

NPTEL
Nation and Narration

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Transcript from the Video

Hello everyone! In the previous lecture we learnt about the nation and homosexuality. Same-sex relationships in India were criminalized because of British colonial laws, not Indian traditions. Section 377, introduced in 1860, was based on English beliefs that saw homosexuality as sinful. This law shaped Indian views until 2018, when it was partially removed for consensual adult relationships. Before British rule, Indian society had more flexible ideas about gender and sexuality. But under colonial rule, strict Victorian morals were enforced, and even Indian nationalists adopted them while trying to modernize. These changes were seen in theatre too—where male actors used to play female roles, colonial discomfort with homoeroticism led to their replacement by Anglo-Indian actresses to appear more “respectable.” Literature also reflected this shift. Ugra’s 1927 book *Chaklet* criticized homosexuality but caused controversy just for mentioning it. Scholars believe that even though the stories were negative, they brought same-sex desire into public conversation. Overall, colonial laws and values changed how India thought about gender and sexuality, leading to lasting silence and stigma around queer identities.

In this lecture we will look at publishing houses. Now in some of the previous lectures we have seen how pamphlets etc were used by many writers to moralise Indian women, while establishment of little magazines also created many avenues for dalit and women’s voices to emerge. The result of this is stories such as ‘Sultana’s dream’. If you have any queries, you can go back to the lectures and listen.

During the early years of British rule in India, the press and journalism had little influence on political life and did not play a significant role in the development of political ideas. Journalism at that time lacked both reach and quality, especially in its connection to politics. However, this situation began to change gradually, particularly between 1870 and 1918, as the Indian nationalist movement started to take shape. In this early phase of nationalism, the focus was more on political education, the spread of nationalist ideology, and creating a politically aware public. The press quickly became an essential instrument for nationalists to achieve these goals. The Indian National Congress, in its formative years, relied heavily on newspapers to circulate its resolutions, publicize its proceedings, and reach the wider public. As a result, numerous newspapers began to appear, led by committed journalists and reformers. These publications were not commercial ventures; rather, they were seen as vehicles for national and public service.

Several important developments supported the growth of the Indian press during this time. The expansion of English education and the introduction of printing presses made it easier to produce and distribute written material. The establishment of libraries and improvements in communication systems, such as the telegraph and railway networks, further boosted the spread of ideas. Moreover, the publication of religious texts by European Christian missionaries encouraged Indians to assert their own religious and cultural philosophies

through media. The press played a crucial role in preserving and promoting regional languages like Bengali, Marathi, and Tamil, which helped to build a strong base for cultural and political expression at the local level.

At the same time, a dynamic and educated middle class began to emerge, consisting of scholars, social reformers, teachers, lawyers, and writers. Many of them took up publishing as a way to contribute to the development of society. These individuals used media platforms to express their ideas, mobilize support for social reforms, and articulate their visions of national identity. The media also became a space for upper-caste and middle-caste groups, along with various religious communities, to voice their concerns and assert their presence in the public sphere. Through newspapers, pamphlets, and books, these groups debated religious, cultural, and social issues. The press enabled discussions on the differences and similarities between major religious traditions—such as Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, and Sufism—as well as intra-religious debates, for instance, between the Sanatan Dharma and Arya Samaj.

As the media became a platform for competing views, it also turned into a powerful space for shaping collective consciousness and identity. It gave voice to a variety of perspectives that may otherwise have been suppressed under colonial rule. However, the growing influence of the Indian press made the colonial authorities uneasy. The East India Company, and later the British government, viewed the Indian press with suspicion, often imposing restrictions or censoring critical publications. Despite this, Indian journalists and thinkers continued to use the press to challenge colonial rule, critique missionary efforts, and promote national unity. Ultimately, the press in colonial India played a transformative role in shaping modern Indian society, serving not only as a means of political resistance but also as a tool for cultural revival, public education, and the assertion of indigenous identity.

Closely linked with the nationalist movements and ideologies, is the emergence of the Gita Press. Jaydayal Goyandka and Hanuman Prasad Poddar set up the Gita Press and the *Kalyan* magazine in the early 1920s. As of early 2014, Gita Press had sold close to 72 million copies of the Gita, 70 million copies of Tulsidas's works and 19 million copies of scriptures like the Puranas and Upanishads. Akshaya Mukul's book *The Gita Press and the Making of a Modern India*, notes that, "it was only in 1926 that Gita Press truly came to life as a serious player in the fast-emerging Hindi publishing world of the early twentieth century. The seeds of its development into the most successful religious- genre publishing house were sown, not by Goyandka and his associates' concern for one religious text, but by an acrimonious debate between reformists and conservatives in the larger Hindu world."

