

NPTEL
Nation and Narration

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Week1 Lecture 5
Transcript from the Video

Hello everyone, in the previous lecture, we discussed the ideas of civilizing mission and orientalism. In this lecture, we are going to further explore the idea of the civilizing mission. The civilising mission was a justification for colonial rule, claiming to uplift native societies by imposing European values. The first step towards achieving the civilising mission was the creation of an imaginary Orient that is exotic, irrational and uncivilized. The colonial masters created a series of narratives to portray the Orient as an exotic other of the occident. These narratives were collectively called Orientalism.

The colonial administration held the view that the colonial subjects should be thoroughly reformed through the civilizing mission, before granting them the right to self-governance, based on popular sovereignty. Partha Chatterjee in his article “Five Hundred Years of Fear and Love” observes, “It would be declared that the British had been in India to make Indians fit for self-government, which is to say that that latter had first to be robbed of their autonomy in order to qualify to receive it back from the robbers” (42). The promise made by the colonial rulers was that once the ‘uncivilized natives’ were ‘reformed’ and ‘civilized,’ they would be treated by the British Empire as equals. One of the many ways through which the civilizing mission was carried out in the colony was through English education. The colonial masters introduced English education in India and imparted Western ways and manners to the native population. The schools and institutions established for this purpose portrayed the West as morally and intellectually superior to the East.

Once the civilizing mission is complete, the natives in the colony will be treated as citizens with full rights. After the completion of the civilizing mission, the natives will enjoy all the privileges of an Englishman. In the event of such a scenario, that is when the civilizing mission successfully gets completed, the natives will become civilized. They will no longer be subordinate to the civilized white men. This means that at the end of the civilizing mission the colonies will cease to become colonies, and they will eventually become nations. The colonizer will declare that the natives in the colonies are fit enough to rule themselves.

But this ideal situation will never happen in reality, because this transformation of the colonies into nations, is fundamentally at odds with the commercial interests of the Empire. The transformation of colonies into independent nations was fundamentally opposed to the commercial interests of the Empire because colonial rule was designed to exploit resources and maintain economic control. European powers depended on the colonies for raw materials, cheap labor, and captive markets for their manufactured goods. If colonies became sovereign nations, they would prioritize their own economic growth. Therefore, the colonizers perpetually postpone the actualization of the promise of civilizing mission. In other words, although the colonial masters promise that at the end of the civilizing mission is the autonomy of the colonies for self-governance, it will never happen. What will be the excuse of the colonial master for not completing the civilizing mission. The colonial master would say that the natives in the colony cannot be reformed completely. Since they cannot be reformed fully, there can be no end to the civilizing mission.

In this context, it is interesting to refer to Bhabha's famous essay "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse." In the essay, Bhabha says that a native in the colony can at most become anglicized, not an English man. In other words, a native can only resemble a civilized man, but cannot become fully civilized like an English man. This means there is no end to the civilizing mission. Bhabha's observation is really interesting in this context. He observes,

Colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite. Which is to say, that the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an ambivalence; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference. The authority of that mode of colonial discourse that I have called mimicry is therefore stricken by an indeterminacy: mimicry emerges as the representation of a difference that is itself a process of disavowal. Mimicry is, thus, the sign of a double articulation; a complex strategy of reform, regulation, and discipline, which "appropriates" the Other as it visualizes power. Mimicry is also the sign of the inappropriate, however, a difference or recalcitrance which coheres the dominant strategic function of colonial power, intensifies surveillance, and poses an imminent threat to both "normalized" knowledges and disciplinary powers.

A mimic man is like a camouflaged entity in the sense that a camouflaged entity never completely becomes one with its surroundings, even though it seems to have done so.

The real aim of the civilizing mission was to create an Other who always remains loyal to the colonial master. Thomas Babington Macaulay, in his infamous 'Minute on Indian Education,' stated that the goal of colonial education was to create a class of people who were "Indian in blood and color, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect." This statement reflects the core objective of the British civilizing mission—not to empower Indians but to shape them into loyal subjects who would serve colonial interests. By promoting English education and Western values, Macaulay aimed to create intermediaries who would help sustain British rule. This approach ensured that the colonized remained culturally dependent on the colonizers, never fully integrating into British society nor retaining their own independent identity. Ultimately, Macaulay's vision exemplifies the contradictions of colonial rule—offering the illusion of progress while reinforcing subjugation.

Bhabha further gives an interesting example in this regard through Charles Grant's "Observations on the State of Society among the Asiatic Subjects of Great Britain." Grant envisioned a system of education for the Indian population that would be conducted entirely in English and rooted in Christian values. This system would not only teach Christianity, but also transform the "moral and social" fabric of Indian society. Grant believed that educating Indians in this way would help integrate them into the British colonial order. He thought that Christianity would promote moral reforms in India, creating a "civilized" and "moral" society, thus making it more governable under British colonial rule. The "reform" he referred to was not just about improving personal conduct, but about reshaping the Indian population to fit the colonial ideal.

But we should note here that Grant did not advocate for a complete conversion of Indians into the image of an English man. Instead, he suggested a "partial" diffusion of colonial values which were just enough to morally reform the Indians. He did not want to enlighten the Indians about their rights. He did not want Indians to be aware of the importance of equality. Nor did he want to have a rule of popular sovereignty for them. He believed that a complete conversion of Indians into a subject who is aware of his rights would encourage them to question the very authority of the colonial rule. To cut the long story short, Grant wanted to

impart English education to the natives just to make sure that they are in awe of the colonial rule. This points out that Grant's project contained internal contradictions. On one hand, he is promoting a moral reform based on Christian values and English education, which, in his view, would improve Indian society. On the other hand, the very process of reform he advocates for— that is the “partial” diffusion of Christianity and English values—aims to effect a form of control that only keeps Indians subordinate to the British. So, the natives were given English education not to empower them and enlighten them about their rights, but to make them feel inferior to their colonial masters. This is the reason why Bhabha’s observes that “The discourse of post-Enlightenment English colonialism often speaks in a tongue that is forked, not false.” It is not false because it does aim to reshape the native population according to Christian values. It is forked because the very process of reform involves only a “partial” diffusion of the Enlightenment values. The reformed self is almost like an Englishman, but not completely an English man. In other words, the reformed native can only be anglicized, not the English.

Okay now let us wind up the lecture by summarizing all the major points that we discussed so far. We saw that the civilizing mission was presented as a promise to uplift colonized people by reforming them socially and morally. It was presented as an attempt to equip the colonized subjects for self-governance. However, this promise was never meant to be fulfilled, as granting full autonomy would threaten the economic and political interests of the Empire. Colonizers justified their continued rule by claiming that natives could never be fully reformed, thereby making the civilizing mission an indefinite process. Homi Bhabha, in his “*Of Mimicry and Man*,” highlights how colonial subjects were allowed only to resemble but never fully become like their rulers, reinforcing their subordination. The real aim of the civilizing mission was to create loyal subjects rather than independent individuals. Charles Grant, in *Observations on the State of Society among the Asiatic Subjects of Great Britain*, advocated for educating Indians in English and Christian values, not to empower them but to make them more governable. However, he limited this reform to ensure admiration for British rule without awakening demands for rights or sovereignty. This partial diffusion of colonial values revealed the internal contradiction of the civilizing mission—it claimed to reform but strategically withheld full enlightenment. If natives were truly reformed, they would challenge British rule, so education and moral instruction were carefully controlled. In the end, the civilizing mission was not about genuine progress but about maintaining colonial dominance under the pretense of upliftment.