

NPTEL
Nation and Narration

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Week 4 Lecture 23
Transcript from the Video

Hello everyone, welcome to the fourth week of the course Nation and Narration. Before we get into this week's lecture, let me give you an overview of the major topics that we are going to discuss this week.

The first lecture of the week focuses on how women's clothing changed in colonial India. We will mainly look at the history of the sari, which became a symbol of national identity across the country. Our discussion will focus on colonial Bengal, where the debates about women's dress first began. The main source for this is Meredith Borthwick's book "The Changing Role of Women in Bengal 1849–1905." The sari, especially the style called Bhramika sari, was created as a response to two criticisms from Europeans about Indian clothing. First, they said that Indian women's dress was too revealing and inappropriate. Traditionally, upper-class and upper-caste women wore a sari made of fine, transparent muslin, which was a single piece of cloth draped around the body, along with jewelry. This was comfortable for Bengal's hot weather, but under Victorian ideas of modesty, it was seen as improper, even when worn only around male family members. The second problem was the use of the veil. Earlier, upper-class women wore veils that covered their entire body. But colonial thinkers saw the veil as a symbol of women's oppression by Indian men. So, clothing reforms had to balance two ideas: Women's dress should not be too revealing, and at the same time, it should not feel like forced control, such as making them wear veils. The goal was to promote modesty without harsh rules. This led to the creation of a new, modest style of sari.

The second lecture of the week deals with the notion of friendship. In this lecture, we will explore the idea of friendship as discussed in Sudipta Kaviraj's influential book *Inventing the Private*, focusing on his analysis of Sibnath Sastry's autobiography. Colonial modernity brought about a radical redefinition of friendship in India. Several socio-political changes—such as the spread of Western education, the rise of new political structures, the growth of print culture, and evolving ideas of individuality and community—reshaped how friendship was understood in literature, politics, and daily life. In pre-colonial India, relationships were largely shaped by caste, kinship ties, and religious affiliations. However, with colonial modernity came a more individualistic view of friendship, inspired by Western liberal thought. Among the educated elite, friendships began to move beyond traditional boundaries of caste and religion, creating new forms of solidarity and intellectual companionship.

The focus of the third lecture is the rise of the novel as a new literary genre in colonial India. In this lecture, we will examine how the novel contributed to shaping the moral and intellectual world of the colonial middle class. While our primary focus will be on early Malayalam novels such as *Indulekha*, *Vasumati*, and *Saraswathivijayam*, the themes and concerns they raise are relevant to literary developments across many Indian languages during the colonial period. To deepen your understanding of the topics we discuss, you may refer to works such as "*Realism and Reality: The Novel and Society in India*," G. Arunima's

“*Writing Culture: Of Modernity and the Malayalam Novel*,” Dilip Menon’s “*Caste and Colonial Modernity: Reading Saraswativijayam*,” and Meena T. Pillai’s “*Modernity and the Fetishizing of Female Chastity: C.V. Raman Pillai and the Anxieties of the Early Malayalam Novel*.”

In the fourth lecture, we will focus on a particularly intriguing phase of the nationalist movement—one where colonial presence was paradoxically viewed as necessary for the restoration of India’s lost glory. The idea of modernity in colonial India changed a lot over time. In the beginning, modernity was not seen as something against British rule. Instead, many educated Indians in the 19th century believed that modernity could actually be achieved through the help of the British. These Indians, influenced by Western education and reform movements, thought that British rule was important for improving Indian society. They believed the British could help fix what they saw as the problems and weaknesses of Indian traditions. They pointed to actions taken by the British—like banning sati (the practice where widows were burned on their husband's funeral pyre), encouraging widow remarriage, and setting up Western-style schools—as signs that the British were helping India move forward. Many early reformers believed that the British brought important tools like reason, science, and law, which could help clean up Indian society and restore its greatness. In this way of thinking, British rule wasn’t just accepted because it was powerful; it was seen as necessary for India's moral and cultural rebirth. The dream was to bring back a pure and strong Indian past, but ironically, people thought they needed British help to do it. The British government, with its focus on rational thinking, legal systems, and progress, was seen as a guide that could lead India back to the greatness of its ancient civilization. Our discussion in this lecture will center around two key texts: Ranajit Guha’s “*Neel-darpan: The Image of a Peasant Revolt in a Liberal Mirror*” and Partha Chatterjee’s “*History and the Nationalization of Hinduism*.”

In the last lecture, we will analyse the film *Lagaan* and discuss how it is often seen as a symbol of pride and resistance against British colonial rule. Many people think of *Lagaan* as a story where the colonized people defeat the British in a dramatic cricket match, showing their victory over colonialism. However, we will explore how this victory is shown through the lens of an "ideal Englishman" and the very colonial structures that oppressed them. In this lecture, we will analyze how the film portrays the British colonial administration as being mostly civil and morally good, with only a few corrupt officials. Unlike what many people think, *Lagaan* is not a strong criticism of colonialism or a celebration of the creation of an independent nation. Instead, it shows a return to an old, monarchical system of rule and never truly challenges the British colonial system. Through this analysis, we will explore how *Lagaan* presents the colonial system as generally fair, with its wrongdoings only caused by a few bad people, rather than questioning the whole idea of colonial rule. Since we have formed a good idea about the gist of the major ideas we are going to discuss this week, let us start the class.