

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

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**Week 6 Lecture 37**  
**Transcript from the Video**

Hello everyone! In the previous lecture we saw how the anti-caste movements led by Dalits and non-Brahmans in India are radical, anti-systemic efforts to dismantle the entrenched caste system and create an egalitarian society. Unlike 19th-century nationalist and reformist efforts, like Gandhi's Harijan movement, which sought to assimilate marginalized groups within the fold of Hinduism, these movements aimed to abolish caste entirely. Scholars like Gail Omvedt and Braj Ranjan Mani see these movements as counter-narratives to Brahmanical ideology, which historically legitimized hierarchy and exploitation. Mani views caste as a mechanism that serves the interests of the Brahmanical elite and advocates for a reinterpretation of history from a Dalit perspective, inspired by figures like Phule and Ambedkar. Dalit historiography attempts to challenge and revise mainstream narratives, reclaiming suppressed histories and rejecting the nationalist and Marxist tendencies to oversimplify or subsume caste issues within broader frameworks. These anti-caste movements are not merely reactions to social and economic oppression but are intellectual, ideological struggles for identity, cultural recognition, and true liberation beyond the end of colonialism.

In this lecture we will begin with one of the notable leaders of anti-caste movement- Jotirao Phule. Jotirao Phule (1827–1890) was a social reformer, thinker, and activist from Maharashtra, India, whose work laid the foundation for anti-caste and social justice movements in the country. Born into a Mali (gardener) caste, which was considered “low” in the Brahmanical social hierarchy, Phule faced caste-based discrimination from an early age. His experiences of injustice and exclusion influenced his lifelong commitment to dismantling the caste system and advocating for the rights of the oppressed, including Dalits, women, and marginalized communities. He realized the deep interconnections between caste, patriarchy, and economic exploitation and dedicated his life to challenging these oppressive structures. In 1873, Phule founded the Satyashodhak Samaj (Truth-Seekers' Society), an organization committed to promoting equality, opposing caste discrimination, and uplifting marginalized communities. The Samaj emphasized rational thinking, rejected Brahmanical rituals, and advocated for the rights of women and the lower castes. Alongside his wife, Savitribai Phule, one of India's pioneering feminists, he established the first school for girls and Dalit children in Pune in 1848. This was a revolutionary act at a time when education for women and lower-caste individuals was condemned. Phule was a prolific writer whose works exposed the injustices of the caste system and challenged the religious and cultural narratives that sustained Brahmanical supremacy. His notable publications include *Gulamgiri* (Slavery, 1873), where he compared the oppression of Shudras and Ati-Shudras (lower castes) to the enslavement of African people, drawing a parallel to global systems of exploitation. In *Shetkarayacha Asud* (The Whipcord of the Cultivators), Phule critiqued the exploitation of farmers by landlords and Brahmins, highlighting the economic dimensions of caste oppression. His treatise *Sarvajanik Satya Dharma* (The Universal Religion of Truth) advocated for a rational, casteless society rooted in equality and justice. Phule also wrote

extensively in pamphlets and essays, critiquing contemporary religious practices like idol worship, blind rituals, and the authority of Brahmin priests. His satirical poems and speeches were critical tools in his mission to awaken the consciousness of the oppressed. Phule also critiqued religious texts like the Vedas, Puranas, and Manusmriti, arguing that they justified inequality and perpetuated the dominance of the Brahmanical elite. He reinterpreted Hindu mythology to present counter-narratives—such as portraying Shudras as the original inhabitants of India who were subjugated by Aryan invaders. His radical questioning of religious orthodoxy and rejection of Brahmanical rituals made him a significant, if controversial, figure in his time. Phule's contributions extended to advocating for widow remarriage, opposing child marriage, and fighting against female infanticide.

Jotirao Phule's ideology holds significant importance in Dalit historiography, particularly for his reinterpretation of Brahmanism as a system of power, dominance, and historical oppression. His perspective offered a radical departure from the birth-based justification of caste as prescribed by Vedic culture. Phule proposed that the Brahmins were part of the Aryan race that invaded India, subjugating and enslaving the indigenous inhabitants. By suggesting that Brahmanism had a historical origin, Phule provided a powerful counter-narrative to the claim that caste was a divine and eternal order. This perspective opened up the possibility that since the caste system had a beginning, it could also have an end. G. P. Deshpande articulates Phule's critique clearly: "In his view Hinduism as we know it originates in the Shrutis (the Vedas) and the Smritis. He was convinced that these books were a part of the brahmanical attempt at creating texts which would rationalize and perpetuate their dominance. The brahmanical position claimed the chaturvarnya system (the division of society along the lines of the four varnas) to be god-given and eternal, and therefore unassailable. As such, brahman superiority had divine origins" (Deshpande, 5). Phule's reinterpretation not only exposed the constructed nature of Brahmanical dominance but also empowered marginalized communities to question and resist this hegemony.

Phule's idea of Sarvajanic Satya Dharma (translated as the "True Religion of the Community") further embodied his vision of a rational, secular, and egalitarian society. Unlike Hinduism's traditional concept of dharma, which segregated people into hierarchical castes with distinct duties and rights, Phule's Satya Dharma sought to unify all people as equals. Gail Omvedt elaborates, stating that Phule's aim was to "establish the moral basis of society... on truth, or rationality, and it had to be one that unified all men and women as equals rather than fragmenting and dividing them into separate social groups with separate responsibilities and rights" (Omvedt, 1970). Phule's emphasis was not on reforming Hinduism from within but on creating a new, rational belief system that would transcend caste divisions altogether.

