

NPTEL
Nation and Narration

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Transcript from the Video

Hello everyone! In the previous lecture we learnt about the anti-caste movements. We learnt that the anti-caste movements led by Dalits and non-Brahmans in India are characterized as radical efforts to dismantle the caste system and establish an egalitarian society. Unlike 19th-century nationalist and reformist movements, such as Gandhi's Harijan movement, which aimed to integrate marginalized groups within Hinduism, these movements sought to eliminate the caste system entirely. Through a detailed analysis of Dalit movements in different parts of the country, dalit leaders, as well as dalit historiography, we got a sense of how caste interrogated the idea of nation. In discussion the issues pertaining to nation, a major observation is that of gender. In this lecture we will begin with the idea of women and construction of nation.

The concept and trajectory of feminism in the Indian context have undergone multiple transformations, shaped by shifts in political structures, socio-cultural discourses, and global feminist thought. In India, feminist expressions have ranged from early social reform movements to contemporary critiques grounded in intersectionality. These transformations are deeply rooted in the nation's colonial past, its democratic aspirations, and the socio-political dynamics that shape the lived experiences of women across class, caste, religion, and region. Radha Kumar, in her book *History of Doing*, makes a significant distinction between pre- and post-independence feminist movements. She argues that the "experience of colonial rule" largely defined the feminist landscape of the pre-independence period, whereas the "experience of democracy" came to characterize the post-independence era (Radha Kumar, 1). This temporal bifurcation enables us to understand the shifting concerns, methods, and frameworks within Indian feminism. Three dominant themes — modernity, development, and democracy — have continually shaped the feminist agenda in India (Kumar 1993; Banerjee et al. 2012). Beginning in the nineteenth century, a growing critique of traditionalism and orthodoxy became evident, particularly as reformers and nationalists began to frame the 'Hindu Indian woman' as the emblem of cultural reform and civilizational progress.

The nineteenth century marked the beginning of sustained social reform movements that centered on the so-called "woman's question." This question, however, was not merely about improving the condition of women, but also about symbolizing a broader societal transition from tradition to modernity. Women were not simply passive beneficiaries of reform; rather, their bodies, roles, and lives became sites through which modern Indian identity was negotiated. These reformist efforts gained momentum alongside rising nationalist sentiments and were further complicated by colonial critiques of Indian society.

By the early twentieth century, the woman's question had bifurcated into two major strands. On one hand was the constitution of the 'New Woman,' and on the other, the role of women in nationalist movements, especially within the Gandhian paradigm. The 'New Woman'

emerged as a product of the bourgeoisie's aspirations to mold themselves in the image of Western modernity. She was envisioned as an educated, cultured, and morally upright companion who could complement the rising male middle class. This shift also marked a break from older traditions that had limited women's roles to domesticity. Following the legal abolition of sati and child marriage, new reform efforts focused on educating women. According to Partha Chatterjee, who writes in his article, 'The Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question', the education of women served dual functions: it created women who were "suitable companions to their husbands who were becoming the new bourgeoisie," and who were also capable of teaching their sons. Thus, the image of the educated woman was embedded in a vision of national progress rooted in familial and cultural continuity.

Women's increasing visibility in the Indian National Congress and their participation in nationalist protests signaled a new political subjectivity. As Geraldine Forbes notes in *Women in Modern India*, this created a distinctly "feminine political role" wherein women assumed the symbolic and emotional mantle of being the nurturers and protectors of the men fighting for national freedom. In many ways, this reinforced existing gender binaries while reconfiguring them to fit the demands of the time. It is indeed striking how public and private gender roles reshaped themselves to align with nationalist and reformist ideologies.

In the immediate aftermath of independence, there was widespread optimism regarding constitutional guarantees and their potential to bring about gender equality. The faith in constitutional rights and legal mechanisms prevailed until the mid-1970s, a period that proved disillusioning for many feminists. The 1974–75 report *Towards Equality* laid bare the gap between constitutional ideals and social realities, revealing that "the condition of women have worsened since 1911" (Sen and Dhawan, 13). Middle-class women, in particular, faced growing isolation and structural discrimination, prompting a reevaluation of feminist concerns.

