

NPTEL
Nation and Narration

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Transcript from the Video

Hello everyone, in our last lecture, we explored the concept of “alternative modernity.” The model of modernity founded on Western norms encountered two significant challenges. Firstly, it presented the orient as incapable of self-reform. The presence of the West was often considered necessary to actualize the reform. Secondly, the uncritical imitation of the Western notion of modernity meant the absence of a nationalist imprint. In response to this dilemma, 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 neither completely modern nor fully Indian. It, in fact 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 the West could dominate the entire world because of their material prowess. So, it is imperative that we should follow the Western values in the material sphere. While the West was seen as superior in material progress, the East was regarded as superior in domestic and spiritual matters. Therefore, domestic values were drawn from the East. The country’s elite intelligentsia emphasized tradition in shaping an alternative modernity, but they did not blindly imitate the early 19th-century Hindu culture in the form it existed then. Instead, they believed that the outdated traditions should be discarded and reformed to align with modern ideals. Reforming Hindu traditions was the first step in developing this alternative modernity.

The idea of colonial modernity had a great influence on every aspect of Indian life. It significantly transformed the traditional Indian household in many ways. One interesting aspect to explore is the way the traditional joint families got replaced by the modern nuclear families in the late nineteenth century. This period marked an important shift in the understanding of what constitutes a household under the influence of colonial modernity. During this time, the coexistence of traditional Indian values and Western material values gave rise to a unique blend of cultural and societal dynamics. This fusion was characterized by the adaptation of certain Western practices and ideals while preserving essential traditional values. This transformation in the image of the household is reflective of broader shifts in society, and it underscores the complex interplay between colonial influences and the enduring significance of traditional Indian values. To develop a proper understanding of these changes, we necessarily need to delve into certain specific factors that define this changing notion of the household and how it represented a microcosm of the broader changes taking place in India during this period.

The first major change that I want to highlight here is a shift away from the extended and joint family structure and the formation of nuclear families based on the concept of companionate marriage. The traditional view of marriage was that the primary purpose of a man and a woman in a marital framework was procreation. In other words, marriage aimed to make sure that the family line is not broken. This idea that the marriage is solely for the

creation of progeny was at war with the ideals of modern companionate marriage which emphasized that marriage did not just mean the procreation, but also the strong bond and friendship between two like-minded people. In the framework of the modern companionate marriage, the wife was also considered a friend and companion to her husband. So, treating one's wife as a friend or a companion often meant showing affection, intimacy, and equality. But, there was a problem here. In the conventional joint family structure, it was not often possible for young couple to show their affection for each other in public. Now you may ask why? Well, the public display of affection was often against the existing moral codes of the joint family. Aspects like the public display of affection, showing intimacy towards each other in public, displays of affection such as holding hands, or exchanging glances, or sharing private jokes and so on were often seen as inappropriate and indecent. It was also perceived as even disrespectful to the elders. Such behavior was seen as violating the moral codes of modesty and decorum in the household. In the moral universe of the joint family, the love or affection between a husband and wife was supposed to remain very private, subdued, and subordinated to collective familial responsibilities. In short, the modern notions of companionate marriage which emphasized mutual affection and public display of intimacy, stood in stark tension with the traditional norms of the joint family, clearly challenging the very basis of marriage and relationships in the extended household. In the traditional joint family framework, both men and women made it a point to adhere to a social code that required them to show attention to other family members. This was to prove that they were not obsessed with each other in a selfish or inappropriate way. This implies that the joint family which represented the local customs and traditions was seen as an impediment to the creation of a modern nuclear family based on the values of modern companionate marriage.