Phule's critique went beyond theoretical discussions—he understood caste as an ideological framework that influenced every aspect of daily life, perpetuating discrimination through its epistemological control. He argued that it was essential not only to resist caste oppression but to create an alternative space where caste would cease to exist. Deshpande captures this sentiment, writing, "For Phule, Brahmanism was historical, constructed over time, and since it was the ideology of oppression and dominance, it had to be opposed and ultimately smashed" (Deshpande, 6). In this sense, Phule's politics were not just reactive; they were transformative, envisioning a complete reordering of society.

A significant aspect of Phule's thought was his ability to link caste and class without privileging one over the other—an approach that would influence later Dalit politics. Rosalind O'Hanlon contextualizes Phule within subaltern studies, emphasizing his efforts to forge a broad alliance across marginalized communities. She writes, "What distinguished Phule as a political activist and social reformer was that he sought a broad alliance between Dalits, Kunbis, artisans, and Maratha warrior-farmers, against what he saw as a Brahmanic

hegemony stretching across culture, society, and the state, which had its origins in the peshwa period but had been reinforced by the coming of colonialism” (O’Hanlon, xvii). Phule’s depiction of the entire peasantry as Shudratishudra highlighted his understanding of caste oppression not merely as a social issue but as an economic one rooted in the agrarian system. Ashok Chausalkar, as cited by Deshpande, notes that Phule demanded state intervention to improve the conditions of peasants, recognizing the interconnectedness of caste-based and economic exploitation (Deshpande, 12).

Phule’s labor theory also displayed an intersectional understanding of caste and class. He saw the exploitation of labor as intrinsically linked to caste, with the Brahmanical order exploiting the productive majority. By framing the laboring classes—whether agricultural or artisanal—as victims of a Brahmanical order, Phule brought a materialist critique to the caste system, underscoring the economic foundation of caste-based discrimination.

Phule’s critique of Brahmanism extended to its epistemological dominance—the way it established itself as the ultimate source of knowledge and moral authority. According to Omvedt, “Upper-caste social reformers (from nineteenth-century activists like Rammohan Roy to Agarkar to Gandhi) tried to argue for scriptural justification for a change in or even abolition of the jati and varna systems, whereas social revolutionaries like Phule, Periyar, and Ambedkar agreed with the conservatives that the Hindu scriptures necessarily implied observation of caste hierarchy and used this to denounce them as irrational and exploitative” (Omvedt, 1994: 22). Phule’s rejection of Brahmanical scriptures was not merely a critique of religious texts but a challenge to the entire ideological apparatus that legitimized caste as divine law.

Retrieving Phule’s contributions in anti-caste history is crucial not only for understanding an alternative strand of nineteenth-century political thought but also for recognizing the intersectional approach he took toward oppression. His ideas laid the groundwork for later thinkers like B.R. Ambedkar, whose fight against caste discrimination was similarly grounded in rationality, equality, and the rejection of Brahmanical dominance. Phule’s critique of Brahmanism as a system of epistemological and material exploitation continues to inspire contemporary Dalit movements seeking not just reform but a radical reimagining of Indian society.

Now, while talking of Phule, it is also important to note the contributions of Savitribai Phule. Savitribai Phule (1831–1897) was a social reformer, poet, and educator who played a crucial role in the fight against caste and gender discrimination in 19th-century India. Recognizing the transformative power of education, Savitribai and Jotirao established the first school for girls in Pune in 1848, breaking societal norms that prohibited the education of women and marginalized communities. Facing immense hostility from orthodox society—being pelted with stones and cow dung on her way to school—Savitribai persisted in her mission.

Savitribai went on to open multiple schools for girls and dalits. In addition to her role as an educator, she worked to address issues like child marriage, widowhood, and the practice of Sati. She set up the “Balhatya Pratibandhak Griha,” a shelter home for widows and victims of sexual exploitation, and she encouraged widows to remarry, defying the rigid patriarchal norms of the time. Her poetry collections, *Kavya Phule* (1854) and *Bavan Kashi Subodh Ratnakar* (1892), are powerful works that challenge Brahmanical patriarchy and express a progressive vision of equality. Her poem *Go, Get Education* is a call to arms for the oppressed to seek knowledge as a means of empowerment:

"Awake, arise, and educate.

Smash traditions—liberate!"

Savitribai’s efforts were not limited to education; she was also a dedicated health worker. During the bubonic plague epidemic in 1897 she opened a clinic to treat those affected.

Now, in this context, it is important to look at how dalit historiography represents her.

