NPTEL
Nation and Narration

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Transcript from the Video

Hello everyone. In previous lectures we have briefly mentioned women's writing as a way to assert agency. So what we were talking about there, was the idea of identity constructed by the self. This identity is agential because it is the women who are constructing it themselves. Now, often in real life scenario it was impossible to construct such an identity. That is why we find Sultana dreaming of Ladyland where only women run the place. This is possible only because she is dreaming. Identity, however, is not always about what we make, but it is mostly about what is given to us. And this is where the framework of representation becomes important. In this week of lectures we will look at how nation and its citizens were represented in the popular imagination. This lecture is divided into three sections. We will begin with the method of engaging with popular culture, then we look at the representation of nation in popular culture through visual media such as films, photographs, paintings and textual representations; we will also look at the production of culture through publishing houses.

Let's begin with what is culture. Stuart Hall viewed culture as a dynamic and contested space, deeply intertwined with power and ideology. Rather than seeing culture as fixed or elite, he described it as "a terrain of struggle," where different groups compete to define meaning and identity. Hall emphasized that culture plays a key role in shaping how power is experienced and resisted in everyday life. He argued that "culture is the way we make sense of the world," highlighting its role in everyday practices, not just in art or media. Through his influential encoding/decoding model, Hall showed how media messages are not passively received; instead, audiences actively interpret them in varied ways—dominant, negotiated, or oppositional—underscoring that "there is no necessary correspondence between encoding and decoding."

Now, what is popular culture? Oxford Bibliography defines popular culture in the following way: Popular culture is the set of practices, beliefs, and objects that embody the most broadly shared meanings of a social system. It includes media objects, entertainment and leisure, fashion and trends, and linguistic conventions, among other things. Popular culture is usually associated with either mass culture or folk culture, and differentiated from high culture and various institutional cultures (political culture, educational culture, legal culture, etc.). In colonial imagination, popular culture served a specific purpose- to inculcate among people an idea of nation that would be widely accepted. In other words, it was a 'people's culture'. In this way, we also see that culture is not inherent, but is constructed. By making something popular among the masses, the nationalist narratives tried to create a unified culture which was universal to all. The next lectures will explore this complexity by analysing various media such as textual and visual.

Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, in her seminal text *Real and Imagined Women,* comments on culture in the following manner: "Culture then, viewed as the product of the beliefs and conceptual models of society and as the destination where the trajectory of its desires takes shape, as well as the everyday practices, the contingent realities, and the complex process by which these are structured, is the constitutive realm of the subject. As a result, culture appears as the

chief matter and consequence of dominant ideological investment, powerfully coercive in shaping the subject; but since it is also heterogeneous, changing and open to interpretation, it can become a site of contestation and consequently of the reinscription of subjectivities. Therefore cultural analysis both calls forth the critique of ideology, and—given the crucial function of representation in the dialectic of social process—enables political intervention, scenarios of change, theoretical innovation and strategic reinterpretations." This paragraph presents culture as both a product and a shaping force of society. It argues that culture is formed by societal beliefs, desires, and daily practices, and in turn, plays a central role in forming individual subjectivity. While culture can enforce dominant ideologies and social power, its inherent diversity and openness to interpretation also make it a space for resistance, change, and redefinition. Thus, cultural analysis becomes a tool for ideological critique and political action, offering opportunities for transformation and new theoretical perspectives.

Culture, in the colonial context, is imbued with the idea of modernity. India provides an interesting milieu in this context. In the 19th and early 20th century social life was split into two spheres: the "material" and the "spiritual." For example, the 19th-century Bengali reformers who accepted Western modernity in the material realm—science, technology, and administration— preserved Indian cultural identity in the spiritual realm—family, religion, and community. This split allowed colonized elites to adopt aspects of modernity without fully imitating the West, thus creating a "derivative discourse" of nationalism. This sentiment was very much aligned with the way in which culture was imagined. It is also important to remember that cultural modernity does not develop in the same way across all areas of society. Even within the "modern sector," different institutions experience change differently. For example, traditional Indian medical systems like Ayurveda and Unani adopted some features of modern medicine—such as standardized drugs, exams, and licensing—but maintained their identity as alternative systems, rather than becoming branches of Western medicine. In contrast, subjects like chemistry or mathematics in India were absorbed into modern Western frameworks without retaining a distinct Indian identity. Similarly, in the cultural sphere, Western forms like the novel or oil painting deeply transformed Indian literature and art. But Indian music, despite adopting Western instruments, technologies, and institutions, remained recognizably Indian in structure and style.

