
UNIT 2 ORIENTALIST DISCOURSE AND COLONIAL MODERNITY

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2.1 INTRODUCTION

In this unit, an attempt will be undertaken to understand the concept of Orientalism and the question of modernity and its colonial roots in India. This is a relatively new field that has opened up new questions and has significantly reconstituted the old field of colonial history, both for the ex-colonised societies as well as of the colonisers themselves. The history of Europe too, is now increasingly marked by an awareness of the ways in which the colonial encounter crucially shaped the self-image of Europe itself. In this unit we will mainly be concerned, however; with the history of the Indian subcontinent.

Although the unit will be concerned with the debate on the colonial period, it is necessary to understand that it is a field that is irrevocably constituted by the present context. In the last few decades, particularly since the 1980s, this field has given rise to a whole new body of work and serious, often very sharp debates among scholars. It was during this period that an intense and fresh engagement with the whole question of our colonial modernity came to the fore. What is crucially important about this development in the scholarship on the Indian subcontinent is that it focuses, unlike earlier writings on colonial history, on the *politics of*

knowledge implicated in that history. In a very significant way, it foregrounds the manner in which our knowledge of 'our own' history – and our own selves – is framed by and understood through categories produced by colonial knowledge.

Before we go into a discussion of our actual subject matter, let us make a preliminary observation. Indian history today is no longer what we have known it to be so far from our history text-books. The new developments have illuminated aspects of that history that were hitherto covered in darkness. What do we mean when we say some aspects were 'covered in darkness'? It is not as though some entirely new 'facts' have been uncovered. New facts have certainly become known to us, or known facts, often considered unimportant, have acquired new meaning because *the way we look at that history has now changed*. As we will see later in the unit, the idea of history as a repository of some kind of uncontaminated truth about our past, itself has become problematic in the light of these developments. Let us keep this in mind before we proceed.

2.2 DIFFERENT STRANDS OF RECENT SCHOLARSHIP

There are at least four different strands of scholarship that have come together since the 1980s, that have been at the root of this transformation.

2.2.1 The Neo-Gandhian Critique

In the first place, there has been since the early 1980s, the reactivation of an older Gandhian critique of modernity. Central in this strand has been the work of scholars like Ashis Nandy, Veena Das and scholar-activists active in the environment and science movements like Claude Alvares and Vandana Shiva. Much of the critique of this set of scholars has been directed at a critique of science and rationality as the ruling ideological coordinates of modernity, alongside the related notion of development followed by the Nehruvian state. Though not all scholars associated with this strand have an explicitly Gandhian orientation, they broadly extend elements of Gandhi's rejection of modern Western civilisation and its faith in science and reason as the conditions of human freedom. Ashis Nandy directed his main attack on this ideological constellation of modernity ; namely the constellation of science, reason and development. He also extends that critique to the nation-state itself, which he sees as the institutional embodiment of modernity, as an institution that is always intolerant of popular beliefs and ways of living. Nandy sees in the project of the modern nation-state, an inherent drive towards homogenisation, towards cultural genocide and the desire to reduce life to a few, easily definable and negotiable categories. His central argument in this respect is that notions of the self in the South Asian context have been largely fluid and it is only with the onset of the modern nation-state that the attempts have been made to fix identity into singular categories like Hindus and Muslims. He points to the fact that even today, there are hundreds of communities who combine elements of both Hinduism and Islam and find it difficult to 'classify' themselves in neat and exclusive categories. Such an argument is substantiated, for instance by anthropological surveys by scholars like K. Suresh Singh.