Dalit historiography hails Savitribai as the icon of 'wifeness' and 'motherhood', who overcomes all obstacles in supporting her husband and gives her life in helping the lower castes and poor with motherly affection. Noted biographer of Jotiba Phule, Dhananjay Keer writes, (1974), "As he [Jotiba] could not get a teacher to help him, he took the help of his wife whom he had taught at home. A wave of uncontrollable excitement and anger swept over Poona. A woman going out of step with society and doing the work of a teacher! An unholy, unheard of thing! An affront to national honour! The learned Brahmins and their hirelings hated the very sight of Savitri. They threw mud, dirt, stones at her when she was on her way to the school. Embarrassed by this unholy uproar and upsurge, she would stop in the street and say serenely to her persecutors, 'God forgive you. I am doing my duty. May He bless you'." (25-26). This extremely passionate representation of Savitribai's courage limits her within the sphere of ideal wifeness. She is revered for her spirit to get out of the house and engage in public work in order to support her husband.

In *A Forgotten Liberator: The Life and Struggles of Savitribai Phule* (2008), Braj Ranjan Mani critiques the "casteist and sexist negligence" (6-7) of mainstream historiography, accusing it of maintaining a "deeply biased and brahmanical" outlook (1). This biased history often ignores the voices of marginalized figures like Savitribai Phule, who is frequently overshadowed by her identity as Jotirao Phule's wife. However, Dalit feminist scholars reclaim Savitribai as an independent social reformer, educator, and writer—an active agent in her own right. Cynthia Stephen provides a glimpse into the harsh realities Savitribai faced as a Dalit woman challenging caste and gender norms. She writes, "Savitribai was subject to intense harassment everyday as she walked to the school. Stones, mud and dirt were flung at her as she passed" (2008: 17). Despite such hostility, Savitribai remained committed to her mission of educating marginalized communities. Her struggles exemplify the intersections of caste and gender oppression, where being both a Dalit and a woman exposed her to intensified public assaults.

Savitribai's letters have become crucial in understanding her perspectives on knowledge, power, and liberation. In a letter to her husband dated October 10, 1856, she insightfully wrote, "The lack of learning is nothing but gross bestiality. It was the possession of knowledge that gave the Brahmins their superior status. Learning has a great value. One who masters it loses his lowly status and achieves a higher one" (Tharu and Lalita, 213). These words reflect her understanding of education as a tool for emancipation and her critique of how Brahmanical control over knowledge perpetuated social hierarchies.

Savitribai's personal letters also reveal her complex role as a public intellectual. In one of her letters to Jotirao, she criticized her brother for discouraging her from social work, arguing that her identity as a woman did not limit her capabilities (Stephen, 2008: 41). These letters not only connect the personal with the political but also establish her as a creator of knowledge, challenging the narrative that reduces her to a mere supporter of Jotirao's work.

The reclamation of Savitribai by Dalit feminist scholars emphasizes her significance as a thinker who articulated the right to education, the right to choose one's partner, and the need for women to assert their agency. Her identity as a Dalit woman made her a target of public hostility, yet it also fueled her resolve to fight against oppression. Recognizing Savitribai as a "teacher" and a speaker who resisted patriarchal and caste-based oppression repositions her from the margins of history to a central figure in the struggle for social justice.

Now, let us summarise today's lecture. Today we talked about the lives and contributions of Jotirao and Savitribai Phule, highlighting their significant role in challenging caste and gender oppression in 19th-century India. Jotirao Phule is portrayed as a pioneering social reformer whose anti-caste ideology laid the groundwork for later Dalit movements. His critique of Brahmanism and reinterpretation of religious texts exposed the constructed nature of caste as a tool of dominance, while his organization, Satyashodhak Samaj, promoted

equality and rational thinking. Alongside him, Savitribai Phule emerges as a crucial yet often overlooked figure. Despite severe harassment, she championed education for girls and Dalits, critiqued the Brahmanical control over knowledge, and advocated for women's rights through her writing. Dalit feminist scholars reclaim her as an independent thinker, challenging narratives that reduce her to a supportive wife. Her personal letters reveal her sharp intellect and commitment to social justice, positioning her as a creator of knowledge. The lecture emphasizes that the Phules' efforts were not just reformist but sought to dismantle the systemic foundations of caste and gender-based discrimination.

In the next class we will learn about B.R. Ambedkar.

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### **Lecture 3 – B. R. Ambedkar**

Hello everyone! In the previous lecture we learned about the contributions made by Jotirao and Savitribai Phule in pioneering the anti-caste movements and reinterpreting caste in an intersecting manner. Phule's reinterpretation of caste system as a birth-based originary narrative to one of Aryan invasion, thoroughly challenged the predominant notions of caste and impressed upon people that one is not born with caste hierarchy, rather it is a social construct created to implement social, cultural, and economic control.

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar (1891–1956) was a social reformer, economist, jurist, and the chief architect of the Indian Constitution. Born into a Dalit family, he faced caste-based discrimination from an early age, which shaped his lifelong struggle against caste oppression. Ambedkar dedicated his life to securing equality and justice for Dalits and other marginalized communities. A prolific scholar, he earned multiple degrees from prestigious institutions, including Columbia University and the London School of Economics, using his education as a tool to challenge caste-based hierarchies.