As feminist discourse shifted focus, new questions emerged around women's education, employment, and security. The figure of the woman evolved from 'mother' to 'daughter' and 'working woman' (Radha Kumar), with increasing emphasis on her individuality and productive capabilities. This was a crucial departure from earlier periods where women's roles were framed primarily in relational terms — as wives, mothers, or daughters-in-law. The seventies saw the rise of a feminism that sought to redefine women's subjectivity not in relation to men, but through self-exploration and autonomy.

A key concern during this period was bodily autonomy and the prevalence of gendered violence. Rape — including marital and custodial rape, often linked to dowry deaths — became central to feminist critiques of patriarchy and state indifference. The construction of new feminist subjectivity meant that women began identifying themselves outside familial structures, bringing into focus the workplace, the street, and the legal system as new sites of contestation. Feminist class consciousness contributed to a radical transformation in how women's labor — both paid and unpaid — was understood. The double burden of domestic and professional labor featured prominently in feminist arguments.

Interestingly, just as their reformist predecessors had done, 1970s feminists continued to rely on the legal framework to advance their goals. There was a strong belief that achieving women's rights within a legal and constitutional framework would enable women to gain freedom of choice and improve their quality of life. However, this reliance on the law as a neutral and universal mechanism for justice came under serious scrutiny with events such as the Shah Bano case and debates surrounding the Uniform Civil Code (UCC). These events exposed the flawed assumption of a homogenous Indian womanhood and brought communal and religious differences into sharp focus.

As critics pointed out, behind the façade of "constitutional secularism" (Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, *Real and Imagined Women*), lay a reality of communal majoritarianism that

marginalized the specific needs of minority women. In her seminal article, Kumkum Sangari emphasized the importance of recognizing “multiple and overlapping patriarchies” that operate across caste, community, and religion. By the 1990s, the heterogeneity of the category ‘woman’ gained increasing scholarly and activist attention. The rise of Dalit women’s movements, environmental activism, and deeper engagement with the public-private dichotomy further underscored the diversity of women’s experiences in India. This period marked the emergence of difference and intersectionality as central feminist concerns. Recognizing difference means acknowledging that identities — be they caste-based, religious, regional, or class-oriented — profoundly affect how women experience oppression. Instead of treating “woman” as a unified, monolithic subject, Indian feminism began to focus on the specificities of identity. Intersectionality, as a methodological tool, enables an analysis of how systems of power function in conjunction — not isolation. It allows scholars and activists to see how caste, gender, religion, and class intersect to create complex forms of marginalization. Such a lens provides a more nuanced and inclusive understanding of gender in the Indian context.

With these theoretical foundations laid, it is now pertinent to revisit the nineteenth-century nationalist construction of womanhood. Central questions arise: Why did the woman’s question become such a pivotal aspect of nationalist and reformist thought? How did this shape the conceptualization of gender itself in modern India?

The social reform movement in nineteenth-century India emerged with women’s issues as one of its central agendas. However, the extent to which these reforms constituted genuine emancipation remains a critical point of debate. The nineteenth century witnessed a global surge in attention to women’s issues. In Europe, the French Revolution was instrumental in sowing the seeds of feminist thought. Mary Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* remains a foundational feminist text that critiqued the gendered dynamics of power and argued that systemic inequalities — particularly in education — rendered women weak and dependent. She famously advocated for women’s rights not just in reproductive roles but in the professional and political domains.

In colonial India, the rise of the woman’s question was intricately linked with the emergence of British rule. Radha Kumar attributes the heightened early awareness of women’s issues in Bengal and Maharashtra to the centrality of British colonial administration in those regions. This growing consciousness, she argues, stemmed from both social and economic transformations. The British presence enabled the emergence of a new bourgeois middle class, whose primary objective was to distinguish themselves from the ‘uncivilized’ masses. This self-differentiation was pursued by rejecting ‘bad’ traditions and adopting select colonial traits. As Radha Kumar writes, this new class “sought to reform itself, initiating campaigns against caste, polytheism, idolatry, animism, purdah, child-marriage, sati and more, seeing them as elements of a ‘pre-modern’ or primitive identity” (7–8).

