

NPTEL
Nation and Narration

Dr. Sreenath V S
Department of HSS, IIT Madras

Week 4 Lecture 28

Transcript from the Video

In the previous lecture, we explored the idea that colonial administration itself was often considered inherently good, with only certain colonial administrators being labeled as corrupt or evil. This perspective was illustrated through Ranajit Guha's article on Neel Darpan, where the colonial system is depicted as neutral, and the blame for injustices is placed solely on individual officials. Today, we will examine this concept in the context of the film *Lagaan*, a movie that is widely viewed as a symbol of nationalist pride and resistance against colonial rule. In popular imagination, *Lagaan* holds a special place as a representation of the struggle between the colonizer and the colonized, with the colonized emerging victorious through a dramatic cricket match. However, this victory is paradoxically framed through the lens of an "ideal Englishman" and the very same colonial structures that oppressed them. In this lecture, we will take a closer look at *Lagaan* through a symptomatic reading to uncover how the colonial administration, portrayed in the film, reinforces its claim to civility and moral integrity. The movie suggests that colonial rule is not fundamentally flawed, but that its corrupt elements are merely the result of a few bad actors. Contrary to the popular view that *Lagaan* is a strong critique of colonialism and a celebration of nation-building, this lecture argues that the film lacks a deeper aspiration for true national sovereignty. Instead, it regresses to an outdated, monarchical form of governance and never fully challenges the colonial system. Through this analysis, we will explore how *Lagaan* portrays the colonial machinery as ultimately just, with its injustices being framed as the result of a few corrupt individuals, rather than questioning the legitimacy of colonial rule itself.

The movie is about the problem of high taxes and how badly the farmers are suffering. In a village called Champaner, the farmers are waiting for rain, but the monsoon is late. Because of this, they cannot grow crops and don't have money to pay the tax. Raja Puran Singh, the king of Champaner, asks the British officer, Captain Andrew Russell, to cancel the tax for that year. But Captain Russell not only says no, he also tells the king to make the farmers pay double tax to make up for the previous year's tax that was waived. The king has no power to say no, so he sadly tells the villagers they must pay double. The villagers go to the king again to ask for help. At that time, the British are playing a game of cricket. A young farmer named Bhuvan sees the game and says it looks silly. Captain Russell hears him and gets angry. He challenges Bhuvan to a cricket match. At first, the villagers are afraid. But then Russell says that if the villagers win the match, they won't have to pay tax for the next three years. If they lose, they will have to pay triple the tax. Bhuvan bravely accepts the challenge for the whole village. Bhuvan becomes the captain of the village team. The villagers practice every day. In the end, they win the cricket match and don't have to pay taxes for the next three years.

Using the format of a sports drama, the movie shows how the villagers stay strong and united against British rule. It looks like a story about how ordinary people fight back and make the British listen to their fair demands. However, if we look more closely, the film also seems to support the British claim that their rule is based on justice, morals, and good behavior. It does

this by showing how the British system removes the bad people from within. To understand this, we need to look at the main villain—Captain Andrew Russell. Interestingly, Russell does not represent the good image the British like to show. He actually goes against the rules and values the British claim to follow. He causes problems for the British system, harms its business, and breaks the idea of being fair and polite. The movie gives us many examples of Russell's wrongdoings. He makes at least three big mistakes that go against the British government's policies and business goals. First, Russell uses his position to serve his personal interests, not the company's. A key example is when he tells Raja Puran Singh that he will cancel the tax only if the king, who is vegetarian, eats meat. Puran Singh tells Russell that the villagers believe praying at a temple will bring rain, but the temple is in another king's land. He wants Russell to ask that king to allow his people to go there. While they are talking, meat is served, but Puran Singh refuses to eat it because of his beliefs. This makes Russell angry. He says he won't help unless the king eats the meat. When the king asks how the two things are related, Russell says they are not—he just wants to see him eat meat. Puran Singh replies that he cannot go against his religion just to do his job. This makes Russell even more furious. When the king later asks for tax to be waived, Russell says he must now pay double tax to make up for last year's cancellation. But this decision has nothing to do with protecting British interests. It is only because Russell is angry with the king. When the king asks, "How will the farmers pay?", Russell replies, "It's just double tax. And besides, you didn't even eat meat." This shows that if the king had agreed to eat meat, Russell might have let the temple visit happen and not raised the tax. So, it's clear that Russell acts out of personal revenge and uses his power for selfish reasons—not for the good of the British government. He uses his authority to satisfy his own desires