Ambedkar's contributions to the Dalit movement were vast and transformative. He led several movements advocating for Dalit rights, including the Mahad Satyagraha (1927) for access to public water sources and the temple entry movement to challenge caste restrictions. As the chairman of the Drafting Committee of the Indian Constitution, he enshrined principles of equality, secularism, and social justice, ensuring legal safeguards against caste discrimination. He also played a key role in the Hindu Code Bill, advocating for women's rights. In 1956, as a final act of resistance against Brahmanical oppression, Ambedkar embraced Buddhism along with millions of his followers, marking a mass rejection of caste-based Hinduism. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar was a prolific writer whose works laid the foundation for anti-caste discourse and social justice movements in India. His seminal text, *Annihilation of Caste* (1936), is a scathing critique of the caste system, arguing that Hinduism's structural basis is inherently oppressive and calling for its complete dismantling. In *The Problem of the Rupee: Its Origin and Its Solution* (1923), he provided an economic analysis of British colonial policies and their impact on India's monetary system, showcasing his expertise as an economist. His magnum opus, *The Buddha and His Dhamma* (1957, posthumously published), serves as both a historical exploration of Buddhism and a political manifesto advocating for its adoption as an egalitarian alternative to caste-based Hinduism. *Who Were the Shudras?* (1946) and *The Untouchables: Who Were They and Why They Became Untouchables?* (1948) challenged Brahmanical myths, presenting a historical reinterpretation of caste oppression. As the chief architect of the Indian Constitution, Ambedkar's *Constitutional Assembly Debates and Thoughts on Linguistic States* (1955) reveal his vision for a democratic, secular, and socially just India. His writings remain

essential to Dalit historiography, offering both a critique of caste hierarchies and a roadmap for liberation.

Ambedkar's legacy continues to inspire Dalit movements, human rights struggles, and social justice activism in India and beyond. His emphasis on education, political representation, and legal reform remains central to contemporary efforts to dismantle caste discrimination.

Ambedkar has come to occupy an inevitable and compulsory place in anti-caste theorizing. Dalit histories have traced Ambedkar's legacy in a biographical manner tracing the evolution of his political thought, individually by analyzing singular texts, and by tracing his influence in later political and literary movements. Defining him as a "political realist", Omvedt (2011) argues that Ambedkar was critical of both Marxist class theory and Phule's caste theory. Unlike Phule, Ambedkar depicted that "The Aryans were not a race. The Aryans were a collection of people. The cement that held these together was their interest in the maintenance of a type of culture called Aryan culture" ("Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Ancient India"). As a result, Ambedkar redefined caste as "not a division of labour; it is a division of labourers". He emphasized on ideological and religious factors in highlighting how caste creates social division among people. Omvedt opines that "Ambedkar's longer-term strategy was to break up that majority, to dissolve Hinduism itself, and do so by building unity of dalits and middle castes (non-brahmans) which would be both a caste and a class unity of peasants and workers, against the brahman-bourgeois Congress". And it is for this reason that both in his stress on Buddhism and in his insistence on creating separate electorate, rejection of Hinduism was the major goal. Phule on the other hand saw economic and social and intertwined. Ambedkar's call for annihilation of caste changed the wind of anti-caste politics wherein it came to be seen not as a reformist movement (like Gandhi) but one that sought to view caste system inherent in socio-economic inequality and reject Hinduism for complete annihilation of caste. In Dalit historiography Ambedkar gets placed as a champion who rejects caste system altogether and poses a political as well as social emancipation for dalits. According to Arjun Dangle, "through his struggle against untouchability and socioeconomic inequality, [Ambedkar] liberated the Dalits in India from mental slavery and abject wretchedness, thus giving them a new self-respect" (xxiii, *poisoned bread*). Dangle owes the emergence of a 'dalit consciousness' in the social and literary spheres to Ambedkar. The past few years have seen a resurgence in re-publication of Ambedkar's works, notably the annotated editions of *Annihilation of Caste* and *Riddles in Hinduism*, both published by Navayana publishers, a publishing dedicated to 'caste' issues.

According to S Anand, the reason for publishing this annotation is to sensitise the present-day reader by placing it in a historical context. He writes, "*Annihilation of Caste* was a speech that Ambedkar wrote for a primarily privileged-caste audience. This audience has eluded it. This annotated, critical edition is an attempt to give his work the critical and scholarly attention it deserves" (11). The intention, therefore, is to both to produce a subjugated knowledge of Dalit politics and shape a knowledge of subjugation. Ambedkar provided to Dalit movement what Gramsci calls the 'conscious leadership'. Antonio Gramsci's concept of conscious leadership is deeply tied to his theory of hegemony and the role of intellectuals in shaping social change. He argued that every social class needs its own organic intellectuals—leaders who emerge from within the oppressed class and articulate their interests against the dominant ideology. Conscious leadership, in this sense, is not just about guiding people but about creating a counter-hegemony that challenges ruling-class dominance. Gramsci distinguished between traditional intellectuals (who uphold the status quo, such as clergy, academics, and bureaucrats) and organic intellectuals (who arise from the working class or subaltern groups and develop a revolutionary consciousness). These organic intellectuals play a crucial role in leading movements by raising awareness, educating the masses, and building solidarity.

