendar. When the colonial state tried to impose elements of commercial cycles such as timely tax collection, fixed procurement schedules, etc. on a feudal society which was functioning within agrarian cycles, it caused a systemic mismatch. Farmers were never in a position to produce or pay up on demand, since their work was heavily dependent on nature, not the clock time or market logic. Understanding this mismatch is key to exploring how colonial economic policies strained rural India. This change completely disrupted longstanding socio-economic systems and created confusion and resentment. While the British saw their system as rational and efficient, it clashed deeply with the local agrarian way of life.

The tensions were particularly visible in rich districts like Burdwan, where the revenues were essential for Company investments. Even during the time of natural disasters, like the 1787 floods and cyclone, the East India Company refused to give tax relief. The then Collector's plea for leniency was denied by the Board of Revenue. It opined that it is the duty of the zamindars, not the Company's, to support their tenants. The company was insistent that the peasants must meet their tax obligations to the government, in spite of the eventualities. We should remember that the heart of the issue lay in a deeper conflict: between a traditional, semi-feudal land system and a capitalist-colonial order with different values, especially around the use and valuation of time. The colonial imposition of punctual tax collection symbolized this broader cultural and economic rupture.

In the article, Ranajit Guha clearly sketches how the colonial administration, especially under the East India Company, disrupted the conventional temporal structures of rural India which had been finely attuned to the rhythms of agrarian life. Before the intervention of the colonial administration, the idea of time in rural India was clearly structured around the cyclical patterns of seasons, agricultural production, labor, and the customary timings for the collection of rent and taxes. This particular system clearly maintained a perfect balance. The administrators always showed restraint and sensitivity to the temporal needs of agrarian

society. They recognized any disruption with this system could potentially lead to economic and social instability.

However, approach of the East India Company was radically different. It replaced the organic sense of time with a more rigid, bureaucratic, and alien sense of time based on commercial interests. The Company imposed a standardized fiscal calendar based on punctuality and regularity. It was a radical departure from the more flexible and context-sensitive timing that previously determined the course of rent and tax collection. This imposition was properly formalized through Regulation XXXV of 1795, which emphasized a very strict adherence to deadlines and regular payment schedules for taxes. It totally disregarded the agrarian realities and seasonal dependencies of rural communities, thereby ultimately favoring only landlords and completely subverting peasant livelihoods.

The new system had absolutely no regard for the traditional “custom of forbearance” which allowed flexibility in times of hardship. In the new system of tax collection, those who benefited were the landlords because it allowed them to enforce rent collection with legal backing. Guha is of the view that this was not just an administrative shift, but a deeply ideological one, clearly mirroring a larger colonial agenda of control and restructuring. It also marked a strong transformation in the conceptualization of the idea of time. The idea of time got changed from one based on nature and custom to one governed by abstract, bureaucratic precision.

The strong tie between *property* and *revenue collection* in colonial India also brought about a new connection between *law* and *time*. Thus a new definition of justice based on punctuality emerged. In the new system, the justice was rendered only to those people who held property and revenue rights. The poor peasant cultivators always found themselves totally excluded from this framework of justice. The new administrators totally ignored their economic vulnerabilities, and were insensitive to the uncertainties of the agricultural cycle. In short, what came into being was a new legal regime where justice was thoroughly redefined in fiscal terms, and punctuality became the new moral measure. This was a regime that protected only the propertied to punish delay in the payment of taxes, while offering no such protection to the labouring poor.

This will become particularly clearer when we look at the way the law regulating the seizure of a tenant’s property for unpaid rent was drafted. The law was very specific and clear about timing. Every step in the process were planned as per a strict schedule. For example, let us take a look at one section of the law, titled “Rules regarding the Sale of distrained property.” It clearly lays out when the sale of the confiscated property should take place. It mandates that the sale must happen after the fifth day and before the eighth day after the seizure of the property. If the seized property contained crops or agricultural produce, then the scheduled time starts only after those goods have been properly stored. Another clause mandates that the actual sale of the property should take place on the fifteenth day after the attachment. The sale should happen at the hour of the day when the most number of people is likely to gather. The law even states that the goods must be brought to the sale location in the morning of that day. This extreme attention to dates that we can find in this description shows the colonial state’s deep obsession with *punctuality*. You can find out the same detailed description of timing in other parts of the law. For example, it says how long a defaulter had to pay up before distraint could begin, how fast the sale money had to be collected, how interest on arrears was to be calculated, and so on.

