

NPTEL
Nation and Narration

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Week1 Lecture 3
Transcript from the Video

Hello everyone,

In the previous lecture we saw how the Enlightenment and the Revolution led to the disintegration of the dynastic rule and the growth of nation states in Europe. We saw that all these movements challenged the divine right of the king to rule his subjects. In this lecture, we are going to see the contribution of print capitalism to the growth of nation states.

Before we proceed to understand the contribution of print capitalism to the growth of nation and nationalism, let us understand the idea of print capitalism. What is print capitalism? Print capitalism means the mass production and distribution of printed materials such as books, newspapers, and pamphlets with the intention of profit making. The printing press, invented by Johannes Gutenberg in the 15th century, played a crucial role in the dissemination of printed material. This technology allowed for the mass production of books, newspapers, and pamphlets. Around 1500, approximately 20 million books had already been printed. Before print capitalism, manuscripts were used to record the information and knowledge. Manuscripts had several limitations. They were not widely accessible due to the scarcity of materials. Their production was slow and labor-intensive. As a result, only a few copies were made. As a result, access to manuscripts was restricted to a small elite, limiting the spread of knowledge. Print capitalism transformed this by enabling mass production, making texts cheaper and more widely available to the public. Print capitalism facilitated the spread of ideas across a large area.

The print capitalism played a crucial role in developing a sense of nationalism in people. How did it forge a sense of nationalist solidarity among people? Well, this can be explained with the example of a newspaper. Among the various products of print capitalism, the newspapers played a crucial role in the formation of a shared sense of identity. Newspapers published in a particular language create a sense of commonality in the lives of their readers. How do newspapers create a sense of commonality? I will explain it. This commonality is created through the news items that these newspapers are publishing. When millions of readers across a region hold the same newspaper in their hands and read the same headlines, they become aware of the same events. In this way, newspapers don't just report the news; they create common moments in people's lives. They connect strangers through a shared awareness of the world around them.

For instance, when the Indian cricket team wins a match, the news appears in all editions of a newspaper, making it a common event in the lives of millions of readers. Similarly, during a natural disaster like a cyclone or an earthquake, newspapers report on the devastation, relief efforts, and human stories, shaping a collective experience of grief, hope, and resilience. These shared events, whether moments of joy or tragedy, connect readers within a geographical boundary, fostering a sense of unity and belonging.

Newspapers are produced every day. This means that, daily, there are numerous common events in the lives of people who have never met each other. Whether it's the celebration of a cricket victory, the shock of a political scandal, or the sorrow of a natural disaster, these

shared moments create a silent bond among readers. Even without direct interaction, they become part of the same collective experience, reinforcing a sense of belonging to a larger community. We should remember that this sense of a common national identity is not something that the print capitalism achieved overnight. It was a very gradual process. The most important factor that helped print capitalism form a set of daily common events in the lives of people was the growth of vernacular languages.

At first, print capitalism focused only on people who could read and understand Latin. It was a very small coterie of elite readers. This meant that the printed materials did not reach the hands of the vast majority of people. But by the 16th century, things were changing rapidly. Publishers and printers decided to focus on the vast majority of people who knew only the vernacular. As books, newspapers, and pamphlets became available in languages that ordinary people understood, shared experiences began to take shape. Readers who had never met before found themselves reading the same news, the same stories, and the same ideas. This created a new sense of connection, as people across different regions became aware of the same events, forming imagined communities. According to Anderson, three cultural factors are responsible for the push for making information accessible to more people in vernacular language. They include the cultural and national revolution in 1517 in the form of Reformation, the esotericization of Latin and the gradual development of administrative vernaculars.

First let us see how Reformation led to the growth of vernacular languages. In 1517, Martin Luther opined that people should read the scripture in their homes, thereby increasing the translation of the Bible in vernacular languages. From 1520 to 1540, over half of the books printed in German were translations of his works. Luther played a central role in this remarkable change. Between 1522 and 1546, a total of 430 editions of his Biblical translations were published, marking the emergence of a mass readership. Luther became the first widely known best-selling author, or in simpler terms, the first writer who could easily sell his new books based on his name.

The second factor was the change that Latin as a language underwent. The everyday medieval Latin of the Church was simpler and less ornate. But, during the Renaissance, scholars who studied ancient Roman texts transformed Latin. They started using more elaborate and highly ornate style of classical Latin, instead of a simpler, more practical form of Latin in daily life, turning it into a language that only scholars could fully understand. The shift in Latin indirectly helped the process of vernacularization. As Latin became more esoteric and distant from everyday life due to its focus on classical style, it became less accessible to the general population.