Importantly, not all reformist momentum can be solely attributed to British influence. The eighteenth century was a period of major transition marked by the decline of Mughal rule and the shifting dynamics of regional power. For example, the anti-caste movement in nineteenth-century Maharashtra had older roots, partly stemming from the collapse of Brahmanical dominance with the fall of Peshwa rule. Even though Brahmins reasserted dominance under the British, earlier disruptions had already begun to challenge caste hegemony (Kumar 8). In Bengal, reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, deeply influenced by English rationalist thought, sought to eliminate harmful practices such as sati and child marriage.

The transition period was marked by the twin ideologies of revivalism and nationalism, often operating in tandem. In his famous *Minute on Education* (1835), Thomas Babington Macaulay expressed the colonial ambition to create “a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect.” This newly minted elite would serve as cultural intermediaries who would emulate and enforce colonial ideals. Ashis Nandy, in *The Intimate Enemy*, writes that this identification with British rulers created a psychological subordination, describing it as “identification with the aggressor” (7). He shows how British Victorian values shaped new definitions of masculinity (*purushatva*) and femininity (*naritva*), particularly through a selective revival of ancient texts.

Uma Chakravarti, in her essay “Whatever Happened to the Vedic Dasi?”, illustrates how Orientalist scholars like William Jones and H.T. Colebrooke reconstructed a glorified Hindu past through the translation of Sanskrit texts. This reconstruction had a dual function: to discredit the Mughal period as one of moral and social decay, and to position the British as rescuers of India’s lost glory. Chakravarti notes, “In sum, the Europeans who had successfully constituted their own ‘true’ history were now engaged in giving to Indians the greatest gift of all — a history” (39). However, Indian intelligentsia were not mere recipients of this colonial narrative; they actively participated in constructing and internalizing it.

Women were placed at the center of this imagined past. Chakravarti writes, “The emerging Indian intelligentsia in the first half of the nineteenth century were involved in a dual encounter with colonial ideology. Awareness of the past through Orientalist scholarship was countered by an equally strong negative perception of the present which missionaries, administrators, travellers and others were engaged in writing about” (44). Thus, the past was idealized, and the present vilified — creating an impetus for reform that centered on reclaiming national dignity through the ‘upliftment’ of women.

This reformist focus on women was further fueled by European critiques of Indian society. James Mill, in *The History of British India*, described Hindu women as being in “a state of dependence more strict and humiliating than that which is ordained for the weaker sex... Nothing can exceed the habitual contempt which Hindus entertain for their women... They are held in extreme degradation, excluded from the sacred books, deprived of education and (of a share) in the paternal property... That remarkable barbarity, the wife held unworthy to eat with her husband, is prevalent in Hindustan” (312–13). Notably, Mill did not attribute this degradation to Islamic rule, but rather to Hindu social structures, which he saw as fundamentally barbaric. Social reformers, motivated by such critiques, sought to cleanse Indian society of these ‘degenerate’ practices — often in alignment with colonial views — in an effort to portray Indian culture as morally upright and capable of self-rule.

As part of the modernizing mission, two issues that were immediately taken up were sati and widow remarriage. It was Raja Ram Mohan Roy who came to be known as one of the most prominent critics of sati or widow immolation. One interesting factor is that since the eighteenth century, British missionaries had viewed the practice of sati as an example of Hindu barbarism. In fact they saw sati as a way to promote their civilizing mission. Later, when anti-sati sentiments were on the rise, the British parliament refused to abolish it to avoid religious interference.

