

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

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**Transcript from the Video**

Hello everyone. In the previous lectures, we primarily examined the idea of modernity and how it radically altered the socio-cultural landscape of colonial India. In today's lecture, we will turn our attention to a particularly curious phase in the nationalist movement—one in which the presence of colonial forces was paradoxically seen as essential for restoring India to its lost glory. In this lecture, we will be engaging with Ranajit Guha's *Nil-darpan: The Image of a Peasant Revolt in a Liberal Mirror* and Partha Chatterjee's "*History and Nationalization of Hinduism*" as our primary texts.

The concept of modernity in colonial India underwent significant transformation over time. In its initial phase, modernity was not imagined in opposition to colonial rule but rather as something that could be achieved through it. Many members of the 19th-century Indian intelligentsia, especially those shaped by Western education and reformist thought, believed that the British Empire played a vital role in guiding India toward progress. They viewed British rule as a civilizing force capable of reforming what was perceived as a corrupted and stagnant Indian tradition. Drawing upon the reformist initiatives taken by the colonial government—such as the abolition of sati, the promotion of widow remarriage, and the establishment of Western-style education—these elites saw the empire as an ally in their project of cultural rejuvenation. Reformist initiatives by the British, such as the abolition of sati, promotion of Western education, and support for social reform, reinforced this view. The colonial state appeared to offer the tools—reason, science, law—to cleanse Indian society of its perceived ills and return it to a purified version of its past. Thus, many early reformers defended colonial rule as a necessary condition for India's moral and cultural rejuvenation. The Empire was imagined as a rational and progressive force, capable of guiding India out of superstition and into modernity. In this framework, colonial rule was defended not simply as an inevitable political condition but as a moral and intellectual necessity for national regeneration. The desire to reclaim a glorified Indian past, untainted by what was seen as superstition and social decay, was paradoxically linked to the continuation of foreign rule. The belief was that British governance, with its emphasis on rationality, law, and progress, could help Indians recover the purity and strength of their ancient civilization.

Another major factor that cemented this thought was the way the Indian history was presented to the natives. Indian history has often been divided into three broad periods: the ancient, the medieval, and the modern. This way of looking at history was shaped by British orientalist, and it became very influential in both colonial and early nationalist thinking. According to this view, ancient India was a time of greatness—full of wisdom, culture, and learning. The medieval period, especially under Muslim rule, was seen as a time of decline and disorder. The modern period, marked by British rule, was believed to bring progress, reason, and reform. This way of dividing history influenced how many English-educated Indians thought about their past and future. They believed that India could become great again, but only with the help of the British. Since the British had already introduced some reforms—like banning sati, encouraging widow remarriage, and starting Western-style

education—they were seen as playing a positive role in improving Indian society. As a result, many people thought that colonial rule was necessary to reform India and help it move forward. They felt that the British could guide India out of its so-called backwardness and help it return to the glory of its ancient past. In this view, the British were not seen as oppressors, but as helpful partners in India's journey towards modernity.

This early phase of colonial modernity thus reflected a collaborative impulse, where the colonized sought to work with the colonizer to reinvent the nation. Only later did this idea evolve into a more radical, anti-imperialist vision of an alternative modernity rooted in indigenous values and resistance to colonial domination. It was only later, especially with the growth of the anti-colonial movement, that this belief began to change. More people started to argue that India could become modern and progressive on its own terms, without depending on the British. This marked a shift in thinking—from seeing British rule as necessary, to seeing it as something that needed to be challenged and ended.

Partha Chatterjee quotes a very interesting excerpt by Bholonath Chakravarti to highlight the faith of colonial intelligentsia in the rule of the British against the previous Mughal rule is a case in point in this context. Chakravarti in his essay *History and Nationalization of Hinduism* says: “There are limits to everything. When the oppressions of the Mughals became intolerable, the Lord of the Universe provided a means of escape.... The resumption of good fortune was initiated on the day the British flag was first planted on this land. Tell me, if Yavana rule had continued, what would the condition of this country have been today? It must be loudly declared that it is to bless us that isvara has brought the English to this country. British rule has ended the atrocities of the Yavanas.... There can be no comparison between Yavana rule and British rule: the difference seems greater than that between darkness and light or between misery and bliss.

The worldview expressed in this passage is strongly colonial and orientalist, with British rule being viewed as a divine gift and a necessary force to save India from the alleged tyranny of previous Muslim rulers, known here as "Yavanas." It implies that Mughal suffering was so great that the British, who were said to have been sent by the "Lord of the Universe," were the only ones who could bring about peace and order. This perspective is based on the orientalist division of Indian history into three periods: a modern, progressive period under British rule; a medieval, decadent Muslim period; and an ancient, glorious past. Here, the British are hailed as enlightened leaders who brought light where darkness once existed by putting an end to the violence and corruption of the previous government.