The third factor was the gradual and uneven spread of vernacular languages for administrative purposes. This shift began even before the printing press or the religious changes of the 16th century. So, in the beginning, it was an independent force that weakened the old idea of a sacred community united by Latin. It is also crucial to remember that they were the 'state,' not 'national,' languages. In other words, the language developments that we just discussed were primarily related to the administration of monarchic states, rather than the formation of national identities. We should also remember that the adoption of vernacular languages for administrative purposes was solely for convenience of those in positions of authority. In other words, it wasn't a result of a deliberate or planned strategy. Similarly, there was no intentional effort to systematically impose these languages on the diverse populations under the rulers. But the situations started changing in the nineteenth century, as a result of

the emergence of nationalist sentiments. Rulers in this period actively worked to shape and promote particular languages as a means of fostering a national identity. There was a deliberate effort to standardize and enforce a specific language within the nation.

In essence, the esotericization of Latin, the Reformation, and the gradual development of administrative vernaculars, played a role primarily in a negative sense—contributing to the diminishing influence of Latin. Now how did the new print culture in the vernacular foster a national identity? Printed languages helped shape national identities in three simple ways. First, books and newspapers helped standardize languages like French, English, and Spanish. This made communication easier by creating a common language that everyone could understand, even if they spoke different versions of it. Second, they helped people have a common shared memory by giving millions of people daily the same news and stories. These common stories made them feel part of a larger group, even if they never met. Finally, this shared language and reading experience helped people see themselves as part of a nation, creating a sense of unity and belonging.

Having briefly analysed the historical circumstances which formed the idea of nation in Europe, let us try to define the very idea of nation itself. According to Benedict Anderson “nation is an imagined political community that is inherently limited in scope and sovereign in nature.” It is considered ‘imagined community’ because even in the smallest nation, the majority of its members will never have personal interactions, meetings, or knowledge of one another. Despite this, each individual holds a mental image of their shared identity.

For example, during the Indian independence movement, people across different regions, languages, and cultures felt a sense of unity as “Indians,” even though they had never met most of their fellow countrymen. The idea of a shared struggle, symbols like the national flag, and the influence of leaders like Mahatma Gandhi, fostered this imagined sense of belonging.

I guess a more contemporary example would make more sense to you. See how people get united, as Indian cricket team is playing a cricket match. When the Indian cricket team plays in a World Cup final, millions of fans across the country—who have never met each other before—experience a shared sense of excitement, pride, and belonging. Even though they come from different states, speak different languages, and have different backgrounds, they collectively cheer for their team, feeling emotionally connected as “Indians.” This sense of unity, built around a common symbol, that is the national team, reflects how nations function as imagined communities.

So, a nation is viewed as an imagined community. In spite of actual disparities and inequalities, we imagine that we are equal and connected, and we are brothers and sisters. This sense of fraternity has enabled millions of people over the past two centuries not only to not engage in conflict but also, more significantly, to willingly sacrifice their lives for these constrained and conceptualized identities.

A nation is called a political community because it is formed through shared governance, laws, and a sense of collective identity. It binds its members under a common political structure. Unlike ethnic or cultural groups, which may exist without political organization, a nation is tied to ideas of sovereignty, statehood, and governance. For example, India is a political community because its citizens, despite their diverse languages and cultures, are united under a common constitution, democratic government, and national institutions. This political framework differentiates it from purely cultural or religious communities.

A nation is also perceived as limited because even in the largest nations, with perhaps billions of inhabitants, there are defined boundaries that distinguish them from other nations. No nation envisions itself as all-encompassing, extending to every member of the global human population. Unlike in some historical periods, when believers of a universal religion

envisioned a fully united world, nations do not expect all of humanity to join their community. A nation is called sovereign because it has the supreme authority to govern itself without external control. In nation-states, this sovereignty comes from the people who elect the governments to govern the nation without external control.

We saw that the print capitalism played a crucial role in shaping national identity. Newspapers, in particular, created a sense of simultaneity in the lives of millions of people. Readers across different regions, as they read common stories or news items, felt connected despite never meeting. This process became really effective when the publishers started printing materials in vernacular languages, as opposed to Latin that was the language a chosen few. We also saw that three factors were primarily responsible for this process of vernacularization, namely the esotericization of Latin, the Reformation, and the gradual development of administrative vernaculars. Finally we saw the definition of nation by Anderson. Benedict Anderson defines a nation as an imagined political community, both inherently limited and sovereign. It is “imagined community” because its members will never know most of their fellow citizens, yet they share a deep sense of belonging. A nation is called a political community because it is formed through shared governance, and laws. A nation is limited because, no matter its size, it has clear boundaries separating it from others. I hope you have understood all the major ideas that we discussed in this lecture. Thank you!