

NPTEL
Nation and Narration

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Transcript from the Video

Hello everyone, In our earlier lectures, we explored the idea of the nation through the metaphor of the mother. We began with *Bharat Mata*, where the nation is visualized as a divine mother figure. This image played a crucial role in shaping nationalist sentiment during the freedom struggle. The figure of *Bharat Mata* combined devotion to the motherland with religious iconography, which made it both powerful and controversial, especially in a multi-religious society. We then looked at *Vande Mataram*, a song that became a national symbol. While it inspired many during the anti-colonial movement, it also raised concerns among some communities due to its religious overtones and depiction of the nation as a goddess. Finally, we turned to the Tamil language and the idea of Tamil as a mother. Here, the language itself became a symbol of identity, pride, and resistance, especially in the context of the Dravidian movement. Unlike the religious imagery of *Bharat Mata*, Tamil as mother emphasized linguistic and cultural belonging. Together, these cases show how the metaphor of the mother was central to the imagination of the nation—but also how it could be inclusive or exclusive, depending on its cultural and political context. In this lecture we will examine the idea of secularism in the Indian context. This lecture has two parts. In the first part of this lecture I would like to give you a historical overview of the idea of secularism in the colonial and the postcolonial context. In this lecture we will see the approach of the colonial government towards matters relating to the personal law and the enthusiasm of the native intelligentsia in the reformist activities vis-a-vis religion outside the legal ambit of the colonial government. In this context, we will also briefly discuss the a series of reforms undertaken by the postcolonial state in reforming the outdated practices in Hinduism through reformist activities. The second lecture will essentially focus on the problematics of understanding the notion of secularism in the Indian context, using a strictly western parameter that insists on the separation of the state from religious matters. People usually believe that the term secular is the same everywhere. But in reality that is not the case. The term "secular" is used differently globally. In America, even though religion plays a vital role in lives of individuals, being secular actually means to leave religion and government entirely apart. In France, the term secular also translates to the government remaining neutral. Here the state doesn't allow religious symbols to be present in schools and public places. In Britain and Holland and other European nations, there even exists a national church, but the government does not intervene in religious issues. These differences occur because each nation has its own history and culture. These differences are expected due to varying historical and cultural conditions. This means that the idea of secular differs considerable from nation to nation. So, in the second lecture, we will try to understand the idea of nation in the Indian context. Let me address a common point about 'secularism' in India upfront: the term means something different in the Indian context compared to its standard English usage. Some argue this difference is because India and Europe have distinct cultures, whereas others say that this difference is because Indians don't fully grasp the concept of secularism and hence it is a flaw. I hope that by now you have got a proper idea about the organizational contours of this lecture. Let us not begin the lecture by tracing the colonial and postcolonial

history of state's disposition towards religious matters.

By the latter part of the 19th century the British rule in India had established a clear policy of keeping the state separate from religious matters. The focus was on maintaining neutrality in religious disputes and avoiding any appearance of favouritism toward Christianity. This meant that the government would not officially endorse any religion, including Christianity, though the ruling powers themselves were Christian. The British wanted to demonstrate that they were treating all communities equally in the colony which had so many religions in it. They also made it a point to keep themselves out of religious conflicts between communities, and wanted people to assume that the government was neutral and not seeking to propagate Christianity by official means. This policy remained unchanged even when the Crown assumed power in 1858. After the Crown assumed power in 1858, a major step was taken towards the idea of equality before the law, by implementing the uniform civil and criminal codes. Before the implementation of the uniform civil code, the British followed a policy of legal pluralism, which allowed different religious communities to follow their own laws in matters of dispute. Hindus followed Hindu law based on texts and customs. Muslims followed Islamic law, while the Christians and others had their own personal laws. The uniform civil code was meant to create laws that applied to everyone, regardless of religion. However, personal law remained outside the ambit of this uniform code. Now what is personal law? Personal law refers to a set of laws that govern in matters related to family life—such as marriage, divorce, inheritance, adoption, and guardianship. So, the British decided to stay away from reforming and modernizing the personal law. Personal law was removed from the ambit of a uniform civil code primarily because the colonial state was reluctant to interfere in areas deeply connected with religious beliefs and practices.