And Dalit history has built this cult of Ambedkar by positing him in opposition to Gandhi. As Arundhati Roy's essay to the annotated edition of *Annihilation of Caste* points out, the intention is to "familiarize the reader with caste as it plays out in contemporary India, and with the historical context of the public debate between Ambedkar and Gandhi that followed the publication of *Annihilation of Caste*" (12). Hence the Ambedkar-Gandhi debate over the Poona Pact (1932) seems to be an almost inevitable addition to anthologies. The Poona Pact was signed between B. R. Ambedkar and Gandhi on September 24, 1932 at Yerwada Central Jail in Poona. The Pact was a result to end Gandhi's 'fast unto death' at the jail of Poona in protest of British Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald's impending decision to give separate electorates to Dalits in the election of members of provincial legislative assemblies in British India. Gandhi feared that this would cause a rift in uniting 'Hindus' of India. Ambedkar, therefore, is approached with two particular views in mind: recovering the text in order to emphasise the ongoing practice on caste oppression, and to locate anti-caste discourse specifically as a contrast to dominant brahmanical politics.

It is also important to note that Ambedkar's thoughts encompassed not just caste, but also gender. In the earlier lectures we have seen Ambedkar's views on endogamy as the root of caste system. Such conceptualisation thoroughly reorients caste as an intersectional category. Kumud Pawar and Meenakshi Moon, in *We Also Made History*, invoke Ambedkar's writings and speeches on sexual oppression of dalit women which lead them to review anti-caste struggle in a new light. One such example is the reinterpretation of Mahad satyagraha. Unlike dalit historiography where this satyagraha is invoked as one of the very first triumphs of dalits as a collective in reclaiming public spaces, Pawar and Moon emphasise how the burning of Manusmriti signified a challenge to caste-gender oppression. They perceive the Mahad satyagraha not merely as a reclamation of public space but also within the private sphere in terms of stigma and difference among women as imposed by caste system. During the speech, Ambedkar urged dalit women to give up markers of caste such as the way they wear saris above their knee or keep their breasts bare, and instead wear saris like Brahmin women because they are as respectful as Brahmin women. And this had a tremendous effect on dalit women attending the conference. As Pawar and Moon note, "After listening to Babasaheb's speech, the women who had come for the conference turned up the next day wearing their nine-yard saris around their ankles like Brahmin women. Mrs. Chitre and Mrs. Tipnis helped them to do this" (124). This shows awareness about stigma of caste being linked to gender. Thus in dalit feminist understanding annihilation of caste calls for eradicating graded inequalities.

Now let us summarise today's lecture. The lecture traced the evolution of anti-caste thought from Jotirao and Savitribai Phule to Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, focusing on how both figures reinterpreted caste as a socio-economic and cultural construct rather than a birth-based hierarchy. While Phule critiqued caste through the narrative of Aryan invasion, Ambedkar advanced the anti-caste movement by foregrounding the structural, ideological, and religious foundations of caste oppression. Ambedkar's contributions included leading mass movements like the Mahad Satyagraha, drafting the Indian Constitution to enshrine principles of equality, and converting to Buddhism as a radical rejection of caste-based Hinduism. His writings, including *Annihilation of Caste* and *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, provided a sharp critique of caste hierarchies and offered a vision of social justice and liberation. The lecture also situates Ambedkar's leadership within Gramsci's idea of "conscious leadership," emphasizing how he became an organic intellectual who articulated Dalit struggles against dominant Brahmanical ideologies. Additionally, Ambedkar's anti-caste thought is positioned as intersectional, addressing both caste and gender oppression, with Dalit feminist scholars like Pawar and Moon highlighting how his activism also sought to liberate Dalit women from caste-based stigmas.

In the next lecture we will talk about EVR Periyar.

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### **Part 3:**

Hello everyone! In the previous lectures we talked about the contributions of Jotirao Phule, Savitribai Phule and Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, to the anti-caste movement. The lecture explored the development of anti-caste thought from Jotirao and Savitribai Phule to Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. It highlighted how both Phule and Ambedkar saw caste not just as a birth-based system but as a social, economic, and cultural structure. Phule linked caste oppression to the Aryan invasion theory, while Ambedkar focused on its deep-rooted ideological, religious, and structural foundations. Ambedkar played a key role in the anti-caste movement by leading mass protests like the Mahad Satyagraha, drafting the Indian Constitution to ensure equality, and converting to Buddhism as a strong rejection of caste-based Hinduism. His writings, such as *Annihilation of Caste* and *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, challenged caste hierarchies and offered a vision for social justice. The lecture also connected Ambedkar's leadership to Gramsci's concept of "conscious leadership", showing how he became an intellectual voice for Dalit struggles against Brahmanical dominance. His work also addressed gender inequality, with Dalit feminist scholars like Urmila Pawar and Sharmila Rege recognizing his efforts to empower Dalit women.

In today's lecture we will learn about the contributions of E.V. Ramasamy Periyar and the growth of Dalit movement in South India.