Partha Chatterjee, in his article, *Critique of Popular Culture,* notes that the task of engaging with popular culture is not to analyze it from a detached, scientific perspective, but to start from within its everyday practices and forms. Rather than applying pre-formed theories, one should immerse in popular culture to understand and critique it from the inside. Since the methods for such critique are not clearly defined, it becomes important to explore cultural works that both participate in popular culture and consciously attempt to reshape or transform it.

He provides reference to Judith Gutman's book *Through Indian Eyes,* and writes, "Indian photographs, although they were products of the same modern Western technology, did not follow the Western realist aesthetic at all and instead reflected a completely different and distinctly Indian conception of reality. Unlike a Western photograph, where the viewer is carefully led from one part of the picture to another according to a familiar set of realist-narrative conventions, in Indian photographs everything within the picture field seems to happen at once, as though in an idealized and timeless space."

Chatterjee explores the concept of darshan, a deeply rooted practice in Indian culture where devotees seek blessings by seeing and being seen by a deity. The act of visual contact is believed to transfer spiritual or moral benefit. This idea of darshan has expanded beyond religious worship to include interactions with holy people, kings, political leaders like Gandhi, and others seen as powerful or sacred. In visual culture, this belief influences how

important figures are represented. For example, the scholar Christopher Pinney discusses a popular photolithograph showing the Sri Ramakrishna, his wife Sarada, and disciple Swami Vivekananda, placed in front of the image of the goddess Kali. This composition is historically unrealistic—these figures never posed together like this—but it is deliberately arranged to allow viewers to experience a collective darshan of divine and human figures in one glance. Interestingly, the image blends sacred symbolism with realistic elements, like a photo of Ramakrishna and a clock, suggesting a merging of spiritual and everyday life. The goal of such imagery is not historical accuracy but to create a powerful visual moment where viewers feel spiritually connected through sight.

Christopher Pinney highlights the political power of popular visual prints in shaping how Indian nationalism was experienced and understood. He argues that these images offer a different version of history than what is typically told through written texts. While standard accounts focus on speeches, writings, and leaders of the nonviolent movement, popular prints stirred emotional and patriotic feelings through visual means. Two key points stand out in his analysis: first, the nation became emotionally real to people through images that showed it as a tangible landscape, rather than just an abstract concept. Second, in the public imagination, the most iconic symbols of the nationalist struggle were not Gandhi or peaceful protests, but the images of armed revolutionaries—figures the British called "terrorists." These visuals captured the popular imagination in a way that words alone could not, suggesting that visual culture played a central role in how nationalism was felt and remembered by ordinary people. Photograph, then, becomes a powerful component of popular culture to make a popular imagination nationalistic.

Let us take the example of Durga Puja—a highly celebrated Hindu worship. The Durga Puja festival offers a vivid and multifaceted example of how popular culture operates as a space where tradition, modernity, creativity, and commercialism intersect in complex ways. Once a primarily religious event centered around the worship of the goddess Durga, the festival has evolved into the most significant and widely celebrated cultural festival in the city. Historically, Durga Puja was a localized, community-driven ritual, funded by small contributions from neighborhood residents. However, in the past few decades, it has been dramatically reshaped by the forces of corporate sponsorship, media attention, and mass tourism, reflecting the broader commercialization of religious and cultural practices in urban India.

Today, over a thousand community pujas take place each year, transforming entire neighborhoods into temporary cultural zones filled with vibrant activity, elaborate decorations, music, food, theater, and fashion. At the heart of the celebration are the pandals, temporary pavilions built to house the idol of the goddess Durga. These pandals have become a major site of creative expression and competitive display, with each neighborhood striving to outdo the others in attracting crowds and media attention. Drawing millions of visitors—locals and tourists alike—the pujas are judged not only on artistic merit but also on their ability to generate mass appeal and emotional impact. This competitive spirit has sparked a major shift in the aesthetics of the festival.