What does this show? This shows that a separation from the joint family was necessary to set up the modern conjugal life. Here we should note that the emergence of the modern family was not the result of a conscious attempt on the part of the modern colonial youth, in the sense that one fine morning the youth in the new middle class did not decide to live away from their joint family to start a modern nuclear family. Well, this separation was rather gradual and natural. It was facilitated by the newer material opportunities created by the colonial rule. One of the most important forces in this regard was the formation of the modern occupational life. The emergence of the modern occupational life played a crucial role in disrupting the conventional structure of the joint family. One of the primary reasons why joint family was retained was the agrarian occupation of the individuals. The family members stayed together in large family groups to look after the farm field. It was also necessary that there should be a large labour force to do the farming. The joint family often provided the labour force for the agricultural activities.

With the development of modern professions, emergence of bureaucratic jobs, and the urban job markets, young men started migrating to cities in pursuit of salaried work. Since these modern jobs were located far from the village, the colonial youth was often forced to leave their joint family and settle down in places near their workplace. As a result, the joint family system slowly eroded, giving rise to nuclear families which centered around smaller conjugal units. This shift reconfigured the existing spatial arrangements. Instead of the large space of the ancestral homes in the joint family, there came into being smaller, private homes meant for two or three people. The absence of other family members and the creation of the space exclusively for a couple significantly altered emotional and social dynamics. The new space, that is the space of the nuclear families, prioritized the marital bond, individual autonomy and affection over the duty-bound familial ties and collective responsibility in the joint family.

Kaviraj in his article clearly demonstrates this radical change in family relations in the

colonial period through the autobiography of Sibnath Sastry. Sibnath Sastry was a Bengali social reformer, writer, translator, scholar, editor philosopher and historian. Sastry's family represented the first generation that came under the direct influence of modernity. Through a juxtaposition of Sibnath Sastry's life with that of his father and grandfather, Kaviraj clearly shows how the modern nuclear family came into being in colonial Bengal and how it differed from the joint family. Sastry's grandfather lived in a joint family and he was a traditional pandit in his village. But Sibnath Sastry's father, Harananda Bhattacharyya, received the modern education and managed to secure a government job. This means that his job necessitated him to move away from his ancestral joint family and move to a place that is near his work-place. Instead of depending upon village support and land ownership, Sastry's father worked as a teacher in government-funded schools and he earned a regular salary. His job demanded frequent relocation from place to place and this changed how the family lived. Harananda, however, did not take his family with him. He wanted to keep some traditions. While his wife and children stayed in the village as part of the joint family, he moved to different places for his work. Since distances between his workplaces and ancestral homes were not too great, he could easily visit his family on weekends and holidays. Harananda, Sibnath Sastry's father, followed this lifestyle throughout his life. While his real home remained in the village, he stayed in temporary rented rooms near his workplace. But in Sibnath Sastry's time, things changed further. As opposed to his father, who kept his family in the joint family in the village, Sibnath took his wife and children along with him wherever his job took him. This marked a radical shift from the older way of living in a permanent ancestral home. Never ever in their lives did Sastry's family have a fixed place in the village. Instead, they lived together in different rented houses, following the demands of his work. This change made family life more connected in one way, as they stayed together. But, it also meant letting go of the deep ties to the ancestral home that had been central to his father's life. The government jobs changed the lives of the modern youth in many ways. First of all, the youth who secured the government jobs had to move away from their ancestral homes, since the workplaces were far away from the home. Many of them, especially those belonged to the elite spectrum of the job, got to live in large, comfortable government housing. As a result, they got a lot of opportunities to spend more time with their wives, thereby creating a new form of conjugal life in contradistinction to the village-centered family life of their previous generations. For those who were financially stable, this meant a young couple with good income living in each other's close company in large, stylish homes.

