

NPTEL
Nation and Narration
Dr. Sreenath V S
Department of HSS, IIT Madras
Week1 Lecture 7
Transcript from the Video

Hello everyone, in the previous two lectures, we saw the factors responsible for the origin and development of the idea of nation in Europe. In this lecture, we explore the idea of modernity. I know you must be wondering why are we going to talk about the notion of modernity now. Is the idea of modernity really important in the context of our discussion nation? Well, yes. The ideas of nation and modernity in fact go hand in hand with each other. The modern nation states were often thought to be the visible embodiments of modernity.

First, we'll try to conceptualize the traditional way in which the notion of modernity in the West is understood. Then, we will try to examine the efficacy of this traditional model in understanding the notion of modernity in the Indian context. The primary texts that I am using in this section are Partha Chatterjee's essay "Nationalism as a Problem in the History of Political Ideas," Sumit Sarkar's "Rammohun Roy and the Break with the Past" and Ashok Sen's "Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar and his Elusive Milestones. So, let us get started.

Let us begin by understanding what the idea of modernity is. Modernity refers to the social, cultural, economic, and political changes that emerged with the transition of society from a traditional, feudal framework to a scientific industrial order. Modernity challenges old traditions, emphasizes reason and individualism, and is often associated with the rise of nation-states and print culture. What are the characteristic marks of a modern society? Well, there are so many aspects. For example, the dominance of secular values, as opposed to religious ones, prevalence of scientific temper, instead of superstition, the rise of an industrial society in place of a feudal society, the establishment of a system of governance based on popular sovereignty, etc. I just mentioned a few for you. It is often conceived that the new nation-states that emerged in Europe were strongly founded on the notion of modernity. The ideas of modernity took deep root first in the countries in the Western Europe like United Kingdom, France, Germany, etc. So, quite naturally, the global standards of modernity were set for the rest of the world by these countries in the Western Europe. Although the idea of modernity emerged and took deep root first in Western Europe, the countries in the Eastern Europe were not in position to achieve these global standards of modernity set by the comity of nations in the Western Europe. It was just that they were just a bit slower in using their resources effectively to attain the standards of modernity, while Western Europe had already achieved them.

An idea that is deeply associated with modernity is the concept of progress. I know you will now ask progress from what. Progress from traditional, religious, and feudal ways of thinking to a society driven by reason, science, and democracy. It means moving away from monarchy and rigid social hierarchies to a system based on individual rights, equality, and innovation. The advocates of modernity stood for a systematic progression from orthodoxy to liberal values. They opposed outdated beliefs and practices of the medieval society. They supported rationality, science, and enlightenment, in contrast to traditional scriptures, customs, and faith.

Modernity was generally thought to be a struggle between the forces of 'progress' and those of 'reaction and antiquity.' Modernity was primarily represented by those who advocated for a radical progression or departure from the traditional beliefs and customs of a medieval society. It was believed that the modernists upheld the values of rationality, science, and preferred enlightenment to scripture, tradition, and faith. So, the intellectual history of modernity in Europe was mostly seen as a history of struggle between the forces of reaction and those of progress.

In the nineteenth century, many attempts were made to measure the degree of modernity that the non-western world has achieved by examining to what extent these non-western countries successfully transitioned from tradition and orthodoxy to liberal values and rationality. In the Indian context, this initiative was primarily taken by many Marxist historians. They analyzed the Indian modernity in comparison to the history of modernity in the West. They analyzed the social and intellectual history of nineteenth-century India in relation to modernity, in the same manner scholars had examined the way modernity shaped the economic and cultural history of Europe. The social, cultural, and intellectual awakening in India during the 19th and early 20th centuries and the consequent emergence of the new, modern-middle class were compared to the Renaissance movement and the emergence of a progressive bourgeoisie in Europe. The nationalist struggles in central and southern Europe in the nineteenth century were often compared to the rise of nationalist movement in India. So, through this double analogy—that is the analogy of a new progressive middle class which militated against the antiquated beliefs and the analogy of the emergence of the nationalist sentiment—the Marxist historians explained the nature of Indian modernity. The Marxist historians also identified the “the champions of modernity with westernizers and those of orthodoxy with the traditionalists.

But there were quite a few problems with this model. The 1970s witnessed numerous challenges to the Marxist conception of Indian modernity as essentially a struggle between orthodoxy and liberal values. One such event was a commemorative volume of critical essays published in 1972, marking the bicentenary of Rammohun Roy. Although the volume featured several contributions in the conventional Marxist framework, it also included several essays that questioned the conventional Marxist perspective. A case in point is the criticism of Sumit Sarkar in his *“Rammohun Roy and the Break with the Past.”* In this work, Sarkar opined that while 19th-century social reformers and ideologues undoubtedly embraced many modern elements, this did not necessarily entail a wholesale rejection of tradition and orthodoxy. In other words, the Indian modernity was not total abandonment of the traditional values of the past for the liberal, progressive values of the present.

Sarkar further says that the Marxist historian understood Indian modernity essentially as a struggle between two opposing trends—'westernist' or 'modernist' on one side, and the 'traditionalist' on the other. It is true that an important principle that defined modernity in Europe was the decisive departure from many ideas and practices of the Middle Ages, accompanied by the rise of rationality and the development of a systematic scientific temper. But this crucial element, that is the complete renunciation of the traditional values of the past, which defined modernity in Europe, was conspicuously absent in Indian society.