The growth and success of Gita Press and its magazine *Kalyan* can be explained by three closely connected factors. First, by the late 1800s and early 1900s, Hindi was becoming strongly identified as the language of Hindus. During this time, there was a rapid expansion of the Hindi public sphere, with many new journals, newspapers, publishing houses, and public figures shaping public opinion. This growing media space was closely monitored by the British colonial state, which used informants and strict laws to keep control over political and religious activities. Second, Gita Press was a Marwari business, but it stood out because it was not focused on making profits. Instead, its main goal was religious—specifically, to protect and spread Sanatan Hindu Dharma, although the version of Hinduism it promoted was quite conservative and traditionalist. In terms of ambition and scale, Gita Press was unlike anything the Hindi literary world had seen before. It aimed to reach as many people as

possible with religious teachings, and it treated this mission with the seriousness and scope of a major national project.

The third and most important factor was the political environment of the 1920s, a period when tensions between Hindus and Muslims were growing sharply. Nationalism was increasingly being divided along religious lines, and frequent communal riots—especially around the sensitive issue of cow protection—fuelled further division. In this context, many Congress leaders who were dissatisfied with the direction of Congress politics, such as Madan Mohan Malaviya (founder of the Hindu Mahasabha), Purushottam Das Tandon, K.M. Munshi, and Seth Govind Das, threw their support behind the work of Gita Press and Kalyan. A major moment came in 1923, when leaders from the traditionalist Sanatan Dharma groups and the reformist Arya Samaj came together at a meeting in Banaras. They agreed to work together on common causes like protecting cows and promoting shuddhi (reconversion of non-Hindus back to Hinduism). This alliance gave a huge boost to conservative Hindu movements and strengthened efforts to build a unified Hindu identity, with Gita Press playing a key role in spreading these ideas across the Hindi-speaking world.

As Bilawal writes, “Mukul’s book tells us a story of how specific constituents of print media can serve as major instruments of popular mobilisation for the creation of a sectarian Hindu communal consciousness.”

In an interview Mukul writes, “The idea was that Hinduism should speak in one voice just like Islam does. According to them, Hindus were in big trouble because they didn't speak in one voice. In the first issue of Kalyan in 1926, Hanuman Prasad Poddar writes in the editorial that what Hindus needed was sangh bal, unity of strength. There was a proper subhead in the editorial called 'Hindu-Muslim Samasya'. So it was a political project. Otherwise, they always said it was a journal for bhakti, gyaan and vairagya, renunciation. But they were hitting at various levels. Anyone who was spiritually inclined but not a believer in Hindu right wing ideology would read it. From time to time, they'd speak of political things that were happening. They were unique in the sense that they created a very Bania model of Bhakti. A lot of people go to the temple because it makes them feel happy, peaceful.”

This is a very interesting interpretation that directly connects nation with Hindu Marwari identity. Kalyan, the Bhagavad Gita and Ramayana were made available in lakhs of copies at very low prices. It was a ‘joining together’ of the ‘realms of the moral, the sacred and the commercial’.

By making religious books like the Bhagavad Gita and Ramayana cheap and easily available to millions, Kalyan and Gita Press were doing much more than promoting personal devotion. They were creating a mass religious culture that blended three powerful forces: moral values, sacred religious duty, and commercial enterprise. On one level, they were teaching Hindus what it meant to live a good, righteous life through sacred texts. On another level, they were building a shared Hindu identity that tied individuals to a larger collective idea of the nation. And at the same time, they were using the tools of business—low-cost mass production, smart marketing, and wide distribution—to spread these ideas efficiently. In this way, religion was not just a personal or private matter anymore; it became deeply connected to ideas of community, identity, and even politics. Gita Press, through its spiritual messaging wrapped in commercial success, helped quietly shape a version of Hindu nationalism that linked faith, culture, and the economic realities of modern life.

Now let us summarise today’s lecture. In the early years of British rule, the Indian press had little influence on politics, but from 1870 onwards, it became a key tool for spreading

nationalist ideas and educating the public. Newspapers were not created for profit, but to serve the cause of national awakening, helping Indians express political, cultural, and religious views. Improvements in education, printing technology, libraries, and transport systems allowed ideas to spread widely. Religious publications and the rise of local languages like Bengali, Marathi, and Tamil further strengthened cultural identity. In this context, the Gita Press, founded by Jaydayal Goyandka and Hanuman Prasad Poddar in the early 1920s, became hugely important. It sold millions of copies of the Gita, Ramayana, and other sacred texts at low prices, making religious teachings accessible to the masses. Gita Press's success came from three main factors: the rise of Hindi as a Hindu language, its religious mission over profit, and the political tensions of the 1920s that made Hindu unity a powerful idea. Although Gita Press and its magazine Kalyan spoke the language of devotion and wisdom, they subtly promoted Hindu nationalist ideas by encouraging unity among Hindus. By blending religion, morality, and commerce, Gita Press helped transform personal faith into a larger sense of national identity. Publishing houses like Gita Press played a crucial role in creating a nationalistic emotion by connecting everyday religious devotion with the broader project of building a Hindu nation. Through mass publication, they not only preserved cultural traditions but also helped ordinary Indians imagine themselves as part of a larger collective struggle for identity, unity, and independence.