

**NPTEL**  
**Nation and Narration**

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**Transcript from the Video**

Hello everyone! In the previous lectures we talked about nation and its representation through popular culture. The lecture explored how popular culture is shaped through images and media, focusing on visual symbols and film. It first examined how images influence cultural norms, using Bharat Mata as an example—a symbol of Indian nationalism that blended religious imagery with national identity, but also carried contradictions and exclusions. Scholars like Joan Landes and Sumathi Ramaswamy highlighted how such symbols are politically charged and not universally inclusive. The second part discussed how films like *Mother India* and *Khooon Bhari Maang* use female figures as moral centers, drawing on goddess imagery to justify actions like sacrifice and revenge. However, despite appearing radical, these films follow familiar, controlled narratives that ultimately reinforce traditional values. So far we have looked at representations of women and a gendered understanding of nation. However, identities were not merely limited to the binarism of male/female. In this lecture we will talk about the stigma surrounding homosexuality.

The criminalization of same-sex relationships in India is not a reflection of indigenous cultural or moral values, but rather a legacy of colonial imposition. It is crucial to recognize that the legal prohibition of homosexual activity, specifically enshrined in Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, was a legal provision crafted in the 19th century under British rule. This law was rooted in the Buggery Act of 1533, a piece of legislation from England that defined certain sexual acts—particularly those between men—as "unnatural" and "against the will of God and man." Drafted by Thomas Macaulay in 1838 and brought into force in 1860, Section 377 marked the beginning of a systematic criminalization of same-sex desire in India. The terminology of "buggery" used in this law was broad and morally charged, reinforcing the colonial vision of acceptable sexual conduct and marking a departure from more pluralistic precolonial norms. After more than a century of this colonial legacy shaping public and private life, the Indian Supreme Court, in a landmark judgment delivered on September 6, 2018, declared the application of Section 377 to consensual homosexual activity between adults unconstitutional. The Court described the provision as "irrational, indefensible, and manifestly arbitrary," effectively recognizing the harm caused by centuries of legal and social marginalization. However, the law still remains applicable in cases of non-consensual sexual acts, acts involving minors, and bestiality.

To fully grasp the implications of this legal trajectory, one must consider the broader colonial context and the role of Victorian morality in reshaping Indian ideas of sexuality and gender. Prior to British intervention, Indian societies had more fluid and diverse understandings of gender roles, sexual identities, and intimate relationships. During the colonial period, however, this diversity was forcefully regulated through both legal and social interventions. As the British sought to "civilize" Indian society according to their moral framework, various non-normative sexualities and non-traditional family structures were actively suppressed. In their influential anthology *Same-Sex Love in India*, Ruth Vanitha and Saleem Kidwai trace

texts and narratives across centuries—from 1500 B.C. to the present—that depict intimate relationships between women and between unrelated men. They contend that it was not until the 19th century that a homophobic perspective—one that had little traction in precolonial India—began to gain prominence and structure public discourse in a significant way.

This colonial anxiety over same-sex desire also played out visibly in cultural practices like theatre. Kathryn Hansen's research into Western Indian theatre offers compelling evidence of how gender and sexuality were policed through performance. For instance, male actors who portrayed female roles were once an accepted and even celebrated part of Indian theatre traditions. These impersonators were not just filling a logistical gap created by social taboos against women performing publicly; they were, in many cases, considered more adept at embodying the feminine ideal than women themselves. In Parsi theatre, this translated into male heroines who, through their performances, created idealized models of femininity that both male and female audiences could identify with and admire. For women spectators—particularly those from elite classes—these portrayals offered a template for how to conduct themselves in public, while for men, they became a way to counter colonial critiques of Indian masculinity and the perceived backwardness of Indian women. Through such impersonations, Indian men could demonstrate that their understanding of womanhood was refined, modern, and dignified.

However, this practice of cross-dressing and male impersonation took on a different hue under colonial moral scrutiny. What was once a theatrical convention became a site of moral panic, particularly because of the “underlying homoerotic valence” that linked the gazes of the hero and the male heroine on stage, as well as the impersonator and the male spectators in the audience. Hansen shows how this subtle but potent homoeroticism became a problem for the newly emerging Indian elite, who had internalized Victorian ideas about gender propriety and sexuality. This discomfort led to a gradual displacement of female impersonators by real women—but not Indian women. Instead, Anglo-Indian women were recruited to play female roles. This solution allowed theatre companies to preserve a sense of visual realism and moral respectability while avoiding the social stigma that would have come with allowing Indian women from “respectable” families to appear on stage.

The choice of Anglo-Indian actresses also reflected a deep ambivalence about the visibility of Indian women. Just as Elizabethan theatre in England permitted women to attend performances but not to act, Parsi theatre insisted that respectable Indian women could be audience members—but not performers. Casting Anglo-Indian women allowed for a form of distancing: audiences could admire these actresses as embodiments of femininity without implicating their own women in the perceived indecency of public performance. The Anglo-Indian actress became a fluid figure in the cultural imagination, embodying both the familiar (Indian womanhood) and the exotic (Western modernity). She could be viewed as both “the Other” and “one's own,” navigating the dual expectations of modesty and allure.