Another interesting text I want to cite in this regard is Bankim Chandra's *Anandamath*. Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay's 1882 novel *Anandamath* is a seminal work of Indian literature and nationalist philosophy. The novel, which is set in late 18th-century Bengal during the Sannyasi Rebellion, narrates the tale of a band of warrior monks who rebel against the Nawabs' oppressive rule and, implicitly, against the British. The novel combines religious symbolism, patriotic fervor, and historical fiction. The protagonists of the tale are Mahendra and Kalyani, a couple who split up while escaping political unrest and starvation. A group of austere warriors known as the Sannyasis, who reside in a forest monastery known as the "Anandamath" or "Abbey of Bliss," save Mahendra. These monks have given up the material world to fight for their motherland's freedom under the charismatic leadership of Satyananda. They derive strength from their devotion to a divine Mother figure and are subject to a rigorous code. Three images—the revered Mother, the poor Mother, and the glorious Mother—that stand for India's past, present, and future serve as symbols for this Mother throughout the novel. *Anandamath* is most famous for introducing the song “Vande

Mataram”, which became a rallying cry in the Indian freedom struggle. The novel played a crucial role in creating an emotional and spiritual vision of the nation as a divine mother worthy of devotion and sacrifice. It is very interesting to note that in *Anandamath*, the main enemy of the nationalists is not the British, but the Nawab of Bengal. The British are not portrayed as cruel or oppressive rulers; instead, their qualities—such as discipline, fairness, and courage—are often appreciated in the novel. They are shown as a force that brings stability and order. In fact, their rule is seen as necessary for initiating reforms and helping India recover its lost glory. This suggests that the early nationalist imagination, as reflected in the novel, did not always view British rule as entirely negative. Rather than directly opposing colonial power, the novel places the blame on the earlier Muslim rulers, especially the Nawab, for India’s decline. This reflects a belief, shaped by Orientalist ideas, that British presence could help revive a once-glorious Hindu past. The Great Man in *Anandamath* who laments that Hindu religion has been lost vindicates the necessity of colonial rule in India. He observes:

“Currently, this country has no knowledge of the external. There is nobody to teach also. Now, India has to get this knowledge from outside countries. The British are experts in this knowledge and they are good at teaching the public also. If the British get to rule this country, naturally, that knowledge would grow here too. Till the time Hindus don’t become knowledgeable, virtuous and strong, the British would rule over this country. Under the British rule, people will live in comfort and they will follow their religion without any problems. Now drop your weapons and stop fighting against British and come with me” (142-43).

This passage highlights a significant component of early nationalist thinking in colonial India and demonstrates a strong belief in the British Empire's civilizing mission. It demonstrates that colonial rule was, at least for some, viewed as a necessary stage in India's quest for knowledge, advancement, and self-improvement rather than as an oppressive force. According to the speaker, India must rely on the British to gain knowledge of the "external" world, which includes modern science, rationality, and education as defined by Western standards. In addition to ruling, the British are presented as kind mentors who can help Indians become more enlightened. Their rule is viewed as beneficial and even necessary for India's development. The notion that Indians will remain under British rule "until they become knowledgeable, virtuous, and strong" suggests a form of conditional sovereignty in which British rule is defended as a short-term but essential measure. The assertion that religious freedom is unaffected by British rule and that individuals can peacefully practice their dharma also evokes a strong sense of comfort. In addition to softening the perception of colonial power, this appeal to religious freedom promotes acceptance rather than resistance. Above all, the exhortation to "drop your weapons and stop fighting the British" makes it abundantly evident that violent rebellion is not acceptable. Instead of revolution, the speaker advocates cooperation with the British as the more effective path to national progress. This viewpoint demonstrates the extent to which colonial ideology influenced certain segments of the Indian intelligentsia, particularly those who were influenced by reformist and Orientalist frameworks. Thus, British rule in India was initially conceived a channel to achieve modernity.

The last text example that I wish to highlight here is Ranajit Guha’s critique of *Nil Darpan*, a play by Dinabandhu Mitra. This play has often been praised in nationalist circles for showing the cruelty of British indigo planters and the bravery of Indian peasants. However, Guha in his famous essay *Nil-darpan: The Image of a Peasant Revolt in a Liberal Mirror* argues that

the play is shaped by the liberal and humanitarian ideas of the Western-educated Bengali elite of that time. The farmers had no choice, and they were paid very little. If they refused, they were beaten or punished in other ways. The play focuses on a landowner named Golok Chandra Basu and his sons, Nabin and Madhab. They try to help the farmers and stand up against the British planters. Nabin believes in the law and tries to take legal action, but he soon realizes that the system is unfair and supports the British. The court and the police do not help the farmers. Instead, they protect the planters. As the story goes on, the situation becomes worse. The planters continue to hurt the farmers, and no one is able to stop them. Even though Nabin and others want to fight back, they feel helpless because the government is on the side of the British. The play shows how much the farmers suffered under British rule. It also shows that the educated Indians at the time still believed in British justice and did not question the rule of the British. They thought the British were better than the earlier rulers and could bring progress to India.