E. V. Ramasamy (1879-1973), widely known as Periyar, was a radical social reformer, thinker, and political leader from Tamil Nadu who played a crucial role in the anti-caste and self-respect movement in India. He dedicated his life to fighting caste-based discrimination, advocating for rationalism, gender equality, self-respect, and Dravidian identity. His contributions transformed Tamil Nadu into one of the most progressive states in terms of social justice policies. In 1919, he joined the Indian National Congress, believing that it would help bring equality. However, he soon became disillusioned by the dominance of Brahmins in leadership positions and the neglect of non-Brahmin and lower-caste issues. His experiences in Congress, especially during his time as the head of the Madras Presidency Congress, led him to believe that mere political freedom was not enough—social equality was more important. In 1925, he left Congress and started the Self-Respect Movement, marking the beginning of his lifelong struggle against caste-based oppression. The Self-Respect Movement was Periyar's most significant contribution to the anti-caste struggle. It aimed to instill dignity and self-respect among lower castes, abolish Brahmin dominance in politics, education, and religion, promote inter-caste marriages, oppose religious rituals and superstitions that justified caste discrimination, and advocate for women's rights and gender equality. Periyar encouraged people from oppressed communities to question religious texts that justified caste discrimination. He urged them to reject the concept of "divine superiority" imposed by Brahminical texts like the Vedas, Manusmriti, and Puranas.

Vaikom Satyagraha (1924), one of the notable episodes in India's struggle for independence, was a historic movement that aimed to challenge and eradicate the social evil of untouchability. Initiated in 1924 in the small town of Vaikom in present-day Kerala, this nonviolent protest stood as a beacon of hope and progress in the fight against caste discrimination. Vaikom Satyagraha served as a powerful symbol of unity and resilience, showcasing the determination of individuals to overcome the oppressive shackles of a deeply entrenched social hierarchy. Under the guidance of leaders like K. Kelappan, T.K. Madhavan,

and K. P. Kesava Menon, Vaikom Satyagraha witnessed the active participation of people from diverse backgrounds, cutting across caste and creed. Mahatma Gandhi, although not directly involved in the protests, expressed his support for the cause and its nonviolent means. The participation of women, in particular, played a crucial role, as they actively joined the struggle, breaking the traditional barriers that confined them to the domestic sphere.

The primary objective of Vaikom Satyagraha was to secure the right of untouchables to enter the Shiva temple located in Vaikom. The satyagrahis aimed to challenge the oppressive social norms and demand equal access to places of worship. Their nonviolent approach, inspired by Gandhian principles, included peaceful marches, public meetings, hunger strikes, and demonstrations. The satyagrahis faced violent opposition from conservative elements in society, but they remained resolute in their commitment to achieving justice and equality.

Vaikom Satyagraha had a significant impact on Indian society and the freedom struggle. Although the immediate goal of temple entry was not achieved during the satyagraha, it generated widespread awareness and public discourse about untouchability and the need for social reform. The movement inspired similar protests in other parts of the country, leading to the eventual dismantling of various discriminatory practices and the enactment of laws to protect the rights of the marginalized communities.

Furthermore, Vaikom Satyagraha became a significant landmark in Mahatma Gandhi's vision for an inclusive and egalitarian society. It laid the foundation for subsequent social reform movements and shaped the discourse around caste and social justice in India. The spirit of the satyagrahis inspired future generations to challenge caste-based discrimination and work towards a more equitable society.

Regarding the Vaikom Satyagraha, Periyar expressed reservations about its focus on temple entry as the primary issue of concern. He believed that the movement's emphasis on entering temples was a distraction from the larger goal of dismantling the caste system itself. Periyar argued that temple entry, while symbolically important, did not address the fundamental issues of social inequality and discrimination faced by marginalized communities. Periyar criticized the Vaikom Satyagraha for its reliance on nonviolence and peaceful means of protest. He believed that such methods were insufficient to challenge the deeply entrenched caste hierarchy and advocated for more assertive and confrontational strategies. Periyar called for a comprehensive social revolution and encouraged marginalized communities to assert their rights and demand equality through more radical means.

He later took over the Justice Party (a non-Brahmin political organization) and transformed it into a powerful vehicle for social change. This laid the groundwork for the formation of the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) and later the AIADMK, two major political parties that continue to rule Tamil Nadu today.

One of the major demands of the Dalit movement in the Southern part of India was to assert the Dravidian identity as opposed to the Brahmanical identity.

The Non-Brahmin Manifesto of 1916 put forth by the Justice Party was seen as divisive because the manifesto observed that in the caste-ridden India, it was the British who could “hold the scales even between creed and class and . . . develop that sense of solidarity and unity without which India will continue to be a group of mutually exclusive and warring groups without common purpose and a common patriotism” (Geetha and Rajadurai, *Towards a Non-Brahmin Millennium*). Geetha and Rajadurai point that this separation was a direct critique of ‘incorporation’ and welfare agenda that Annie Besant and Narasimha Iyer propounded. This opposition, they observe, was based on three agendas: first, to highlight the already ongoing policy of Annie Besant to bring them under the Hindu fold and thereby ‘humanize’ them; secondly, to propound the agenda of ‘unification’ under Hindu fold to stop the conversion of Dalits into Christians; and thirdly, to highlight the necessity of retaining caste division to showcase the Brahmins’ supremacy. “Thus the ideal solution with respect to

adi dravidas and one which best expressed Brahmin endeavours at reform as well as their intent to maintain ancient norms was to bring the adi dravidas into the caste system and re-define them as ‘shudras’” (Geetha and Rajadurai, *Towards a Non-Brahmin Millennium*). As a speaker at a meeting organized by the Hindu Reform Association said, “Reform did not consist in all the people of all classes eating together . . . it was remoulding . . . the caste system according to *natural laws*. The Law of Nature is variety and if there was variety there was also division of labour . . . Reform could only be brought about by love” (*New India Journal*).