2.2.2 The Subaltern Studies School

The second strand can be identified in the work of the Subaltern Studies School of Indian

Historiography (henceforth referred to as 'Subaltern historians'). This school too made its first public appearance on the scene in the early 1980s – although its work began in the late 1970s. This group of historians and some political scientists came from a primarily Left-wing political background and much of their initial work was a continuation of the concerns that they had developed through the impact of Maoist political practice in the 1970s. Important among scholars of this school were historians Ranajit Guha, Gyanendra Pandey, Shahid Amin, David Hardiman and Dipesh Chakravarty and political scientists like Partha Chatterjee and to some extent, Sudipta Kaviraj. The common thread that links the effort of the early work of the Subaltern historians with that of scholars like Ashis Nandy was a critique of nationalism and nationalist historiography and a concern with popular consciousness. Through a series of volumes published in the 1980s, the Subaltern historians launched a major critique of nationalist historiography which subsumed all histories into the 'History of the Nation'. By initiating this critique, they sought to recover what Ranajit Guha called "the small voice of history". They sought to understand what those who participated in the nationalist or peasant struggles in the colonial period thought, why they participated and what were the forms of their motivation and participation. In other words, they sought to recover the subjectivity and agency – the autonomy – of the subaltern classes. The word 'subaltern', as many of you would know, comes from the writings of the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci. In the early subaltern studies, this term was used to distinguish it from other more restrictive categories like class. 'Subaltern' simply means 'subordinate' and could be used to designate different kinds of social, economic and political subordination. As Guha put it in his "Preface" to the first volume, it would "include subordination in South Asian society whether it is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office or in any other way."

2.2.3 The Anthropological Studies in the US

The third strand comes from within the field of area studies from anthropologists like Bernard Cohn, largely situated in the United States. Bernard Cohn's work spans a much longer period starting from the mid-1950s. He had been writing on questions relating to colonial knowledge of India and the ways in which this knowledge transformed the very society it claimed to study. His researches also showed how these knowledges constituted political subjectivities in the colonial world. Under his stewardship a whole generation of scholars from the University of Chicago, like Nicholas Dirks, Arjun Appadurai and others worked on the different modalities of colonial knowledge to show how it was thoroughly embedded in the colonial project and power. It was a knowledge that provided the intellectual justification for Britain's civilising mission in India, where, in Ranajit Guha's words, "an official view of caste, a Christian missionary view of Hinduism and an Orientalist view of Indian society as a 'static, timeless, spaceless' and internally undifferentiated monolith, were all produced by the complicity of power and knowledge." (Ranjit Guha, "Introduction" to Bernard Cohn (1988) *An Anthropologist among Historians and Other Essays*, p. xix). Around the 1980s, this anthropological work gets reconfigured into a different kind of framework that explicitly situates itself within the field of our discussion. In an influential essay published in 1984, "The Census, Social Structure and Objectification in South Asia", Cohn showed, for instance, how the colonial censuses not only produced knowledge about India and its people, but also produced an India that was not necessarily the India that existed prior to the advent of colonial rule.

2.2.4 Edward Said's Orientalism

Finally, there is the work of Palestinian-American scholar, Edward Said that could be said to have made possible the coming together of these different bodies of work. With the publication in the 1978, of Said's highly acclaimed tract *Orientalism*, different efforts to deal with the continuing legacy of the West in the former colonies as well as in immigrant communities in the West received a major fillip. In this tract, which became very influential in and around the mid-1980s, Said showed how certain constructions of the East or the 'Orient' have been crucial to Europe's self-image. He showed through a reading of major literary texts as well as political documents, parliamentary speeches and such other sources, how the 'Orient' was a peculiar European construction – backward, superstitious, barbaric and irrational on the one hand and exotic and pristine on the other. Said emphasises, however, that it should not be assumed that "the structure of *Orientalism* is nothing more than a structure of lies or of myths"; it should be understood as a "body of theory and practice". This body of knowledge, he argues, undoubtedly had an older history, but "in the period from the end of the eighteenth century, there emerged a complex Orient suitable for study in the academy, for display in the museum, for reconstruction in the colonial office, for theoretical illustration in anthropological, biological, linguistic, racial and historical theses about mankind and the universe, for instances of sociological theories of development, revolution, cultural personality, national or religious character."