When families moved away from their ancestral homes, everything changed. In the old system, elders and relatives were always around, watching over young couples and making sure they followed traditional values, like maintaining a sense of modesty in marriage. But once a couple moved away, there was no one to enforce these rules. Without family members constantly offering advice, the husband naturally turned to his wife for support and guidance. This didn't mean men and women suddenly became equals in terms of power, but it did mean they shared the same experiences. They had to make decisions together, solve problems together, and navigate life as a team. For husbands, having a wife who was uneducated or unable to understand their interests became a real problem. It was simply inconvenient if she couldn't engage in conversations or share in his concerns. So, many men started educating their wives—not necessarily out of a desire for gender equality, but because it made their own lives easier. Over time, this led to a subtle shift. As couples faced life's ups and downs together, their shared experiences created a deeper bond. Unlike in a joint family, where memories were shared with many relatives, now the couple had a world of their own. This brought them closer. Interestingly, while most marriages didn't start as love stories, many became romantic over time. Living together in a modern setting, dealing with work, and

being influenced by ideas of independence and even romantic novels—these things shaped a new kind of intimacy between husbands and wives. This period marked the elite native bourgeoisie's invention of the concept of the "modern private," which was necessary to reshape the traditional domestic sphere both structurally and ideologically. As noted by Bose, this signaled "the breakdown of the idea of a larger order and the assertion of individual independence, as well as the newfound importance placed on intimate personal relationships."

In the upper echelons of society, the concept of family planning has long been ingrained in their culture. This is mainly due to their exposure to Victorian morality, which took root as early as the early 19th century. Under the influence of Victorian moral standards, which significantly impacted the *bhadralok*, having a large family with numerous children was viewed as a sign of sexual profligacy and a lack of sexual discipline. Consequently, the affluent middle class, influenced by these values, actively began controlling their birth rates from the 19th century onward. They pursued this goal through means such as self-discipline or by resorting to artificial contraception methods. This was a conscious effort on their part to align with the prevailing Victorian moral standards and avoid being perceived as lacking in sexual restraint and discipline.

In this period of the new family system, there was a noticeable shift towards focusing more on children. Families began using the new family structure as a platform to impart traditional values to their children, while also providing them with access to modern education. As Chatterjee points out, the home became the rightful space for shaping the moral character of the emerging citizens of the nation by shielding them from corrupting external influences. In this context, children, especially boys during this era, were expected to embody a particular set of virtues. They were to be self-reliant, hard-working, self-denying, ascetic, obedient, truthful, austere, and unselfish, content with only the essentials for physical well-being. They were expected to prioritize intellectual and spiritual pursuits over the pursuit of material wealth, understanding that the spiritual dimension of life held greater importance than the material one. As Chatterjee observes, the home became the proper domain "where the spiritual character of the new citizen of the nation would be cleansed of outside, corrupting influences" (12). Accordingly, children— especially male children of this period were expected to be "self-reliant and hard-working, but self-denying, ascetic, obedient, truthful, austere and unselfish, satisfied with the few things necessary for his physical upkeep. He would be a person able to engage his mind in more worthy pursuits than mere acquisition of worldly goods; one who knows well that the material side of life is less important than its spiritual counterpart". (Bose 140) However, this division between the spiritual and material aspects of life, as meticulously constructed by the native bourgeoisie through the idealization of the new child, ultimately reinforced the existing disparities in caste and class. This created a clear separation between the spiritual and material realms, contributing to the persistence of social inequalities. Consequently, the colonial period witnessed the emergence of a childhood that was not wholly Westernized but rather evolved in alignment with Western models, resulting in a fusion of both traditional and modern values.

The interior of the homes also underwent drastic changes during this time. Previously home just served a functional purpose, that is it was simply a place to live. But now the home became a place to mark one's changed modern sensibility. We can say for certain that one of the first areas that underwent a change due to colonial modernity was the traditional Indian household. This started with a significant overhaul of the conventional family structure. The concepts of discipline and order, which played a crucial role in shaping the way nationalists

envisioned native culture, also began to influence the domestic sphere of native life. Discipline was considered as an important aspect which made the Britishers powerful. It was also seen as the reason for them developing a civilization. Thus, “discipline” was seen as essential to the power of the colonial state.” This idea of discipline was further brought to the home. Influenced by Western homes, the Indian bourgeoisie of the time made extensive efforts to modernize their households.