Pointing at the lack of attention from Marxist historians who see anti-caste politics in Tamil Nadu merely as political antagonism towards nationalist politics and Tamil historians who either ignore it or present it as part of ‘other nationalist movements’, Geetha and Rajadurai present anti-caste politics as a call for not just political but also social challenge. They envision non-brahmin movement in Tamil Nadu as an assertion of “dalit voices that emerged in the last decade of the nineteenth century” (xvii) and recovers Self-Respect movement as propounding Dravidianism and as a critique of Gandhi and the “holy alliance of caste, religion and nationalism” (xvii).

Adi dravida intellectuals presented a non-Aryan version of history in which non-brahmin shudras were claimed to be the original inhabitants of this vast subcontinent, who had been cast out of history and relegated to the fringes of society with the historic defeat of their Buddhist faith by Aryan-brahmin invaders”. The uniqueness of ‘Dravidian’ identity is explored by G. Aloysius in his discussion on Iyothee Thassar and his journal *Tamizhan*. Aloysius opines that along with its anti-brahmanical stance, the search for a Dravidian identity as formulated by Thassar (Periyar’s predecessor), also challenged the ‘Paraiyah’ politics propounded by his contemporary R. N. D. Srinivasan. The term ‘paraiyah’ refers to a member of the untouchable castes, ‘Paraiyar’, in Tamil Nadu. However, as Aloysius notes, “The term was also sought to be deployed in the normal social discourse as an adjective—*paraiyah*—which could be added on to anything contemptuous and despicable. . . . The term *paraiyah* in this sense, during the period under discussion became a polar-typical concept with the specific Paraiyar community at its core to be sure, but referring to also a socio-political principle of mass exclusion”. And it is in this context that Srinivasan viewed the use of term *paraiyah* by the *paraiyahs* as a step towards positive assertion. Srinivasan formulated the lower caste political identity as a ‘Paraiyah’ to counter the derogation attached to it. He was of the view that emancipation from the stigmatized identity is possible for the lower castes only by reclaiming the ‘Paraiyah’ in a positive connotation removed from its given stigmatized perception.

Thassar, however, viewed such reprocessing as problematic to Dravidian identity. He viewed that while the term *paraiyah* gave the lower castes a sense of positive assertion and unity, it nevertheless remained bound within indispensable terminology provided by dominant discourse, i.e. brahmanism. The term *paraiyah* for Thassar was a marker of victimhood and subalternity in which the lower castes were either fixed (by Brahmins) or which they need to escape from (as Srinivasan claimed). Thassar’s agenda to get out of pre-given victimisation, was to transcend the boundaries of linguistic and social subalternity and opt for Tamil/Dravidian. He uses these terms interchangeably. Aloysius points out that this Dravidian identity also retained the uniqueness of being Tamil. Aloysius writes, “the exclusionary effort of the Brahmanical of the early twentieth century had as its target not only the specific community(s) of the Paraiyars but also the generalised ‘Tamils/Dravidians’ who were heirs to hoary non/anti-Brahminical/Aryan cultural traditions and who also as a fairly distinct group emerged as rival to the monopoly exercise of power in modernity. This exclusion was sought to be achieved by the Brahminical . . . *terms of a single Paraiyah/Shudra discourse*. In this context the term meant *paraaya* or the alien other, obviously of the Brahmin, irrespective of

real or alleged internal differentiation. . . . [As a result of posing such] nebulous commonality of all non-Brahmins . . . it was the Tamils/Dravidians in general, certainly including the specific communities of the Paraiyars, who were maligned and sought to be excluded as the Paraiyah” (Aloysius 18). Contextualising Thassar in such spectrum, Aloysius therefore writes Tamil dalit historiography as a critique of North-based brahmanism and at the same time deviates from other anti-caste ideologies.

With regards to Dalit politics in South India it is not only Periyar who is recovered, the Telengana Peoples’ movement and the Karamchedu massacre have also come to occupy important roles in shaping Dalit politics. The Telengana Peoples’ movement (1946-1951), also known as the Telengana Bonded Labour movement and Telengana Peasants Armed Struggle, was a peasant rebellion initially against the landlords and spreading over the entire Telangana region to culminate into rebellion against the Nizam’s rule. In the princely state of Hyderabad, forty percent land was owned by the Nizam and rest was under the government’s land revenue system. P. Sundarayya owes it to the economic crises of 1920-22 and 1930-33 when, due to bad harvests and unfair prices for crops, peasants were unable to pay taxes and had to give up or sell their lands to the feudal landlords. Along with the forced ownership of land, the rebellion also questioned the *vetti* (forced labour) system which ruled that one man from each untouchable family was forced to do the household labour for the landlords. The demands were made to “put an end to *vetti* (forced labour), illegal exactions, and compulsory grain levies and . . . to reoccupy the lands seized earlier by the landlords and deshmukhs. The movement became one for abolishing feudal landlordism and even Nizam rule”. The Communist Party’s contribution was seen as crucial in setting the rebellion in motion, as a result of which they won the 1952 election in Andhra Pradesh.