The focus is no longer solely on religious devotion but increasingly on spectacle and innovation. Pandals are designed to mimic or creatively reimagine everything from historical monuments and religious shrines to global pop culture icons and current events. Some recreate ancient Assyrian temples, while others evoke the world of Harry Potter or dramatize disasters like the sinking Titanic or the 9/11 attacks—often timed with media events or public memory.

Sociologist Pradip Bose has characterized this phenomenon using Michel Foucault's concept of "heterotopia"—spaces where the real and unreal collide, and where contradictions are not

only allowed but celebrated. In this context, Durga Puja pandals become dreamscapes of cultural imagination, embodying fantasy, memory, history, and politics all at once.

Art historian Tapati Guha-Thakurta argues that despite their theatrical nature, these spectacles can still generate a form of sacrality, one that resonates with the intensity of religious devotion, even if it doesn't align with traditional notions of piety. The devotion experienced by spectators is mediated less through mythological narratives and more through aesthetic awe, emotional engagement, and collective participation. In this way, the line between sacred art and public entertainment becomes blurred. The transformation of Durga Puja also raises important questions about the status of artistic labor and the division between artisans and artists. Traditional craftsmen who have long made the clay idols of Durga are now working alongside or being replaced by designers, architects, and visual artists trained in modern art schools. This shift complicates our understanding of creative authority and cultural legitimacy.

Partha Chatterjee asks: Who decides what counts as art? What kinds of skills and knowledge are valued in this new landscape of popular cultural production? Moreover, the use of unconventional materials—from medicine bottles and teacups to biscuits and sugarcane fiber—further challenges aesthetic conventions. These "gimmicks," while sometimes dismissed as superficial, often require remarkable technical ingenuity and planning as well as cultural expression. The modern Durga Puja serves as a microcosm of broader shifts in popular culture, where tradition and innovation coexist in tension, and where community participation, market dynamics, media influence, and aesthetic experimentation all converge. It reveals how festivals are no longer just spiritual events but have become dynamic arenas for cultural negotiation, artistic reinvention, and public spectacle. This transformation compels scholars to rethink the boundaries between the sacred and the secular, the traditional and the modern, and the artisan and the artist—urging us to develop new frameworks for understanding cultural production in the contemporary world.

Now let us summarise today's lecture. Today we talked about popular culture, as described by Hall and others, is the set of practices, beliefs, and objects that reflect the most widely shared meanings within a society. The concept of culture is viewed by scholars like Stuart Hall as a dynamic, contested space, shaped by power and ideology. Culture is not fixed or elite but a site of constant struggle where different groups negotiate meaning and identity. Hall's theory of encoding/decoding shows that media messages are actively interpreted by audiences in diverse ways, highlighting that there is no automatic alignment between intended and received meanings. Popular culture refers to the practices, beliefs, and objects that represent the most widely shared meanings within a society. It includes entertainment, fashion, and media, and plays a significant role in constructing national identity, especially in colonial contexts where it served to create a unified, national culture. In India, for example, the nationalist movement used popular culture to foster a sense of collective identity among the masses. Popular culture, as Rajeswari Sunder Rajan notes, is both a product and a force that shapes societal beliefs, desires, and subjectivity. It is a space where dominant ideologies are reinforced but also where resistance and change can take place. In colonial India, the idea of modernity was crucial to understanding cultural transformation. The split between the material and spiritual realms allowed colonized elites to embrace aspects of Western modernity while preserving Indian cultural practices. This was evident in the way Indian cultural forms, like Ayurveda or music, absorbed modern influences without losing their distinctiveness. Partha Chatterjee emphasizes that the critique of popular culture should come from within its everyday practices, rather than from an external, detached perspective. He also highlights how visual culture, such as Indian photography, presents a unique approach to reality, shaped by Indian cultural ideals rather than Western aesthetics. The role of visual

culture in shaping nationalism is explored through Christopher Pinney's work, which discusses how popular visual prints, such as lithographs, played a powerful role in stirring emotions and shaping the popular imagination of Indian nationalism. These images depicted the nation not as an abstract concept but as a real, tangible landscape, and often portrayed armed revolutionaries instead of nonviolent leaders like Gandhi, stirring patriotism through their emotional appeal. By studying popular culture, we can better understand the ways in which national identities are formed, resisted, and reshaped.

In the next lectures we will look at textual and visual analysis.

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