Now, what was the response of the native elites in the country. We have already seen in the previous lectures that the native elites also had felt the need of reforming the traditional customs and practices that were not in line with the parameters of civility and modernity. Initially they looked up to the colonial government for the reform of the traditions. However, with the emergence of nationalism in the latter part of the century, the Indian elite decided not to allow the colonial state to intervene in areas which were seen vital to the nation's cultural identity. So, it's important to highlight that legal intervention in the pursuit of religious reform wasn't inherently undesirable; the issue was the undesirability of such intervention when carried out by a colonial state. As I told you before, this also didn't mean that they stopped their reform efforts. It just meant a change in the idea of who can lead the reforms. Should this be done by the legal authority of the colonial state or the moral authority of the national community? The conclusion was that the change should be effected by the moral authority of the national community. So outside the legal authority of the colonial state, many changes were happening in the ambit of traditional beliefs and customs. Changes occurred in family, personal relations, and religious practices, without the help of the state laws. More importantly, there was a widespread shift in the prevailing attitudes of these sections, favoring the legitimacy of 'social reform.' These reformist views were primarily prevalent among the elite, educated sections in the country and the masses remained outside the purview of reformation. This means the modernity of the religion was something that the elite intelligentsia in the country cared for.

So, one of the major agendas of the postcolonial nation was to modernize the personal and religious lives of individuals. There were two ways in which it could be achieved. The first one was through the pedagogical measures where the masses will be taught the necessity of reforming their personal and religious lives. The second was through legalization, where

those practices in religious and personal lives that do not conform to the larger notions of modernity will be banned through legislation. The intense desire for reform within the nationalist middle class led to a surge in new legislation on religious and social issues right after Independence. Partha Chatterjee's observation in this respect deserves special mention "One of the dramatic results of this accumulation of reformist desire within the nationalist middle class was the sudden spate of new legislation on religious and social matters immediately after Independence. This is actually an extremely significant episode in the development of the nation-state in India, and its deeply problematic nature has been seldom noticed in the current debates over secularism. It needs to be described in some detail. This episode is crucial in India's nation-state development, although its complex nature is often overlooked in current discussions on secularism."

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While the Constituent Assembly was working on India's new constitution, some provincial governments began reforming religious practices. One key example is the Madras Devadasis Act of 1947, which banned the tradition of dedicating young girls to temples. It also stopped women from dancing in temple areas or during religious processions. Another important law was the Madras Temple Entry Authorization Act of 1947, which made it illegal to prevent someone from entering or worshipping in a Hindu temple because of untouchability. Similar laws followed in provinces like Bihar, Bombay, and the Central Provinces, eventually leading to temple entry rights being included in the Indian Constitution.

During the course of the debates on these new laws, many legislators pointed out that these legislations will greatly help to remove the blot on the Hindu religion. But, several of the reforms could readily be justified outside of the religious framework, completely on secular grounds. For instance, the devadasi system was outlawed by framing it as a form of bondage or forced prostitution. Similarly, the push for temple entry was often supported by arguing that it was illegal to deny people access to public spaces based on untouchability. These efforts suggested that the state had a role in interpreting religious teachings and rituals to ensure that worship practices did not promote caste-based discrimination. This shows that these enactments which were primarily attempts to 'remove a blot on the Hindu religion' were often justified on purely secular grounds. The legislative arm of the state was seen as the right tool to help "purify" the Hindu religion and promote equality.

In addition to these reforms through legislation, the Indian state after Independence witnessed many more reforms. The 1951 Madras Hindu Religious and Charitable Endowments Act was a significant step in this direction. A government department was established by this law to manage Hindu religious endowments. Once again, it was justified on non-religious grounds. The state intervention in the administration of religious establishments was justified on the grounds of the prevention of the misappropriation of endowment funds and ensuring the proper supervision of what is, after all, a public property. The push for reform was most thorough during the drafting of the Constitution and later with the passing of the Hindu Code Bill in 1955. Hindu code Bill was a historic legal reform intended to modernize Hindu personal laws. The bill, spearheaded by B.R. Ambedkar, aimed to promote social justice and gender equality. The Hindu Code Bill was first proposed in the early years of independent India and gradually passed between 1955 and 1956. Four significant laws were passed as a result of this reform: the Hindu Marriage Act of 1955, which regulated marriage and divorce; the Hindu Succession Act of 1956, which gave daughters equal inheritance rights; the Hindu Minority and Guardianship Act of 1956, which dealt with guardianship of minors; and the Hindu Adoptions and Maintenance Act of 1956, which regulated the adoption and maintenance of dependents. These laws were meant for all Hindus which included not only the followers of Hinduism in the conventional sense, but also adherents of Jainism,

Buddhism, and Sikhism.