This play has often been praised in nationalist circles for showing the cruelty of British indigo planters and the bravery of Indian peasants. However, Guha argues that the play is shaped by the liberal and humanitarian ideas of the Western-educated Bengali elite of that time. According to Guha, although Nil Darpan criticizes the violent acts of individual British planters and a few careless colonial officials, it does not question British rule itself. In fact, it shows a strong belief in British law and the justice system. For the educated middle class, British rule was seen as a protection against what they considered Indian problems like disorder, superstition, and tyranny. They did not see colonialism as something to be resisted, but as something necessary for reform and progress. Even the peasant characters in the play are not shown as rebels trying to change the system. Instead, they are presented as law-abiding people who know their rights and only resist when pushed too far—but never to the point of wanting to overturn British rule. According to Guha, the play doesn't support a radical or revolutionary anti-colonial message. Instead, it reflects a kind of partnership between the British and the Indian elite—based on law, education, and shared goals—rather than a real break from colonial power.

This fascination for the continuation of the foreign rule was not a long lived one, since the elite nationalist intelligentsia soon realized that absolute sovereignty over the territory was necessary to effect a complete cultural reform in the colony. They realized that as long as India remained under foreign rule, any changes made would ultimately serve the interests of the colonizers, not the Indian people. To truly transform Indian society—whether in terms of social practices, education, or political institutions—the nation needed complete control over its own affairs. Cultural renewal, they believed, required not just partial freedom or reforms from above, but total sovereignty. Only then could Indians shape their own identity, values, and future without interference from colonial powers. This marked a shift in nationalist thinking—from hoping for reform under British rule to demanding full independence as the only way to achieve a true national renaissance.

In the beginning, many members of the Indian intelligentsia believed that cultural reform could be carried out through the laws and legislative efforts of the British colonial government. They hoped that Western education and modern institutions introduced by the colonizers would help improve Indian society. However, this belief did not last long. Over time, the nationalist elite began to feel that culture—unlike administration or economy—was a deeply sacred and sensitive part of Indian life. They realized that outsiders, no matter how well-meaning, could not be trusted to reshape India's cultural values and traditions. Cultural reform, they came to believe, should not be left in the hands of Westerners. It had to be an

internal process, led and shaped by Indians themselves. This growing conviction made them rethink their earlier dependence on colonial rule. They understood that unless India had complete political freedom, any attempt to reform its cultural life would remain partial and incomplete. True reform required more than cooperation with the British; it required absolute sovereignty. Only through full self-rule could Indians take control of their cultural destiny and rebuild their society on their own terms.

Similarly during this time the colonial government also decided not to interfere in the cultural and religious matters of the natives in the colony. During the early years of colonial rule, the British often got involved in the religious matters of Indian society. But after the British Crown took over power in 1858, the government decided not to interfere in issues related to personal laws, which were based on the religious traditions of different communities and interpreted by the courts. This change followed the British effort to create a legal system based on equality by introducing the same civil and criminal laws for everyone. However, they purposely left out personal laws—like those related to marriage, inheritance, and religious practices—because they didn't want to interfere with sensitive religious beliefs. The British feared that if they tried to reform religion, it might be seen as an attempt to spread Christianity. Their choice to avoid such issues also helped them appear neutral and secular in the eyes of the Indian public. So, by not touching personal laws, the colonial state tried to show that it respected religious diversity and did not favor any particular faith. This may have also motivated the colonial intelligentsia to seek complete sovereignty over the country, believing that only with full control could they reform the nation along modern lines.

Having discussed all the major points, let us now summarize the lecture. In colonial India, the idea of modernity initially evolved in tandem with colonial rule rather than in opposition to it. Many 19th-century Indian intellectuals, particularly those shaped by Western education and reformist ideals, viewed British rule as a civilizing force capable of revitalizing what they saw as a decaying Indian society. Reforms such as the abolition of sati, the promotion of widow remarriage, and the introduction of Western-style education were perceived as steps toward moral and cultural renewal. The colonial state was imagined as a bearer of rationality, science, and law—tools considered essential for India's regeneration. This belief was reinforced by the colonial construction of Indian history into three distinct periods: ancient, medieval, and modern. Ancient India was portrayed as a golden age of wisdom and culture, while the medieval period—especially under Muslim rule—was seen as one of decline. The modern period, coinciding with British rule, was presented as an era of progress and enlightenment. This framework, shaped largely by British orientalist, influenced the worldview of the English-educated Indian elite, who began to believe that only the British could guide India back to its former greatness. As a result, many early reformers supported colonial rule not merely as a political reality but as a moral necessity for India's advancement. They imagined a collaborative model of modernity, where the colonizer and colonized could work together for national rejuvenation. However, this perspective began to shift in the later phase of colonial rule. With the rise of anti-colonial movements, more Indians began to argue for an indigenous vision of modernity, one that rejected colonial tutelage and asserted India's capacity for self-directed progress. Thus, what began as a project of colonial collaboration eventually transformed into a struggle for independence and cultural self-determination.