This tension surrounding the theatrical portrayal of gender was not confined to Parsi theatre. Scholars like Rimli Bhattacharya have demonstrated similar anxieties in Bengali theatre, where concerns about men playing women's roles were accompanied by a broader unease with gender nonconformity. These debates were not just about performance quality or realism, but about controlling the social meaning of femininity itself. In these discussions, older indigenous understandings of gender and sexuality were reframed—or erased—in order to align with the bourgeois values of the modern West. This shift was not simply imposed by

colonial rulers; it was also enacted by nationalist elites who, despite opposing colonialism politically, shared the British desire to modernize Indian society in line with European norms.

This pattern of sexual and gender “reformation” under colonial pressure was not unique to India. In Iran, historian Afsaneh Najmabadi has shown how 19th-century cultural exchanges with Europe led to the “heteronormalization of love and feminization of beauty.” According to Najmabadi, the modernist project of women’s emancipation in Iran carried with it the “birthmark of disavowal of male homosexuality.” In both cases, colonial and nationalist projects of modernization involved rejecting previously accepted or ignored forms of same-sex intimacy in order to present a more “civilized” and heteronormative public image to the West.

A final example that illustrates the extent of colonial-era discomfort with homosexuality in India is the controversy over *Chaklet*, a collection of short stories by Pandey Bechain Sharma, also known as Ugra. Published in 1927, *Chaklet* sparked outrage and was accused of being obscene, even though its content was explicitly anti-homosexual. Comprising eight stories that portrayed male same-sex desire in deeply moralistic terms, the collection was intended to warn readers against what the author viewed as a social menace. However, as scholar Charu Gupta notes, *Chaklet* faced criticism not because of its stance, but because it dared to “speak the unspeakable.” By acknowledging the existence of such relationships—however negatively—the book challenged the silence that surrounded homosexuality in public discourse. The reaction to *Chaklet* revealed the deep discomfort shared by the colonial state, nationalist reformers, and the emerging Indian elite, all of whom sought to suppress public discussion of non-normative sexualities.

Let us take a look at the eponymous story in the book titled *Chaklet*. The story, *Chaklet*, was published on 21 May 1924 in the magazine *Matvala* (“Intoxicated”). The title of the story refers to “a name for those innocent, tender and beautiful boys of our country, whom society’s demons push into the mouth of destruction to quench their own desires.” The story describes an illegitimate relationship between Babu Dinkar Prasad, a rich Hindu man, and “a beautiful lad of thirteen or fourteen.” Babu Dinkar Prasad is represented as a predatory character, forcing himself on young teenage boys and corrupting them with his homosexuality. In all this, the narrator, interestingly remains an observer and communicates his anti-homosexual views through a personal letter written to a friend. He does not intervene when Babu Dinkar Prasad attempts to molest the young boy.

Ruth Vanita notes that, Ugra’s pen name reflects political conditions in India at the time he began writing. He was in his twenties during the 1920s, when north India was in the throes of the struggle for independence from British rule. Like almost all writers of the time, Ugra was involved both with this struggle and with the social-reform dimension of nationalism.” His notion of reform was by presenting homosexuality as an evil. Ugra faced tremendous criticism in writing such sinful, *Ghasleti* literature. *Ghaslet* literally refers to kerosene oil, widely used as cooking fuel in India, thereby referring to sensational and obscene, literature. Vanita mentions, “Ugra's opponents argued that while he claimed to be opposing homosexuality, the actual effect of his writings was to titillate and excite his readers and thus to encourage, not discourage, homosexual desire. They stated that such filthy topics as homosexuality should not be discussed at all.” It is interesting to see that the existence of this writing, in fact, gave space to a taboo concept like homosexuality.

Taken together, these examples highlight the ways in which colonial laws, social anxieties, and nationalist modernity worked together to reshape Indian understandings of gender and sexuality. The result was not just legal persecution, but a broader cultural silencing of queer identities—a legacy that continues to influence Indian society to this day.

Now let us summarise the lecture.

The criminalization of same-sex relationships in India stems from British colonial laws, not Indian traditions. Section 377, introduced in 1860, was based on English laws that viewed homosexuality as sinful. This law shaped Indian attitudes until it was partially struck down in 2018 for adult consensual relationships. Before colonial rule, Indian society had more fluid views on gender and sexuality. British rule imposed rigid Victorian morals, which Indian nationalist leaders also adopted in their efforts to modernize society. Theatre, especially Parsi and Bengali, reflected these shifts. While male actors once played female roles and shaped ideas of femininity, colonial discomfort with homoerotic undertones led to their replacement with Anglo-Indian actresses to maintain respectability. Literature also reflected these tensions. Ugra's 1927 story collection *Chaklet* criticized homosexuality but was controversial for even addressing the topic. Scholars argue that, despite its negative tone, the work made same-sex desire visible in public discourse. Overall, colonial laws and moral values reshaped Indian ideas of gender and sexuality, leading to both legal and cultural silencing of queer identities—a legacy that continues today.

In the next lecture we will look at publishing houses.