The Telangana people’s struggle gained renewed interest in Dalit politics as a critique of Marxism. In *Kulam-Vargam* (Caste and Class) Bojja Tharakam writes that even though the Telangana peasant’s movement mentioned the *vetti* system, untouchability did not gain central attention from the Communists. “The party ignored issues related to caste altogether, saying that they would be dealt with after classlessness has been achieved. Its trusting and credulous supporters [i.e. the lower castes] went along with the party, convinced that untouchability and caste itself would vanish once the land problem was solved. They came to believe that it was alright to live without dignity and live in the hope that some land would come their way as the struggle intensified” (Bojja Tharakam). Commenting on the need to address caste and class simultaneously, Tharakam writes, “the abolition of caste is not about ideology alone, but also about material transformation. Caste struggle is a mental-material revolution, while the focus of a class struggle tends to be limited to materialistic considerations”. Dalit politics therefore points at significant fissure in Communist politics in their exclusivity of class. Thus although they talked about giving back land to the tillers, Communists failed to address the issue of domination itself.

Along with the Telangana movement, the Karamchedu massacre (1985) has also been seen as laying foundation for the rise of dalits in the political, social and intellectual domains. The massacre was a result of an incident that occurred on 16 July 1985 in Karamchedu, Andhra Pradesh, when a disabled dalit boy objected to two men from the kamma caste (upper caste landlords) cleaning their cattle-feeding vessels into the drinking water tank of madigas (lower caste group). Just when they were about to beat up the boy, a dalit woman came and tried to protect the boy. In retaliation the men tried to attack her with a hunting knife but the dalit woman raised her vessel to ward off the weapon. This act of self-protection by the dalit woman was seen by the kmmas as a challenge to their power and supremacy. The next day, on 17 July 1985, the kmmas attacked the madiga village, killed eight dalit men of only six were identified, raped dalit women, and injured numerous other dalits. At the aftermath of the incident, furious agitations were led by the Dalit Mahasabha and the government agreed to

their demands of granting agricultural land to the victims and constructing a separate Vijayanagar Colony for the dalits.

In Dalit politics, therefore, this event has been depicted as 'caste atrocity' which initiated demands for economic advancement of dalits. Katti Padma Rao, the then leader of DMS who also led the agitation, viewed this event as catalyst in the growing consciousness among Dalits about their rights. He writes, "The Karamchedu struggle is a symbol of the dalit movement for self-respect. It is this movement that not only lit the spark of self-respect for dalits, but also gave shape to it. Karamchedu was a war cry, a volcano, a transformation. It was a movement that awakened dalits and set them on a long march". Rao posits the Karamchedu movement in contrast to the armed struggles organized by the Communist party where 'class' remained the sole focus, arguing that the Karamchedu agitation arose from an "ideological base". He writes, the struggle "identified caste enemies, their political support and their financial clout and showed that only a conscious struggle against those forces could secure dignity and freedom for dalits". The Karamchedu massacre and the resultant struggle by dalits therefore marked an important moment in dalit politics in successfully seeing the overlap of caste and class.

Now let us summarise today's lecture. Today we talked about E.V.R. Periyar and anti-caste movements in the south. E.V. Ramasamy, known as Periyar, was a radical social reformer from Tamil Nadu who fought against caste discrimination, Brahmin dominance, and religious orthodoxy. Initially a member of the Indian National Congress, he left in 1925 due to its upper-caste bias and launched the Self-Respect Movement to promote equality, rationalism, and social justice. This movement challenged Brahmin supremacy, advocated for inter-caste marriages, and opposed religious texts that upheld caste discrimination. Periyar was critical of the Vaikom Satyagraha (1924), which aimed to secure temple entry rights for Dalits in Kerala. While he supported the fight against untouchability, he believed that temple entry was a distraction from the larger goal of dismantling the caste system itself. He argued for more direct and radical methods instead of peaceful protests. Periyar later took over the Justice Party, a non-Brahmin political organization, and used it to push for social reforms. This laid the foundation for Tamil Nadu's Dravidian political movements, influencing the formation of DMK and AIADMK. The Dravidian movement positioned itself as an alternative to Brahmanical Hindu nationalism, asserting a distinct non-Aryan identity for the Tamil people. Dalit intellectuals like Iyothee Thassar and R.N.D. Srinivasan contributed to this discourse by redefining Dalit identity, challenging caste-based victimization, and opposing Brahmin attempts to incorporate Dalits into the Hindu fold. The movement also critiqued mainstream Marxist and nationalist historians for overlooking caste struggles in Tamil Nadu, emphasizing that the anti-caste movement was not just political but a deep social revolution. The Telangana Peasants' Struggle, led by the Communist Party, was initially a revolt against feudal landlords and later extended to challenge Nizam rule. It sought to end forced labor (vetti), illegal taxes, and land seizures. However, critics like Bojja Tharakam argue that the Communists failed to prioritize caste oppression, assuming that caste would disappear once class inequalities were addressed. Tharakam emphasized that caste abolition requires both material and ideological transformation, exposing a gap in Communist politics. The Karamchedu Massacre (1985) was a turning point in Dalit political consciousness. Both movements highlight a significant tension between caste and class politics, reinforcing the need for an intersectional approach in Dalit struggles.

In the next class we will talk about women's movements.