It can easily be seen that all the strands of scholarship mentioned above had already begun in different ways to challenge the very frameworks of knowledge that had dominated our understandings of our history. With the exception of the early Subaltern Studies school, all the others had explicitly begun asking fundamental questions about Western knowledge – especially colonial knowledge – itself. Even in the case of the Subaltern historians, their relentless interrogations of nationalist and elitist history-writing and the quest for subaltern autonomy led them eventually to question some of the very crucial ways in which nationalism itself was structured by western knowledge. It should also be mentioned at this stage, that these different and diverse strands could come together because of another intellectual development in Europe and the United States. This was what is loosely called the post-structuralist current – or what is often loosely termed 'postmodernism' – which launched a vigorous internal critique of the entire tradition of Western philosophy and metaphysics since the Enlightenment. However, that is not our immediate concern here and we shall return to some of its more relevant aspects later. Let us now examine the main contentions of 'colonial discourse theory'.

2.3 NATIONALISM AND COLONIAL MODERNITY

While we have delineated the main currents of thought that went into the renewed interrogations of colonial history, our main concern in the rest of the unit will be mainly with the work of Subaltern historians and scholars like Kaviraj and Nandy. It is not within the scope of this unit to make an assessment of the entire body of work produced under the rubric of Subaltern Studies. What we are concerned with here mainly is the later body of work – what Sumit Sarkar has called the 'late Subaltern Studies'. For it is there that the concern with Orientalism and colonial discourse acquires its most articulate expression. It is there that the most sustained and thorough-going examination of both colonial discourse and the peculiar

features of what Partha Chatterjee has called "our modernity" has been carried out. Much of the later work of Bernard Cohn himself and his students like Nicholas Dirks and Gyan Prakash too can be said to fall broadly within the same body of work. In the discussion that follows, we will discuss certain themes that emerge from this body of work, rather than proceed in a strictly chronological order.

We have mentioned that the early work of the Subaltern Studies scholars was concerned with the search for subaltern autonomy; that is, of trying to understand forms of subaltern consciousness and their divergences from those of nationalist political elites, even when they participate in movements led by the latter. This concern naturally led to explorations of how elite consciousness too is/was formed in a context of colonial subjugation. It led to an exploration of nationalist discourse, its structure and assumptions, as well as to explorations of forms of subaltern consciousness. Two things started becoming apparent in the course of these explorations. First, that nationalism was not simply one monolithic ideological formation that every modern society must have. The situation was complicated by the fact that societies like India's were inserted into modernity by the agency of colonialism. The desire to be modern here was, therefore, enmeshed with the desire to be free and self-governing; that is be 'Indian'. Early nationalist elite were forced to articulate their politics in a condition of subjugation where they simultaneously aspired to the principles of universal equality and liberty embodied by modern thought, and had to mark their difference from the West. Second, as a consequence, it was also becoming apparent that nationalism therefore, also involved a formidable and creative intellectual intervention, formulating and defending its main postulates in the battlefield of politics, as Partha Chatterjee put it. With the publication in early 1983, of Benedict Anderson's now classic *Imagined Communities*, the possibilities had opened out for a more sustained investigation of how nations are invented. With the publication of this immensely insightful book, the idea that there is anything natural or eternal about nations was laid at rest. All nations, Anderson argued, are imagined communities. We should clarify one common misconception here. When Anderson suggests that nations are imagined communities, he does not suggest that nations are therefore 'unreal' or 'fictitious'. On the contrary, he claims, they are real and call forth such passion that people are ready to die and kill for it, *precisely because they are brought into existence as a consequence of collective imagination.*

2.3.1 Nationalism as 'Difference'

Let us now turn to some of the features of nationalism and colonial modernity as we know it today from the work of scholars mentioned above. Attaining the nationhood and self-governance, the nationalists understood, was the only way to be modern. That was the way the world they discovered, actually was. The great intellectual question that the nineteenth century intelligentsia had posed to itself was "why did India become a subject nation? How did a small island nation called Britain attain mastery over this huge landmass?" Their answer, we now know, was that this was because India, on the eve of colonial subjugation, was internally divided. That there were hundreds of different principalities and quarrels, deep internal divisions like those of caste and it was these that made it impossible for the country to resist colonisation. In the modern world, these could not continue. If we have to become free, we had to overcome the deep internal divisions and usher in a form of self-government that will recognise all its people as free citizens. The only way this could be achieved was

