

**NPTEL**  
**Nation and Narration**

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**Transcript from the Video**

Hello everyone! In the previous lecture, we began with summarizing the methods of conceptualizing alternative histories. One such model we talked about is the subaltern history. Subaltern historiography is a way of writing history that centers on the experiences of marginalized and oppressed groups—people whose voices are often left out of mainstream history. Developed by scholars like Ranajit Guha, it questions traditional histories written from the perspective of powerful elites, whether they are colonial rulers, nationalist leaders, or upper-caste groups. Subaltern historians believe that everyday people—like peasants, tribal communities, and lower castes—also shape history through their struggles, resistance, and experiences. By focusing on these perspectives, subaltern historiography tries to create a more inclusive and accurate understanding of the past. It challenges the idea that only organized, elite-led movements matter, emphasizing that even those seen as "powerless" have agency and a role in shaping history.

In today's lecture we will focus on other notable theorists and their theorization of dalit movements.

Gail Omvedt in her book *Dalits and Democratic Revolution* (1994) defines Dalit and non-Brahman anti-caste movements as “anti-systemic movements” or “value-oriented movements” which “challenged and sought to transform the basic structure of the Indian social system, replacing caste and the accompanying social oppression, economic exploitation and political domination by an equalitarian society” (10). These movements differentiated from 19<sup>th</sup> century nationalist and ‘reformist’ movements such as Gandhi’s Harijan movement in the way that, while ‘Harijan’ movement aimed to cleanse Hinduism of its impure practices and build a new society where everyone was included within the umbrella of Hinduism, the anti-caste movements aimed to annihilate caste system altogether. The problem with Gandhi’s conceptualisation of ‘Harijan’ was his attempt at assimilating and including everyone under the ‘Hindu’ fold as followers of Hari. While his intentions of erasing untouchability were praiseworthy, his execution of the idea—i.e. building solidarity among all—came at the cost of erasing difference and positing

Brahmanical Hinduism as sacrosanct/highest order of belief.

Braj Ranjan Mani in his book, *Debrahmanising History*, constructs Dalit history to uncover subjugated knowledge and understand its conflict with dominant Brahmanical ideology. He recognizes Dalit politics as a counter-narrative and emphasizes the role of ideology in sustaining hierarchy. He identifies Brahmanism as the dominant ideological system: "Ideology as an instrument of domination, ensuring that common people think and behave as the ruling elite want them to, finds its archetypal expression in Brahmanism... Brahmanism is the main exploiting system of traditional Indian society. It stands for the aggregate of sacerdotal literature, social

structure, and religio-political institutions masterminded by the elite to keep the masses ignorant, servile, and disunited. Brahmanism uses caste ideology as a crucial instrument to dehumanize, divide, and dominate the productive majority" (15).

Mani builds a dalit history with purpose to understand and examine how they exist in conflict with dominant groups. He presents an anti-caste theorizing and history in conflict with dominant brahmanical ideology. He emphasises on the roles of ideology and the intellectuals endorsing the ideology in constructing and perpetuating hierarchy in the society. In the caste-context Mani identifies Brahmanism as the archetype of dominant ideology. Mani thus sees brahmanism as an ideological, social system rooted in power politics. And herein he conceptualizes power in the dialectical mode involving 'conflict and resistance'. Mani begins his theorizing by re-defining caste not in birth-based terms but as a system of discrimination particularly intended to endorse the interests of the powerful few (in this case, the Brahmins). Following Omvedt (*Buddhism in India*, 2003) and Ilaiah (*Why I am not a Hindu*, 1996), Mani is of the opinion that due to the pervasion of brahmanism, history needs to be re-examined and re-written. "Dalit-bahujan ideology, popularly referred to as Phule-Ambedkarism, heroes of the social justice movement in modern India, rejects the brahmanic version of caste and culture" (Mani 19).

Dalit historiography, therefore, can be seen as comprising of two amalgamated components: revision and retrieval. In anti-caste theorizing, Dalit history gets written as a counter-hegemonic movement arising during and against the nationalist movement which was brahmanical in nature. To challenge the silencing, appropriation, and absorption of caste in dominant historical narratives, histories written on caste have focused on building an alternative narrative parallel to nationalist movement and recovering the dalit leaders such as Phule and Ambedkar in the process, presenting a consolidated anti-caste movement parallel to the nationalist movement and theorizing the dalit ideology based on Phule and Ambedkar. Dalit writers and thinkers often draw upon Phule and Ambedkar and relate at the level of personal experience to articulate their oppression and their erasure in culture and history.