Colonisers pictured the Indian household as unhygienic. It was often said that as people who enter an Indian home would feel as if they have been transported there to atone for “all the sins of [their] life.” To answer this charge and the similar charges against the inner spiritual realm of the society, the Indian intelligentsia set out to reform the domestic sphere. In order to execute this transformation, the family which was blamed to be devoid of discipline was chosen by the Indian reformist leaders.

The strong desire for order and discipline in the sphere of the home can be very well compared to the larger desire for a disciplined and organized society. Just as the intelligentsia wished for a society that follows rules and is governed by law and order, so also there was a desire for a well-managed household. This connection shows that the need for structure goes beyond just the home and applies to the nation as well. A well-organized household reflects the hope for a well-governed country, which is often seen as an important part of modernization and progress. This transformation in the native domestic sphere was further evident in how traditional Indian homes were portrayed as lacking in both cultural aesthetics and moral values. Dipesh Chakrabarty illustrates this point by referencing a passage from *Streetsiksha*, a document on women’s education in Bengal. In this passage, a traditional Bengali home is contrasted with a Western one, highlighting the changes that are to be brought about in native domestic life. He quotes a passage from *Streetsiksha*, a document on women’s education in Bengal. Here, a traditional Bengali home and a Western home are juxtaposed against each other. He says.

The house of any civilised European is like the abode of the gods. Every household object is clean, set in its proper place and decorated: nothing seems unclean or smells foul.... It is as if [the goddess of] had become manifest to please the human eye. In the middle of the room would be a covered table with a bouquet of flowers on it, while around it would be [a few] chairs nicely arranged [with] everything sparkling clean. But enter a house in our country and you would feel as if you had been transported there by your destiny to make you atone for all the sins of your life. [A mass of] cow dung torturing the senses...dust in the air, a growing heap of ashes, flies buzzing around... a little boy urinating into the ground and putting the mess back into his mouth....The whole place is dominated by a stench that seems to be running free...There is no order anywhere, the household objects are so unclean that they only evoke disgust. (277)

The idea of discipline was the key to colonial aesthetic. The traditional Indian homes were portrayed as having no discipline and hence lacking aesthetics. In the traditional Indian conception, home primarily had a functional purpose, that is a space for living. But during the colonial period, the conception of home as a living space alone underwent a drastic change. It soon became a reflection of one's class identity. Colonial discourse often portrayed traditional Indian homes as chaotic, cluttered, and lacking in aesthetic coherence—an absence of "discipline" that was equated with a lack of taste or refinement. In contrast, European notions of the home emphasized

order, symmetry, cleanliness, and spatial demarcation, aligning with Enlightenment ideals of rationality and control. While traditional Indian homes were primarily functional—designed to accommodate extended families, daily routines, and climate-related needs—they were not concerned with visual spectacle or the display of personal identity. However, under colonial influence, the home began to shift from a utilitarian space to a symbol of class identity. Furniture, décor, and spatial arrangements were increasingly modelled on European styles, and the home came to reflect not just one's way of living but one's assimilation into bourgeois, colonial modernity. This redefinition of domestic space aligned with broader processes of cultural transformation, where aesthetics became a tool for signalling civility, hierarchy, and modern belonging.

Now let us summarize all the major points we discussed so far. The colonial portrayal of Indian households as unhygienic and disorderly prompted Indian reformist leaders to embark on a mission to transform the domestic sphere. Discipline, considered a key element of British power and civilization, was introduced into Indian homes, primarily through women, as a response to these critiques. The home, perceived as a space where the nationalist intelligentsia could exert some autonomy and control, became a focal point for this transformation. The drive for discipline within the household not only aimed to address colonial criticisms but also served as a strategy to assert Indian autonomy and sovereignty, particularly in the context of women's roles. This complex interplay between colonial influences, gender dynamics, and the nationalist agenda highlights the significance of discipline in shaping both private and public aspects of Indian society. I hope you are thorough with these concepts. Thank you!