

NPTEL
Nation and Narration

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Week 7 Lecture 39
Transcript from the Video

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 Telengana 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 Telengana 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 Telengana 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 Telengana 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 kammias as a challenge to their power and supremacy. The next day, on 17 July 1985, the kammias 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.