through the attainment of nationhood, for that was the way modern societies existed. Yet, it was something that troubled the emergent nationalist elite. How could they be modern and yet not simply ape the ways of the Western colonial masters. Being modern and striving for nationhood, that is for liberation from colonial rule, required the subjugated nation, therefore, to *mark* its difference from the rulers. It had to be a modernity that was different in crucial ways from the baggage of western modernity as they saw it. The search for a different, Indian modernity was then what animated the discourse of nationalism in India. In his essay on "The Census and Objectification", for instance, Bernard Cohn cited from a 1943 text by Jawaharlal Nehru where Nehru observed: "I have become a queer mixture of the East and the West, out of place everywhere, at home nowhere...They are both [i.e. the East and the West] part of me, and though they help me in both the East and the West, but they also create a feeling of spiritual loneliness...I am a stranger and an alien in the West...But in my own country also, sometimes, I have an exile's feeling."

This above quotation by Nehru highlights one of the most abiding inner conflicts of Indian, but more generally, of all postcolonial nationalisms. If we remember that Nehru was by far the most radical of modernists among all the nationalists, we can imagine what would have been the situation of other nationalist leaders. In fact this is an anxiety that is evident among the intellectual elite of Indian society long before the formal appearance of nationalism towards the end of the 19th century. Ashis Nandy for instance, showed in an early essay that there was a resurgence of the phenomenon of *Sati* in Bengal towards the end of the 18th century. Through an examination of statistical evidence, he argues that it was only in this period that "the rite suddenly came to acquire the popularity of a legitimate orgy." Before that it had declined substantially in most parts of the country. Nandy suggested that it was in "the groups made psychologically marginal by their exposure to Western impact" that the rite became popular. These groups therefore felt the pressure "to demonstrate to others as well as to themselves their allegiance to traditional high culture." The Bengali elite being the closest to western contact was, thus most affected by this anxiety to be different. The question of modernity was of course not yet on the agenda at this time. More to the point, in that respect, is Dipesh Chakravarty's reading of early nationalist tracts in Bengal that concerned domesticity and the position of women. While most writers of the latter half of the 19th century were clear that "women of this country" were "uncivilised, lazy, quarrelsome" and therefore bad for domestic happiness, due to lack of education, they were also convinced that education itself could produce undesirable traits in women. For education could also make them "arrogant, lazy, immodest and defiant of authority". This was clearly a fear about modern education and exposure to Western ideas that was being expressed by the early elite.

2.3.2 Anxieties About the Nation's Women

The concern with women is evident in both, Nandy's exploration of Sati and Chakravarty's explorations of domesticity. It is the 'Women's Question' therefore, argues Partha Chatterjee, that becomes the site for a major nationalist intervention. Chatterjee explores what he calls the nationalist resolution of the women's question to suggest that the way in which nationalism sought to mark out its difference was by demarcating a sphere of inner sovereignty. What is the nationalist resolution of the women's question? Chatterjee notices that in the last years of the 19th century, with the appearance of nationalism, all the important questions of social

reform centred on the status of women, (like widow remarriage, education of women, against child marriages etc), disappear from public discourse. This happens, he contends, because nationalism starts its journey by demarcating an 'inner' and an 'outer' sphere and declaring itself sovereign in the inner, cultural sphere. In the outer sphere its subjugation is a given fact, but in the inner domain of culture it claims complete sovereignty. It refuses to make the question of women a matter of negotiation with the colonial state. On the other hand, it does not simply rest content with the old status of women. It rather embarks on a project of creating a 'new woman', educated, active in public life and at the same time fully aware of her domestic, womanly duties. This 'inner domain' then, suggests Chatterjee, becomes the sphere where nationalism begins to mark its difference from colonial, Western modernity. But by valourising cultural difference, nationalism was not always being modern. In fact, as many other studies show the assertion of cultural difference often became a way of relegating questions of internal inequalities between groups to the sphere of the 'unspeakable'. The problem then, Chatterjee suggests is that there appeared to be a contradiction lodged at the heart of the nationalist project: its search for modernity was marred by a struggle against modernity in some sense. "What was national was not always secular and modern, and the popular and democratic quite often traditional and sometimes fanatically anti-modern."

