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Reinventing the Nation: A Gandhian Discourse

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Time: 5-6pm

*Topic: Locating the intimate self: Gandhi,
Anglicisation and Nationalist discourse of
the Indian middle class*

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Locating the Intimate Self: Gandhi, Anglicisation, and the Nationalist Discourse of the Indian Middle Class

A duality of desire and anxiety regarding the idea of anglicisation has been deeply entrenched within the Indian middle-class nationalist discourse right from the nineteenth century. Indeed, the desire to emulate the colonisers can be traced back to such early nineteenth-century figures like the Bengali poet Michael Madhusudan Dutta who was renowned for his anglophilia and his reverence for the colonial culture. Such reverence could still be witnessed in the writings of the twentieth century memoirist, Nirad C. Chaudhuri, who regarded all that was good and living within the modern Indian to be shaped and quickened by the British rule. However, by the late nineteenth century, the fear of being deracinated had started underlining this middle-class desire for anglicization. Thus, in the writings of Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, which represent some of the earliest attempts by an Indian middle-class intellectual to systematically propound the ideas of nationalism, we already find an interplay of desire and anxiety surrounding the idea of anglicization.

In this talk, I explore the fate of this peculiar psychological dynamics within the Indian middle-class nationalist discourse as it gained a near hegemonic status under the leadership of M.K. Gandhi. In the first part of my presentation I focus on the emergence of the Indian middle-class nationalist discourse and its initial enthusiasm for anglicisation. I then show why this early enthusiasm proved to be unsustainable and gave way to a project wherein the primarily city-based, western-educated Indian middle-class intellectuals sought to assert their national identity by associating it with the village and the formally uneducated peasantry. In the second part of my essay, I show how Gandhi as the most iconic Indian middle-class nationalist sought to painstakingly reconcile the desire for anglicisation and the imperatives of locating a national self outside the milieu of colonial modernity inhabited by the middle class.