

NPTEL
Nation and Narration

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Week 8 Lecture 48
Transcript from the Video

Hello everyone! In the previous lecture we talked about culture and nation. Culture, as viewed by Stuart Hall, is a dynamic, contested space where power and ideology shape meaning and identity. Popular culture, which includes media, entertainment, and trends, plays a crucial role in shaping national identity, especially in colonial contexts where it was used to unify people under a common national culture. In India, the nationalist movement utilized popular culture to foster collective identity, making it a tool for both constructing and contesting cultural narratives. Durga Puja serves as an example of how tradition and modernity intersect in popular culture, as the festival has transformed into a competitive cultural spectacle blending religion, creativity, and commercialism. The festival's visual displays, which range from traditional symbols to global pop culture references, highlight the role of popular culture in shaping national consciousness, reflecting how culture is constantly redefined to reflect both local traditions and global influences. Popular culture, therefore, is not just a reflection of societal values but a driving force in creating and expressing national identity.

In this lecture we will look at the making of a popular culture through images and publishing houses. This lecture will be divided into two parts. Today we will talk about the first part.

Now in the previous lecture we have seen how culture is defined. Images, and representations heavily impact us. So what we see, observe, also get codified within our brain as cultural norm. Let us analyse some films and images to see how they contribute to creating a popular imagination.

In the previous lectures you have learnt about the complexities of women's identity, bhadramahila, Bharat Mata image and so on. If you have any queries, you can go back to those lectures.

The imageries that appealed the times of colonial period were often about patriotism, valor and so on. Let's take the example of Bharat Mata for a moment. Bharat Mata, or Mother India, first appeared as a symbolic figure in the late 1800s, during a time of growing nationalist sentiment. By the 1930s, her image had become widespread and instantly recognizable. Artists and political thinkers across the country helped shape a standard visual form—usually a serene woman dressed in a sari, often holding the national flag or standing over a map of India. This image became a powerful symbol of the nation.

However, just because Bharat Mata's look became common doesn't mean it was without problems or contradictions. Her image carries the traces of the many political, religious, and cultural struggles that helped define Indian identity during the colonial and early postcolonial periods. While she came to represent the nation's unity, strength, and sacrifice, the way she was represented was not always neutral or universally accepted.

As feminist scholar Joan Landes writes, “symbolic representations are counters in symbolic actions” and are “risky” when deployed. In other words, symbols like Bharat Mata are not just passive images—they are tools used in political and cultural debates. They can inspire

people, but they can also be contested, reinterpreted, or even rejected. When artists or leaders used Bharat Mata to represent India, they were also taking a risk. The image could be powerful, but it could also exclude those who didn't identify with it—especially religious minorities or people who questioned linking the nation with a mother goddess figure.

A key feature of Bharat Mata's iconography is the way she is often shown with the map of India. In some depictions, the shape of the country is part of her body; in others, she stands in front of or within the map. This visual merging of the female figure with national territory created a strong emotional link between the land and the idea of the nation. The land was not just geography—it became sacred, like a mother, deserving devotion and even sacrifice. This emotional connection helped foster a sense of unity and belonging, especially during the freedom struggle.

At the same time, this merging of map and goddess raises important questions. Who gets to define the nation? Who is included in this vision of Bharat Mata? What happens to alternative representations of India that don't fit this model?

Now Numerous paintings, books in regional languages, newspapers, and so on, adopted this dominant image of Bharat Mata as a territorial figure saving the nation while fulfilling the mother's duties to her sons. Sumathi Ramaswamy notes that this was not surprising because “given the general popularity of all manner of female divinities across India from which she obviously benefited. Her association, however, with scientific cartographic devices like maps and terrestrial globes is an innovation indeed. As historians of cartography insist, mapped knowledge is “hard won knowledge”—a product of sustained cultural, ideological, and pedagogic work”. The superimposition of the Bharat Mata onto the geographical map makes the nation into a *living* divine mother, not just a geographical space.

As Ramaswamy notes: “The scientific map form of the country is indispensable, for after all it gives concrete shape to India following the precise protocols of mathematical cartography, it provides the basis for rule and governance, and it demarcates what belongs within its borders and what does not. In other words, it gives tangible form to a nation yearning for form. But nonetheless from the start of nationalist mobilization doubts surfaced about this novel device that magically gave form to the ephemeral abstraction that is the nation.”

Now we may ask, there are already enough number of goddesses. Why invent a new one and how is it different? Ramaswamy mentions that all the images of Mother India were set within a map “to set her apart from other female divinities in order to assure her status as a special deity of national territory and so that she is indeed regarded as an adequate and appropriate representation, embodiment, and symbol of a legitimate and authentic modern nation.” This blending of sacred imagery and cartography gave form to the abstract idea of the nation, but also raised questions about inclusion, representation, and legitimacy.