2.3.3 Cultural Split and Liberal Ideas

Sudipta Kaviraj introduces three more interesting aspects in his delineation of the features of colonial modernity. First, he argues, modern colonial education introduced a split in the Indian cultural life, by bringing into being two "rather exclusive spheres of English and vernacular discourse." The concerns that animated these different spheres were very different. While the English-speaking world was more concerned with ideas of individual liberty, those working in the vernacular world were far less concerned with democracy as a form of government. The vernacular nationalist intelligentsia was more concerned with the problem of "collective freedom of the Indian people from British rule" rather than with that of individual freedom. Indian nationalist elite encountered the great liberal ideas of equality, freedom and autonomy in a context of subjugation and were therefore, more immediately concerned with issues of national sovereignty. They, therefore, chose to transfer these ideas into their own concerns. Here, we see the second feature: Liberal ideas, Kaviraj contends, did have "a deep and profound influence in Indian political argument" but this influence was not in terms of implanting liberal ideas but nationalist ones. This is not a minor or trivial difference but in a sense crucial, for as Kaviraj points out, the idea of equality between nations or societies can be completely blind to the idea of internal equality within the national community. Hence, even somebody like Gandhi could easily justify the caste system while claiming national equality and freedom from the British,

2.3.4 A Different Sequence and Different Modernity

This second feature, according to Kaviraj, is also linked to a third: Modernity in India followed a very different sequence from that in the West. Modernity is a historical constellation, Kaviraj argues, that comprises three distinct processes: capitalist industrial production, political institutions of liberal democracy and the emergence of a society where old community bonds have been largely dissolved and the process of individuation has taken place. This means that in the place of old forms of belonging, there have emerged new interest-based associations.

This is what is called in political theory, 'the space of civil society'. In the historical trajectory of the West, democracy emerged after the other two processes had developed to a high degree. Initial disciplining of the working class, for instance, took place in a context where there was no possibility of democratic resistance. In fact, democratic aspirations were, at least partly, a consequence of the process of capitalist industrialisation. In India, on the other hand, democracy and parliamentary institutions preceded the other two processes. Kaviraj links this different sequence to a kind of populist politics that comes to dominate the political scene in India and many post-colonial countries.

It is this problem that Partha Chatterjee has recently conceptualised in his idea of "political society". Chatterjee argues that what is called civil society in the West is a domain of the individuated, rights-bearing citizen that is governed by rules of free entry and exit and individual autonomy. Non-Western societies, he suggests, are marked by a permanent hiatus between this domain of civil society, which is governed by the normative ideals of Western modernity and the vast areas of society that relate to the developmental state as 'populations' that are subject to the policy interventions by the state. Here, it is the responsibility of the government rather than any notion of rights that becomes the ground on which claims of these populations are negotiated. We cannot go into a longer discussion of this concept as elaborated by Chatterjee, but it is important to note that according to him, one of the crucial defining features of 'political society' is that it is a domain where the idea of a community still holds a powerful sway – as opposed to the individual who is the defining characteristic of civil society. It is the argument of scholars like Chatterjee and Kaviraj that this peculiar feature of non-Western modernity should not be understood as a 'lack' or 'underdevelopment' or as an 'incomplete modernity'. Rather, they should be seen as the specific way in which modernity in the colonial context came to be constituted. It has a different history from that of Western modernity and is likely to have a different future.