In establishing her version of dalit historiography, Omvedt (1994) critiques two modes through which anti-caste movement has been predominantly represented: nationalism and leftist view. While nationalism depicted anti-caste struggle as 'divisive', the Marxist view opted at/for co-opting caste within class purview. While Hindu nationalism called for a return to traditions in order to get rid of Western influence, anti-caste politics criticized nationalism's attempt to subsume the majority within a 'Hindu' fold, challenged "distortions and 'excrescences'; they attacked Hinduism itself by arguing that it was in essence Brahmanical, caste-bound and irrational. They asserted that Hinduism had not been the religion and culture of the majority but rather was an imposed religion; and that escaping exploitation today required the low castes to reject this imposition, to define themselves as 'non-Hindu' and take a new religious identity" (Omvedt 1994, 12). Consequently Phule and Ambedkar have become key figures in such theorizing. Marxists in India incorporated caste within the ongoing class struggle and termed it a fight against discriminatory "socio-economic system" in general. Urging for a merge in caste-class interests, noted CPI leader B. T. Ranadive writes, "The new situation calls for giving up the tradition of fighting caste battles in isolation from other toilers. . . . For it has to be realized that the present socio-economic system is based on property relations which sustain both caste and class oppression. It is sheer deception to think of abolishing untouchability or caste with the landlords and monopolists dominating the economy and bourgeois landlord government in power. The caste problem is inevitably merged with the problem of ending the rule of bourgeois landlord class and moving forward to socialism." (Pp 348. From "Caste, Class and

Property Relations”, EPW, vol 14 no. 7/8, feb 1979,337-348). Historian Bipan Chandra placed National Congress at the heart of democratic revolution in India, with working class and peasant movements incorporated within it, and viewed “alternative stream of politics [such as] the communal and casteist movements which were not nationalist or anti-imperialist” to have endorsed “loyalist pro-colonial tendencies” and thereby betraying the independence movement led by Congress. (Pp 28. Bipan Chandra, “Introduction” to Bipan Chandra et al. *India's Struggle for independence, 1857-1947*, new Delhi: Penguin books india, 1989). Gail Omvedt opines, “Analysis of the Dalit movement has suffered from both interpretations. It has been seen as diversionary either from the economic class struggle because of its argument for the necessity of struggling against social oppression, or in terms of the needs of a national struggle because of its insistence on putting the needs of the most oppressed/exploited group first and because of its willingness to treat the India elite, not foreign powers, as the ‘main enemy’” (1994: 14).

Now let us summarise today’s lecture. The anti-caste movements led by Dalits and non-Brahmans in India are characterized as radical efforts to dismantle the caste system and establish an egalitarian society. Unlike 19th-century nationalist and reformist movements, such as Gandhi's Harijan movement, which aimed to integrate marginalized groups within Hinduism, these movements sought to eliminate the caste system entirely. Scholars like Gail Omvedt and Braj Ranjan Mani analyze these movements as counter-narratives to the dominant Brahmanical ideology that has historically perpetuated hierarchy and oppression. Mani interprets caste as a mechanism of discrimination designed to protect the interests of the Brahmanical elite. He emphasizes the need to reinterpret history from a Dalit perspective, aligning with the ideas of leaders like Phule and Ambedkar, who rejected Brahmanical dominance. Dalit historiography focuses on revising mainstream narratives and reclaiming suppressed histories. It challenges both nationalist and Marxist perspectives—nationalists often saw anti-caste struggles as divisive, while Marxists tended to subsume caste under broader class struggles, overlooking its unique dimensions. Ultimately, these anti-caste movements are not just responses to social and economic exploitation but are also intellectual and ideological struggles to redefine identity and resist cultural erasure. They prioritize the perspectives and experiences of the most marginalized, rejecting the idea that the end of colonialism alone would bring true liberation.

In the next class we will learn about the noted anti-caste leaders.