An interesting case that Paratha Chatterjee cites to demonstrate this negotiation between the modernity and orthodoxy is the view of Vidyasagar in this matter. According to Chatterjee, although Vidyasagar did not fully believe in the authority of religious texts, he strongly felt that the validation for the reform activities should necessarily come from the religious texts

and ancient sastras. He thought it was impossible to challenge traditions in India without working within the existing religious framework.

So, the social reformers, like Vidyasagar, despite their celebrated disregard for religious scriptures, often found themselves relying on these scriptures for the support of their programs. They did not consider the possibility of fostering modernity outside the bounds of canonical orthodoxy. What we observe in these intellectuals is an attempt to reconcile Indian idealism with imported liberal ideals.

Ashok Sen's observation in this regard is also important. Sen observes that even the social reformers who wanted to modernize the Indian society did not think of the possibility of generating "nonconformism outside the bounds of canonical orthodoxy" (Chatterjee, "The Fruits" 75). What we see in these intellectuals is "a spurious conciliation of Indian idealism and imported liberal sanctions" (Chatterjee, "The Fruits" 75). If you want to know more about this contradiction in Vidyasagar, you can read *Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar and his Elusive Milestones* by Ashok Sen.

Sen further says that while the 19th-century intelligentsia did indeed embrace the novel concepts of reason and rationality, and some demonstrated significant courage and initiative in their efforts to modernize social customs and attitudes, certain fundamental catalysts for transformation were lacking in colonial society in India. As a result, the possibility of creating a strictly modern society which challenged the traditional order through and through was difficult.

This meant that the idea of alternative modernity that the nationalist intelligentsia developed in India had to be understood with a different framework altogether. Though the new sense of rationality and feeling of scientific temper which emerged in Europe inspired the *bhadralok* in the colonial state to embrace a new identity based on these progressive ideals, they were not ready to completely do away with their tradition and start a new lease of life in the western fashion. In other words, a newer form of modernity which is partially based on tradition started holding a sway over the nation. Thus, in the Indian context the ideas of modernity and 'progress' were not essentially a conflict between the nonconformists representing liberal values and the traditionalists representing antiquity. On the other hand, modernity was a negotiation between liberal progressive values and the traditional values from the past.

The second problem was with respect to their identification with the champions of modernity with westernizers and those of orthodoxy with the traditionalists. It was often argued that such a framework often tied modernity to British rule and English education, leading to a perception that progress came through colonial influence. This association often resulted in a more positive assessment of British rule, as it was seen as a driving force behind reforms and new ideas. He observes, "In fact, the entire 'tradition-modernization dichotomy' served as a cover under which 'the grosser facts of imperialist political and economic exploitation [were] very often quietly tucked away in a corner' (46-68). The inspiration for such a conception came straight from Marx's own remark in 1853 in his essay "The British Rule in India." In his essay, "The British Rule in India," Marx observed: "England, it is true, in causing a social revolution in Hindustan, was actuated only by the vilest interests, and was stupid in her manner of enforcing them. But that is not the question. The question is, can mankind fulfil its destiny without a fundamental revolution in the social state of Asia? If not, whatever may have been the crimes of England she was the unconscious tool of history in bringing about that revolution" (xx).

In this statement, Marx indeed acknowledges that the primary motive of England's presence in India was the exploitation of India's resources. He admits that England's methods in India were crude and oppressive. But still, he argues that in spite of all these criticisms, England functioned as a catalyst to bring about a radical progressive change for the Asian society.

The problem with this statement is that it assumes that colonial rule can be justified, if it leads to social change without exploitative motives. He overlooks the inherent nature of colonialism, which is fundamentally exploitative. Colonial rule is not simply a neutral vehicle for progress; it is a system of domination, resource extraction, and cultural imposition that disrupts indigenous societies. Even if social changes—such as legal reforms, infrastructure, or new educational systems—occurred under colonial rule, they were often shaped by the colonizer's interests rather than by a genuine commitment to the well-being of the colonized. The idea that colonialism could be "acceptable" under different motives risks legitimizing oppression as long as it produces some form of modernization, ignoring the violent and coercive realities of imperial rule. Marx's statement itself is problematic because it frames England as an "unconscious tool of history," implying that colonial exploitation was part of a necessary historical process. This perspective can be criticized for downplaying resistance and alternative paths to modernity that did not rely on colonial subjugation.

So, we saw that the fundamental principle that characterized modernity in Europe was the rejection of ancient Middle Age ideas and the adoption of practices in favor of a newfound emphasis on rationality and a scientific mindset. This distinctive feature of European modernity—that is the total rejection of the traditional values from the past to embrace the new values of modernity—was noticeably lacking in Indian society. While the emerging sense of rationality and scientific thinking in Europe did influence the educated class in India, they were not willing to entirely abandon their traditions and conservatism. In other words, an alternative form of modernity began to influence the nation. Consequently, in the Indian context, the notions of modernity and progress were not essentially a conflict between those who advocated liberal values and those who upheld traditional orthodox beliefs.

It clearly indicates the emergence of an alternative form of modernity. The alternative modernity in the Indian context, carefully shaped by Indian nationalist intellectuals, was clearly a very careful negotiation with modern values from the West and the traditional values from here. What is the nature of this alternative modernity? We will discuss this in our next lecture.