2.4 NATIONALISM, HISTORY AND COLONIAL KNOWLEDGE

So far we have talked about nationalism, assuming that there was one single entity called nationalism – and that was **Indian** nationalism. As it happens, there was neither a single nationalism, nor for that matter, a single Indian nationalism. We know, for example, that the **Indian National Congress** espoused one kind of Indian nationalism that we may call 'secular-nationalism'. We also know that the Muslim League espoused, at least from around 1940 onwards, a Pakistani nationalism. This is often referred to as the 'two-nation theory'. This was also propounded by someone like Vinayak Damodar Savarkar who stood for an explicitly Hindu-Indian nationalism. We also know for instance, that there was during the nationalist period a Bengali nationalism, an Assamese nationalism, a **Malayali** nationalism and such other nationalisms. The question is that if there was an already existing object/nation called India, how do we account for the fact that so many different people saw it in so many different ways? Sudipta Kaviraj answers this question, in his well-known essay "The Imaginary Institution of India", by claiming that the India that we talk of so unproblematically today, was not really a discovery; it was **an invention!** By calling it a discovery as Nehru did in his **Discovery of India**, we seem to imply that "it was already there", presumably from time immemorial. If you are asked today to describe what India is, you will most probably point to its geographical boundaries stretching from Kashmir to **Kanyakumari** and Bay of Bengal to the Arabian Sea;

you will recount the different linguistic, religious, caste and tribal groups that inhabit this landmass. You will also probably say that because of all this India represents a 'unity in diversity'. And yet, what if you are told that before the nineteenth century, nobody exactly knew the physical stretch of this landmass and that our ancestors had no idea of how many communities and religions existed in this land. Nor did they have any idea of how many people there were in each community. What then is the picture of India that you will draw? How did the early nationalists draw the picture of their India?

2.4.1 Construction of India in the 19th Century

Take for instance the fact that the first tentative maps of 'India' – the name for India too did not exist at that time – were drawn up by James Rennell, a colonial official in Bengal, between 1782 and 1788. It was only by 1818 that, with the East India Company's annexation of large parts of the subcontinent, that an idea of the geographical stretch of the land began to emerge. It was only in the 19th century that the idea of a geographical entity called 'India' was consolidated. As Mathew Edney's detailed documentation and analysis of the mapping of India argues, "In constructing a uniform and comprehensive archive of India, the British fixed the scope and character of the region's territories. They located and mapped the human landscape of villages, forts, roads, irrigation schemes, and boundaries within the physical landscape of hills, rivers and forests..." It was also in the 19th century that the first censuses of India were done and only in 1881 that the first comprehensive census took place. It was then that the idea of the different communities that inhabited the land became available, as also their numbers. But this was not all. It was not simply that the British compiled information about the land in an objective manner. To count and make sense of a huge population of a land like the Indian subcontinent, they had to classify the population into different groups. As there were no clear-cut notions of community, the British defined them in their own ways for purposes of classification. Large categories such as 'Hindu' and 'Muslim', as well as those of caste (in which they fitted thousands of *jatis*) were in a sense, colonial constructs, devised primarily for the purpose of census enumerations. It is not as though religious denominations and *jatis* did not 'exist' before the censuses, but there were large zones of indefinable 'grey areas' that were not easily amenable to classification. These hundreds of categories had to be reduced to a few, easily handle-able, administrative categories. For that purpose their boundaries had to be precisely defined. In doing so, colonial rule actually created new categories and fixed them in certain specific ways, as a lot of historical work now shows. This is not a matter that we can go into at any length here, but a few points should be noted.

In his essay mentioned above, Kaviraj has made a distinction between what he calls 'fuzzy' and 'enumerated' communities. One of the ways in which the very act of enumeration and classification transformed the way in which communities exist, is captured by Kaviraj in this distinction. Individuals in pre-modern, fuzzy communities did not have a fixed sense of identity but that does not mean that they had no sense of identity. Individuals, he argues, could on appropriate occasions, describe themselves as vaishnavas, Bengalis or maybe Rarhis or *Kayasthas*, villagers and so on. But none of these would be a complete description of their identity. Each of these could very precisely define their conduct in specific situations but it was radically different from the identity of modern enumerated communities in one way. It was only when one singular identity was fixed that they would begin to ask, as modern communities do, about how many there were in the world, what was their