It is important to note that Captain Russell's actions also directly contradict the official policy of the British colonial government in India. After the Crown assumed control in 1858, the British administration adopted a policy of non-interference in the religious affairs of the native population. This decision stemmed largely from a concern that any attempt at religious reform could be perceived as a covert effort to promote Christianity, thereby provoking unrest. The policy also reflected the colonial state's desire to present itself as secular and impartial in matters of faith. This commitment is clearly articulated in the "Proclamation, by the Queen in Council, to the Princes, Chiefs, and People of India," which states: "We declare it to be Our Royal Will and Pleasure that none be in any wise favored, none molested or disquieted by reason of their Religious Faith or Observances ; but that all shall alike enjoy the equal and impartial protection of the Law and We do strictly charge and enjoin all those who may be authority under Us, that they abstain from all interference with the Religious Belief or Worship of any of Our Subjects, on pain of Our highest Displeasure"

By compelling Raja Puran Singh to consume meat—a direct violation of his religious beliefs—Captain Russell flagrantly disregards this royal directive. While there is no suggestion that higher officials in the colonial administration are aware of Russell's misconduct, the incident reveals how he undermines the appearance of neutrality and secularism that the Company and the colonial government seek to maintain. In doing so, Russell emerges as a disruptive figure within the imperial framework, exposing the contradictions between imperial policy and its execution on the ground.

While Russell's first decision to double the tax is already harmful to the villagers, his next decision is even more dangerous—it risks the stability of the colonial system itself. Russell challenges Bhuvan because he believes that Indians are naturally incapable of learning and winning at cricket, especially in a short time. But by offering to cancel three years' worth of

taxes if the villagers win, Russell carelessly risks the Company's revenue. It's important to note that this is not a fight between the British Company and the villagers. It is a personal conflict between Russell and Bhuvan, and Russell is the one who starts it. When Bhuvan calls cricket "a stupid game," he not only insults the sport but also questions the pride and manliness of the British officers. For Russell, beating Bhuvan in cricket is about proving his own masculinity. This cricket match is not something the Company cares about—it matters only to Russell, who sees it as a personal challenge.

From the Company's perspective, Captain Russell is more of a liability than an asset. By gambling with the Company's financial interests, he acts irresponsibly and breaks the chain of command. Colonel Boyer strongly criticizes Russell's reckless offer, warning that it could lead to conflict in the region and loss of revenue. Although Russell assures Boyer that the villagers won't win, Boyer is clearly unhappy with how Russell has overstepped his authority. Boyer reminds him, "The British Empire cannot function according to your whims and fancies," and warns that even if Russell wins, it will be a narrow escape. He emphasizes that Russell is simply an officer serving the Queen and cannot make such decisions without approval. Boyer is also disturbed that Russell has made the colonial government appear no better than a gambler. In his view, Russell's job is to ensure smooth administration—not to stir up trouble. By challenging the villagers to a cricket match, Russell creates unnecessary conflict. Boyer fears this could set a dangerous precedent where others across India might demand tax exemptions through similar games. On top of this, Russell acts dishonorably by bribing Lakha, a member of Bhuvan's team, to sabotage the match. This shows Russell to be impulsive, unfair, and reckless—qualities that do not align with the image of a "civilized" British officer that the colonial state wants to project. Ultimately, Russell is portrayed as a disruptive figure who threatens both the natives and the Company itself. The film ends with Bhuvan's team winning the match, and Russell being punished for his behavior by being transferred to Central Africa. His removal serves to cleanse the colonial system of internal disorder. By punishing Russell, the colonial administration restores peace and discipline, ensuring smoother functioning and avoiding similar problems in the future.