This notion found its representation in films such as *Mother India*. Released in 1957, a decade after independence, the film depicts a poor mother's plight who rises above the limits of motherhood and becomes the mother of the nation who is ready to sacrifice the son she gave birth to in order to save the honour and values of the nation. The film links poverty, oppression by landlord, catastrophic impact of industrialization, breaking of agrarian society. In this plight, it is the mother who stands strong in her values despite everything. Sacrifice is made of utmost importance in the film. She becomes the mother of the nation, an icon.

Now when it comes to popular imagination, films have also used images of ravaging Kali and Durga extensively. In this context, I would like to refer to Rajeswari Sunder Rajan's reading of the film *Khoon Bhari Maang*. In the film, Aarti, a simple and wealthy widow, becomes the unsuspecting victim of a plot to take her wealth, family, and life. Her father is murdered by a worker, whose nephew, Sanjay pretends to love Aarti, marries her, and then tries to kill her by throwing her into a lake filled with crocodiles—with help from her best friend, who is secretly his lover. Aarti survives, though badly injured, and undergoes plastic surgery that gives her a completely new, beautiful face. With her new identity, she begins to plan her revenge. Sunder Rajan writes that, "The woman's killing of her husband is therefore a form of justice, even a form of divine retribution (in one scene in the film the icon of Kali/Durga, the avenging goddess, is explicitly displayed; and in the last fight scene Rekha, with her hair loose, wearing men's clothing, carrying weapons and riding a horse, is evoked as the visual analogy of the goddess). The motive of revenge in *Khoon Bhari Mang* derives most immediately from the genre of the vigilante film, a recent phenomenon in Indian cinema that reflects a growing popular belief that, the forces of justice and order having broken down in a basically lawless society, only the righteous (who is invariably single and male but may sometimes be a 'gang', and sometimes even be female) can punish the guilty."

A formula film becomes popular because it follows familiar rules. As a type of fantasy, it works by showing something unreal, but in a way that still feels familiar. It creates a world that isn't real, yet people can still recognize parts of it—even if it doesn't reflect any actual social reality. Popular films avoid showing ideas that are too rebellious or morally controversial. Their narratives are carefully controlled to stay within accepted social boundaries. Even when they present something bold—like a wife killing her husband—they soften its impact through specific narrative choices. For instance, the husband is not her original partner but a second, illegitimate one who has replaced the true husband. Their marriage is not consummated, which preserves her loyalty to the first husband and makes the second marriage seem invalid. Additionally, by the time she commits the act, she has undergone a complete transformation—her identity and appearance have changed—so it no longer feels like a true case of wife murdering husband. In this way, the film makes a seemingly transgressive act safe and acceptable, ultimately reinforcing rather than challenging social norms.

Now let's summarise the lecture. Today we saw how popular culture is shaped through images and media, particularly focusing on visual representations and films. Divided into two parts, the lecture first emphasized how images influence cultural norms by embedding certain ideas into our imagination. A key example is Bharat Mata, a symbol of the Indian nation that gained popularity from the late 1800s to the 1930s. Although she came to represent national unity and sacrifice, her image also carried contradictions and was not universally accepted. Feminist scholar Joan Landes reminds us that symbolic figures like Bharat Mata are not neutral—they're used in political and cultural struggles and can both inspire and exclude. Bharat Mata's image often merges with the map of India, turning the nation into a sacred figure, deserving of devotion. Historian Sumathi Ramaswamy notes that while India already had many goddesses, Bharat Mata's distinct link to geography and maps made her unique, symbolizing a modern nation. This blending of divinity with cartographic precision gave a visual shape to the otherwise abstract concept of the nation but also raised questions about inclusion and legitimacy. We then looked at film, particularly the 1957 classic *Mother India*, where the protagonist rises from personal suffering to become a national icon through sacrifice. This reinforces the idea of the mother as a moral center of the nation. Similarly, in *Khoon Bhari Maang*, the female lead seeks justice after betrayal, echoing divine retribution.

Here, the image of the goddess—Durga or Kali—is used to frame her revenge as morally justified. Finally, the lecture explains how popular films rely on formulaic structures. They present familiar yet unrealistic fantasies, carefully avoiding any real social rebellion. Even radical actions, like a wife killing her husband, are made acceptable through plot devices that neutralize their impact. These narratives, while appearing bold, ultimately reinforce traditional values rather than challenge them.

In the next lecture we will look at further texts and the politics of publishing.