representation in public institutions, how were they being discriminated against and so on. So, as Dipesh Chakravarty asserts, "by the 1890s, Hindu and Muslim leaders were quoting census figures at each other to prove that whether or not they had received their legitimate share of benefits (such as employment and education) from British rule." In that sense, modern notions of majority and minority and such other questions become possible to pose only with the emergence of such enumerated communities. It is from this angle that Gyanendra Pandey contends, in his *Construction of Communalism in Colonial North India*, that even though there were sectarian conflicts among Hindus and Muslims before colonialism, they were usually local conflicts with many different roots. They were not communalism in the modern sense because there was no sense of a 'community' in the first place. At any rate, he argues, there was no sense of an all-India Hindu or Muslim community before colonial practices and knowledge inscribed this difference as essential to Indian society. We can see for instance, that the whole discourse about the Muslim population overtaking the Hindu population could only begin to take shape once the idea of a majority and minority was made possible through practices of enumeration and classification.

One of the major facts that emerges then from the discussion of colonial governmental practices is that our very idea of India, its geographical boundaries, its population and its cultural composition etc are all formed by the knowledge produced by the colonial state. What is most important is that all subsequent politics, including nationalist politics, was shaped by this knowledge. In the initial phases of the nationalist movement, it was not really clear what nationalism was all about. There was a critique of colonial rule, to be sure. But then, this critique was not being mounted on behalf of a clearly defined nation called India. As many studies have shown, there was often a Bengali nationalism or an Assamese nationalism and such others that were the first identifications of the anticolonial elite. As the idea of India became more entrenched and as its contours became more clearly defined, nationalism quickly appropriated this India as the ideal candidate for the new nation-to-be.

2.4.2 Nationalist Imagination and Indian History

There was one problem, however. How could a so recent an entity claim to any kind of legitimacy as a nation? For the very idea of nationhood required that the new political community lay claim to an ancient history. For the large part of the nineteenth century therefore, we see early nationalists vigorously at work to invent a history of India. As Kaviraj puts, in this period, particularly in Bengal, "history breaks out everywhere". Important thinkers like Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay proclaim, "we must have a history". Bankim in fact, puts it more vehemently that "Even when they go hunting for birds, sahebs [i.e. Britishers] write its history, but alas, Bengalis have no history." Notice that even at this stage, Bankim was only thinking of Bengal and Bengali as his nation; nevertheless the desire to have a history was already powerful." What does this search for history mean? Does it mean that Bengalis or Indians had no past? Certainly that was not the case. But as in all premodern cultures, the relationship to the past was of a different kind. What is it that made 'history' in the modern sense different from the earlier accounts of the past? If we look at the accounts that are available in the precolonial period, they are either accounts of genealogies of kings or they are orally transmitted stories of particular events. For there to be history there had to be a community – an enumerated community – whose history it would be. There had to be a more concretely and rigidly defined sense of a community or a people whose history could then be written. This sense arose only when the idea of 'India' became a tangible reality,

thanks to colonial governmental practices referred to above. Much of the effort of the aationalists of different hues was directed then at defining the political community such that it could incorporate all the diverse elements within the land called India. And this India had to have a history. Where did the resources for writing a history of India come from?