Through these events, the colonial government gets a chance to show itself as fair, just, and honest. Even though losing the cricket match is a big financial loss for the Company, it still keeps the promise made by Captain Russell and cancels the tax for three years. By doing this, the Company tries to show that it values truth and keeps its word. This move helps protect its reputation and builds trust with the villagers, possibly preventing future problems. In the film, this decision by the Company is shown as a smart way to present itself as ethical and fair, especially by not supporting Captain Russell, who showed no respect for the feelings of the villagers. The fact that the villagers had no knowledge of cricket makes the match unfair from the start. But this changes when Elizabeth, Russell's sister, helps the villagers learn the game. Her support shows kindness, understanding, and cooperation. She plays an important role in showing the colonizers as kind rulers. Unlike her brother, Elizabeth appears as a caring and supportive figure who helps Bhuvan, even though her brother tries to stop her. Towards the end of the movie, the Company takes control of the situation to make sure it looks fair and honest. The match is held under the close watch of senior British officers. As the narrator says, "To ensure fair play... senior officials invited neutral umpires from Kanpur." This shows that the Company wants the game to be judged fairly. One moment that clearly shows the British government's sense of justice happens in the final over of the game. Bhuvan's team needs five runs off the last ball. When the ball is bowled, the batter is out, and the English team begins to celebrate. But then the umpire calls it a no-ball, giving Bhuvan's team another chance—and they win the match. This moment shows that the British officials are willing to

stand for fairness and justice, even though it means losing a lot of money. The reactions of the senior officers watching the match also stand out. When Bhuvan's team wins, officials like Boyer, Cotton, and Warren applaud the team, and one of them even says, "He has done it." This shows their admiration for the victory and separates them from Russell's arrogant and unfair behavior. The film clearly draws a line between the broader colonial system and the reckless actions of Captain Russell.

The movie *Lagaan* suggests that the only way for the peasants to escape their suffering is by fully trusting the laws created by the colonial government. The film presents the British rulers as the true protectors of justice, and shows that only through their fair application of the law can the hardships of the native people be reduced. When Bhuvan and the other villagers accept Captain Russell's challenge to a cricket match, it shows their deep trust in the colonial system. As they learn the game with dedication, they never question whether Russell will keep his word. Their only worry is whether they can actually win the match—and the fear of having to pay triple the usual tax if they lose. Although one could say that the villagers' decision is a smart and practical move within the limits of colonial rule—rather than an attempt to resist the system itself—it's also clear that they believe in the justice of the British administration. Their actions reflect not just strategic thinking, but a strong faith in the fairness of the colonial laws and promises.

The movie suggests that while the native king fails to protect the poor peasants, it is the fairness and liberal values of the British colonial government that come to their rescue. The story highlights the native ruler's inability to help his people during times of hardship, while portraying the colonial government—and a few upright Englishmen—as saviors of the oppressed. The film subtly sends the message that the British Raj, in its true form, is a positive force, and any flaws within it, like Captain Russell's actions, can be corrected. Throughout the film, the colonial system is shown distancing itself from Russell's greed, cruelty, and reckless behavior. By doing this, the movie creates a hopeful image of the British administration and implies that justice can prevail if the right people are in charge. In the end, the villagers' trust in British justice is rewarded, reinforcing the idea that English law is fair and all that is needed is an honest and neutral bureaucracy to enforce it. As Ranajit Guha notes in his essay "Neel Darpan: The Image of Peasant Revolt in a Liberal Mirror," this kind of portrayal reflects a deep belief in the fairness of colonial rule, even when criticizing the actions of certain officials.

In *Lagaan*, we can identify three main centers of power—the native king, Raja Puran Singh; Captain Russell; and the larger colonial government. Raja Puran Singh is shown as politically and administratively weak, unable to protect his own people. He depends on Captain Russell even to get permission from his hostile cousin, Diler Singh, for the villagers to visit the Siddheshwar Temple. The king never speaks out against Russell's harsh decision to double the tax. Most strikingly, he does nothing when Russell demands that he eat meat in return for helping with the temple visit. Nor does he offer any support to Bhuvan when the latter accepts Russell's challenge to play a cricket match. Throughout the film, help for the villagers comes not from the native ruler but from elite British figures. It is Elizabeth Russell, Captain Russell's sister, who steps in to teach Bhuvan and his team the rules of cricket. And it is the colonial government that ensures the match is conducted fairly, reinforcing the idea that justice and support come only from within the British administrative system.