One thing you must remember is that although Rammohan Roy criticised sati, he did so to revive the ‘great’ Hindu tradition. The practice of sati gets utilised by both Roy and the conservatives to prove their respective readings of the Shastras. He establishes the supremacy of the Vedas and the Shastras by claiming to highlight their ‘accurate’ preaching. This scientificity and logicity establishes the validity and supremacy of the Vedas and the

Shastras. Thus, ironically, in both their support and challenge to the practice of sati, the conservatives and Rammohan Roy attempt to prove the authority and sacrosanctity of the Vedic texts as authentic Hindu ideology.

It is also important to remember that sati was neither common, nor wide spread. In fact, the 1829 regulation mentions that “by a vast majority of people throughout India the practice is not kept up, nor observed: in some extensive districts it does not exist.” (Kumar 10). The irony is that by making anti-sati law, it was assumed that sati is a common practice. Moreover, it also gave a Brahmanical sanctity. And, as Radha Kumar observes, after the abolition, many places started adopting the tradition of sati to show their religious inclination. As Ashish Nany terms it sati abolition was “an assertive-defensive reaction to colonial rule . . . roused by the divided state of feeling among the Hindus” (qtd Kumar p 9). Similar sentiments were also reflected in the widow remarriage.

The matter of widow remarriage took shape through the campaign inaugurated by Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar (1820-91). He collaborated with the Bengal Brahma Sabha and the Tattvabodhini Sabha to “initiate several written pleas for the reform of the institution of marriage, including the abolition of *kulin* polygamy” (Nair 61). In his book *Marriage of Hindu Widows*, he argued, “a total disregard for the shastras and a careful observance of mere usages and external form is the source of the irresistible stream of vice which overflows the country” (Nair 61). He saw widow remarriage as a proper alternative to sati and enforced seclusion. He heavily depended on shastras to prove his point. The opposition questioned Vidyasagar’s authority over vedas and his moral ground. The “784 petitioners of U.P. and Calcutta said that legalizing widow remarriage would bring back the same state of affairs as under the Nawab, namely ‘whosoever may wish will run away with any one’s wife’” (Nair 61-62). It is interesting to note how the degradation of moral codes is linked with the Islamic rule in India. In this way, we can say that the Hindu morality and rituals were presented as exact binary of the degrading Islamic law. In Bengal, more than fifty thousand signed petitions were submitted against widow remarriage. The core of the widow remarriage debate was morality. Vidyasagar saw it as depraved morality, while others saw it as upholding of traditions. The Hindu Widows Remarriage Act 15 of 1856 was largely useless. The number of marriages performed were negligible.

Now let us summarise today’s lecture. Today we saw how the social reformation centred on women and their oppression to show that India is capable of getting rid of its abysmal practices and rule itself. The social reformers aimed to promote a 'new' India which was superior in the spiritual realm. In order to promote such supremacy, women were made central to the discourse. The nationalists wanted to show India's past as glorious and more importantly, the modern nation-state's ability to retain the 'good' traditions while discarding the 'bad' practices. We saw that sati and widow remarriage were made two intrinsic aspects of social reform. The term ‘sati’ literally means “a woman who is virtuous and truthful and, as an extension of the term, a woman who is chaste and totally devoted to her husband” (21, Mandakranta Bose). Therefore, at the root of the word there is a sense of self-sacrifice for the benefit of the husband and the family. The anti-sati movement marked the beginning of women’s reformation in the modern period. However, both in case of sati and widow remarriage similar fate was awaiting. Instead of benefitting women, it often deprived them of their rights and freedom. Moreover, these laws did not have a prolonged impact. As we see in case of Roop Kanwar, sati has been practiced even in the late 20th century. With respect to the Widow remarriage, we saw that it homogenised women as a single category. It did not address the differences among women. In fact, it completely removed the relative agency women used to enjoy during earlier laws. This reinforces the idea that women need to be recognised as different. And that social reformation was primarily based on the interests of upper class upper caste women. We will discuss this aspect more in the coming lessons.

In the next lecture we will discuss women's writings as vehicle to mark their identity.