2.4.3 Orientalism and the Colony's Self-knowledge

It is well known that academic knowledge about India – its history – was produced by the efforts of the great Orientalist scholars of the late 18th and 19th centuries. The founding of the Asiatic Society of Bengal in 1784, by British Orientalists like William Jones, can be considered as a milestone in this enterprise. O. P. Kejariwal's *The Asiatic Society of Bengal and the Discovery of India's Past* for instance documents the work of this pioneering institution in the excavation of India's past. You might be surprised to know, as Kejariwal was when he started looking at the work of the Asiatic Society, that till as late as 1834, the names of ancient emperors like Samudragupta and Chandragupta Maurya were not known to anybody. He even mentions with some excitement, 'I discovered that even Asoka and Kanishka, not to mention their dynasties, were unknown names till the Society's work brought them to light'. He goes on to observe that it was astonishing for him to see that even the history of other well known dynasties like the Palas, the Senas, the Maukharis, the Valabhis and such others were unknown till the 19th century, when the Asiatic Society scholars brought them to light. This is not the place to dwell on the details of the voluminous work done by Orientalist scholars of the 19th century to unearth the history of India. What is important for us to note is that if right upto the 19th century, what we know today as the "ancient nation" of India did not have a clear geographical form, did not have an account of the different cultures and communities that lived in it, did not have a history, then what was it that made possible the story that we know today – that 'India' is an ancient nation, which had an apparent Golden Age in the time of the Gupta and Mauryan Empires, and so on? The point being made here by scholars whom we have been discussing above is that India, like most other nations is a relatively new and modern entity. Like other nations, it is the work of a collective imagination that was at work from the second half of the 19th century onwards, which deftly appropriated the work done by Orientalist scholars, in order to produce the narrative of a great and ancient civilisation. This was the nationalist imagination that retrospectively produced a History of the Nation, in which all the separate histories of the different entities that today form a part of the landmass called India, became reconfigured as the History of India. So when 19th century nationalists like Bankimchandra proclaimed the need for history, they were actually proclaiming the need for a history of this modern, rationalistic kind. This is why Kaviraj claims that India was an object of invention and not a discovery, That is why there is something worth thinking about for instance, in Kaviraj's claim that incorporating the history of the Satavahanas or of the Indus valley civilisation into a history of 'India' involves a certain disingenuousness. Or, let us say, on the basis of present geographical boundaries can we then lay claim to the Indus Valley civilisation and Mohenjodaro because they fall in present-day Pakistan? In other words, how legitimate is the effort to claim all past histories as parts of present-day India's national history?

Now, the fact that "we did not have a history" before the 19th century should not be understood to mean that 'we' did not have any sense or relationship with the past. Nationalists of the 19th and early 20th centuries routinely saw this as a sign of our backwardness, of a 'lack' that showed that we were not modern. Here, an important point should be kept in

mind. One of the ways in which post-structuralism has questioned the common sense of Western Rationalism since the Enlightenment is by challenging its notion of 'human history' as a singular and linear development. We know, for example, that the story of human history as a story of progress from lower to higher forms has been the basis of modern historical consciousness. Post-structuralism has, among other things, challenged the idea that there can be only one way – the historical way – of relating to the past. Again, this is not a question that we can go into in any detail here, but it is useful to bear in mind that such historical self-consciousness is a characteristic of modern enumerated communities who need to continuously provide definitions of their collective selves to themselves and to others. If premodern communities did not need any rational account of their past, it was simply because their ways of being in the world did not require them to demonstrate who they are. The notion of time in such communities marks no clear separation between mythical time and lived time. One of the ways in which this understanding of history and historical time has affected lives in the colonies – and continues to do so – is that it institutes a particular historical journey for all societies as though they were a single entity. In that story, Europe appears as the place where history is, because it is foremost in the scale of progress. All societies then become condemned to replay European history on their ground. One of the lessons of the body of work discussed above is that we have to begin writing our own histories, not by rejecting Europe but by denying it and its history the universal status that it has acquired.

2.5 SUMMARY

This unit is devoted to a thorough discussion of the concept of orientalism and the question of modernity and its colonial roots in India. This is a comparatively new field of study and has thrown up new and revealing insights for both ex-colonies and their erstwhile colonial masters. For instance, the idea that history of Europe alone cannot be a reference point when writing histories of former colonies.

The unit starts with a discussion of the different strands of scholarship on the subject. Four strands Neo-gandhian Critique, Subaltern studies School, U S based Anthropological studies and Edward Said's Orientalism have been examined. One next moves on to an examination of the questions of nationalism and colonial modernity. Here, it has been explained as to how the way nationalism evolved in the former colonies was different from its evolution in Europe. It was nationalism with a difference. The last section of the unit examines how the idea of India as we know it today was conceptualised and developed by nationalist historians of colonial India.

2.6 EXERCISES

1. Discuss different strands of thought among scholars on the question of colonial modernity.
2. Explain Nationalism's concern with orientalism and colonial discourse.
3. Discuss Nationalism and its features with reference to liberal ideas
4. Critically examine the Construction of India in the 19th Century.
5. Discuss Orientalism and the colony's self-knowledge.