But we should note that this was not just administrative precision. It also meant enforcing a new kind of discipline. The British established a legal system that redefined justice as

punctuality through these time-bound regulations. In other words, justice during colonial rule meant strict adherence to deadlines, particularly with regard to property and payments. Every action had to be completed “on time,” according to the government's clock, and delays were never accepted. The older, more adaptable systems of rural India, which permitted negotiation and took into consideration social obligations and seasonal rhythms, stood in sharp contrast to this. Here, time itself turned into a tool of law, used to govern lives as well as schedule events.

The British colonial government observed a notable improvement in revenue collection from Bengal by the end of 1794, especially during the Bengali month of Pous. The money was received on time, and the amount collected was the largest in four years. This was interpreted as encouraging, since it implied that the remaining payments for the fiscal year would likewise be made on time. This reaffirmed the administration's view that punctuality is an essential component of governance. Law was now being used to further institutionalize what had been accomplished thus far through executive pressure.

Being on time was not yet hailed as a moral virtue at this point. It was still a useful administrative tool that was necessary to achieve the objectives of trade and territorial dominance. But eventually, particularly in the Victorian era, being on time would be reframed as a moral standard, supported by Christian ethics and colonial education. Spatial control was closely related to the colonial state's introduction of the concept of punctuality. An assertion of presence—of being “here and now”—accompanies the insistence on exact timing. This temporal discipline also served as a signal to the colonized population that the foreigner intended to remain and rule.

Before we wind up this class, I would also like to introduce to you a very interesting case from Burdwan that Guha cites in his article. This case from Burdwan district clearly shows how the new concept of commercial time tampered with the natural cycle.

Burdwan was a thriving district during the early years of British rule, and because of its high potential for revenue generation, it became essential for funding the East India Company's investments. The British government in Calcutta remained steadfast in their demand for timely tax payments in spite of natural disasters like floods and cyclones (1787), maintaining that even these calamities were inadmissible reasons for tax breaks. With disastrous results, zamindars (landlords) and ryots (tenant-cultivators) were both routinely forced to practise fiscal restraint.

Even though he came from a strong and affluent family, the young Raja of Burdwan found it difficult to satisfy these expectations. He drew attention to the double standard in governance, pointing out that landlords lacked efficient legal means to collect debts from their tenants, while the government had quick legal action to enforce its own claims. Because of this, landlords were powerless to comply, even if they wanted to, underscoring the fact that justice was more closely related to timeliness than equity.

A British officer assigned to the area, collector Samuel Davis, understood the peril of strict tax collection schedules. He cautioned that making landlords collect rents between April and June would go against custom and harm peasants during their critical time for cultivation. In accordance with custom, rent collection usually only started in Bhadra (August–September), after the crops had grown, enabling peasants to pay back loans obtained with the expectation of a bountiful harvest. According to Davis, requiring punctuality at the expense of custom and survival would only unfairly place the burden on peasants, whose hardships were disregarded by a system that valued timeliness over contextual justice. Yet, his reservations

received no sympathy from the authorities, who considered regulatory discipline above the lived realities of rural Bengal.

Having discussed all the major points, let us wind up our lecture with a brief summary of all the major points we discussed so far. In the pre-colonial feudal system, taxation was closely tied to the natural rhythms of agricultural life. Taxes were assessed based on the actual yield of crops, which in turn depended on seasonal cycles, rainfall, and the rhythms of sowing and harvest. This meant that revenue collection was flexible and responsive to the uncertainties of agricultural production. However, under colonial rule, this system was replaced by a capitalist logic of fixed and punctual revenue demands. The British administration imposed a rigid schedule for tax payments, regardless of actual production or local conditions. This shift introduced a mechanical notion of time and punctuality into agrarian life, replacing the older, cyclical understanding of time. Peasants were now required to pay taxes on a fixed date, even if the harvest had failed or was delayed. This change not only disrupted traditional agrarian practices but also subjected the peasantry to new forms of economic pressure and legal coercion, as punctuality in payment became the central criterion for justice in the colonial revenue system.