In *Lagaan*, three key power centers emerge—the native ruler Raja Puran Singh, Captain Russell, and the overarching colonial administration. Raja Puran Singh is portrayed as both politically and administratively ineffective, unable to safeguard his subjects. He is shown

relying on Captain Russell even for basic matters, such as securing permission from his antagonistic cousin Diler Singh for villagers to access the Siddheshwar Temple. The king remains silent in the face of Russell's arbitrary decision to double the tax, and notably, he does nothing when Russell coerces him into eating meat in exchange for assistance. He also fails to support Bhuvan when the latter bravely accepts the challenge of a cricket match. Throughout the narrative, the villagers receive no meaningful aid from their native ruler. Instead, support consistently comes from elite British characters. Elizabeth Russell, Captain Russell's sister, plays a crucial role in training Bhuvan and his team in the unfamiliar game of cricket. Moreover, it is the colonial government that ensures the match is played under fair conditions. This framing reinforces the notion that justice, fairness, and meaningful support are to be found not within indigenous authority but through the mechanisms of British rule. In the past, the image of a weak Hindu king who couldn't protect his religion, do his duties, or care for his people was often used to justify the British rule in India. Some writers even expressed the belief that British rule was a temporary solution, helping India until it was strong enough to defend itself. In the movie, the weakness of the Hindu king is shown clearly, but religion isn't a major theme.

The character, Captain Russell, represents the corrupt side of British colonialism. He abuses his power, breaks laws, and does whatever he wants, ignoring the rules of the British system. On the other hand, the company that represents the Queen is shown as the only fair and just force in the story. They punish corrupt officials, make sure things are done properly, and ensure fairness for everyone. This "fairness" is made possible because the native king is too weak to protect his people or land. The movie shows that King Raja Puran Singh pays taxes to the company in exchange for the protection they offer. At first, the movie shows the villagers, especially Bhuvan, criticizing the king's weakness and the cruelty of the British. However, when Bhuvan and the villagers meet the king to discuss their problem with double taxation, the focus of their movement changes. Instead of demanding justice, the villagers are now asked to prove they deserve justice. This shifts the entire focus of the movement. Despite appearing benevolent, the colonial administration never questions whether double taxation is fair or acknowledges that it's an issue in the first place. The administration's role is simply to ensure the villagers have a fair chance to prove themselves worthy of justice. This suggests that justice is something to be earned, not a right everyone should have. Justice should be impartial and not depend on proving worthiness. In the movie, neither the peasants nor the king ever question the legitimacy of British rule. The story isn't a revolutionary critique of colonialism or an effort to build a national consciousness. By the end, the village remains largely unchanged. Captain Russell is transferred, but a new captain takes his place, and the village is still ruled by Raja Puran Singh. The peasants' suffering isn't fully addressed, and no permanent solution is offered.

While *Lagaan* could have been a strong criticism of colonial rule and the failure of the king's leadership, the movie never questions the unfairness of the high land taxes. Instead, the peasants' main goal becomes winning the cricket match against Russell to get a tax break for the next three years. The movie never delves into the deeper, systemic injustices of the British colonial administration. An essential element in the formation of a nation is the collective desire to break away from monarchy. It's clear that monarchy and nationhood are fundamentally incompatible. In Western nationalist movements, the journey toward independence was often rooted in resistance to monarchy and a strong belief in popular sovereignty. In *Lagaan*, the villagers are subjects of Raja Puran Singh. They revere him and his ancestors, and they deeply mourn the loss of the king's former glory. However, as the film concludes, the prestige of Raja Puran Singh is restored after being humiliated by Captain

Russell. Despite their victory, the villagers do not express any desire to form a nation. Instead, they reaffirm their loyalty to the monarchy and continue to live under the king's rule. Another noteworthy aspect of the film is the exclusion of women from the cricket game. Only men are allowed to participate, completely sidelining women from the action. The film visually reinforces this gender divide by positioning Gauri and Elizabeth at a distance from the cricket field. It is significant that while the film touches on various minority groups within the Hindu state, such as Dalits, Muslims, and Sikhs, not a single woman plays an active role in the game. The two main female characters, Gauri and Elizabeth, are confined to traditional roles as caregivers and nurturers within the story. This exclusion of women from the game reinforces their marginalization and the patriarchal structures that the film ultimately upholds.