This also raises a very interesting question about who a Hindu is. According to conventional wisdom, a Hindu is a person who practices Hinduism, a religion derived from the Vedas, Upanishads, and other ancient Indian texts. This includes belief systems that worship Hindu deities (such as Vishnu, Shiva, or Devi), acknowledge the authority of the Vedas, and observe caste and dharma-related rituals, festivals, and customs. This clearly shows that idea of 'Hindu' in the official state narrative is not strictly based on specific religious beliefs or rituals. The state's definition of Hindu avoids all the differences between various sects and traditions within Hinduism and try to form a uniform Hindu identity. It is also interesting to note that even religions like Buddhism and Jainism—which clearly opposed the Vedic tradition—are also still included within the broad definition of 'Hindu' by the state. This is the precise reason why the Hindu code bill is made applicable to Buddhism and Jainism as well. But this definition does not include religions such as Islam and Christianity. The reason for this exclusion is not based on religious teachings or practices, but on where these religions come from. According to this view, Buddhism and Jainism are seen as 'Hindu' because they began in India and emerged as part of debates within Indian traditions. Islam and Christianity, on the other hand, are seen as foreign because they originated outside the Indian subcontinent. Partha Chatterjee's observation about the state's definition of Hinduism is very interesting in this context. In his article, "History and the Nationalization of Hinduism," he opines. "In fact, the notion of 'Hindu-ness' in this historical conception cannot be, and does not need to be, defined by any religious criteria at all. There are no specific beliefs or practices which characterize this 'Hindu' and the many doctrinal and sectarian differences among Hindus are irrelevant to this concept. Indeed, even such anti-Vedic and anti-Brahmanic religions as Buddhism and Jainism count here as 'Hindu'. Similarly, people outside the Brahmanic religion and outside caste society are also claimed as part of the Hindu jati."

Okay, let us get back to our discussion on Hindu Code Bill. During the debates on the Hindu code bill, some members pointed out that by way of trying to change personal laws, the state was tampering with religious freedom. Numerous criticisms arose in this context, asserting that by employing the state as the instrument for what often amounted to religious reform, the political leadership of the new nation-state blatantly disregarded the principle of separating state and religion. B.R. Ambedkar responded to these concerns in a way that reflected the general thinking of the reform-minded leaders at the time.

"The religious conceptions in this country are so vast that they cover every aspect of life from birth to death. There is nothing which is not religion and if personal law is to be saved I am sure about it that in social matters we will come to a standstill ... There is nothing extraordinary in saying that we ought to strive hereafter to limit the definition of religion in such a manner that we shall not extend it beyond beliefs and such rituals as may be connected with ceremonials which are essentially religious. It is not necessary that the sort of laws, for instance, laws relating to tenancy or laws relating to succession, should be governed by religion ... I personally do not understand why religion should be given this vast expansive jurisdiction so as to cover the whole of life and to prevent the legislature from encroaching upon that field."

Inspired by a strong desire for reform, the postcolonial Indian state unified the complex mix of local customs and sect-based rules that had formed what was called 'Hindu law' under colonial rule. Thus it created one common personal law for all Hindus. This new law brought

about a number of significant changes. Inter-caste marriages were permitted, divorce was legalized, polygamy was outlawed, daughters were granted the same inheritance rights as sons, and adoption of both boys and girls was permitted. Reformers contended that customs must change over time in order to justify these modifications. However, they also had to determine what was and wasn't actually a part of the Hindu religion. In order to explain and defend the new laws, ministers in a secular government, such as the law minister, were forced to pretend to be authorities on Hinduism and even cite old Sanskrit scriptures. This created an uncommon circumstance. What evolved as Indian secularism did not conform to the standard definition of a secular state found elsewhere in the world. There was no strict separation between state and religion, as the state was permitted to intervene in religious matters. The state was also not entirely neutral among religions, as it intervened more in some religions than in others. The argument was that this intervention was necessary due to varying social and political considerations. The argument for progressive reform of Hindu laws was that this was to ensure individual freedom and equality by ending practices like caste oppression. The political climate post-partition violence also mandated the political leadership to assure minority communities that the Hindu majority in parliament would not interfere with their religious and cultural institutions. No changes would be implemented without their consent. Therefore, in contrast to Western definitions, Indian secularism began to be characterized by the phrase "sarvadharmma samabhava," signifying equal respect for all religions.

Having seen all the major points, let us summarize today's lecture. We have discussed that by the late 19th century, British rule in India had adopted a policy of keeping the state separate from religion. The British tried to stay neutral in religious matters and avoided favoring Christianity. At the same time, Indian elites began to feel the need to reform traditional customs that didn't fit modern ideas of civility. In the beginning, they looked to the colonial government for help. But with the rise of nationalism, they began to resist state involvement in areas tied to India's cultural identity. Even without state support, many reforms happened within religious and traditional practices. After independence, the Indian state continued this reform spirit, especially in Hinduism. The most significant reform was the Hindu Code Bill, which aimed to create a common personal law for all Hindus, replacing a mix of local and sect-based rules developed during colonial times. However, this move was controversial. Some felt the state was interfering in religion and violating the principle of keeping religion and government separate. Criticism grew, especially since these reforms mainly focused on Hinduism. Meanwhile, due to the tensions after Partition, the government assured minority communities that their religious and cultural practices would not be changed without their approval.