

**NPTEL  
Nation and Narration**

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**Week 7 Lecture 45  
Transcript from the Video**

Hello everyone! In the previous lecture we examined the pivotal role of women in the Indian National Congress (INC) and the broader independence movement during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. It outlines the INC's evolution from a reformist body to a mass nationalist movement, and how this shift enabled increasing female political participation. Sparked by 19th-century social reform movements promoting women's education and rights, women from elite and reformist backgrounds gradually entered political life. Pioneers like Swarnakumari Devi and Sarojini Naidu helped lay the groundwork, while others such as Aruna Asaf Ali, Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, and Kasturba Gandhi emerged as influential leaders in major movements like Non-Cooperation, Civil Disobedience, and Quit India. Despite societal constraints and traditional gender norms, many women defied expectations to join protests, lead initiatives, and face imprisonment. The lecture also highlights the complexities of their roles—as symbols, citizens, and aspiring leaders—underscoring both their struggles and triumphs in transforming India's political landscape before and after independence.

Now women's participation during the nationalist period was not just limited to Gandhian movements and Indian national Congress. They also participated in movements that challenged the notion of a unified nation. Especially notable are women's participation in the Ambedkarite movement and Periyar's Self-Respect Movement, which ran parallel to nationalist movements, but had a very different idea about freedom, equality, and agency. In this lecture we will look at women's participation in the Ambedkarite movements.

A noted book that documents women's participation in the Ambedkarite movements is *We Also Made History: Women in the Ambedkarite Movement* (1989) by Urmila Pawar and Meenakshi Moon. Before going into the history of women's participation in the Ambedkarite movements, it is important to talk about the purpose and the structure of the book because that will give us a clear idea about how the book contributes significantly in constructing an alternative identity for dalit women.

The book is divided into two parts. The first part outlines the involvement of women in various Dalit struggles from the early twentieth century, drawing on diverse sources including Dalit periodicals, records of meetings, and personal correspondence. The second part consists of interviews with Dalit women activists from the 1930s. Both provide a rich store of material for historians of the Dalit movement and of gender in India. The book gives two kinds of self-expression by dalit women: a) authors as narrators of women's participation in the struggle for untouchables; b) authors as biographers and interviewers of women activists in this struggle. Writing history along with the narratives of those who participated in that history provides an alternative epistemology from the perspective of dalit women. It presents history as consequence of personal and collective liberation and not simply the documentation of grand narratives. These

are mini narratives in multitudinous forms. It does not just write dalit women *and* history; it narrates how dalit women *create* history. By adding interviews of dalit women who participated in the Ambedkarite movement along with the history of the same movement, the book challenges the strategies of constructing history (i.e. narration of the past) and breaks its supposed linearity of time. Emphasising on the mini narratives, it also challenges the notion of who can become subjects and narrators of history. Hence it is not narrating the grand figures like Ambedkar and Phule. It talks about how their policies affected and shaped the political consciousness of dalit women, by merging the historical with the personal, it reinforces that personal is political. It presents personal experiences as valid sources that shape political consciousness. It views personal experience as a consequence of social and political realities of its time. It does not accept experience as it is. The authors mention that “it was necessary to cross-check the information we received from these women, especially the dates, times, occasions and subjects of meetings and conferences, from contemporary sources” (pp 40). This humongous effort shows that experiences are affected by the times.

The two ways in which autonomy of dalit women is claimed through this text are: 1. By participating in the Ambedkarite movements and fighting for a gendered awareness of caste, and claiming their social and constitutional rights, 2. By writing and publishing a book that gives voice to these women’s narratives, thereby making them valid subjects and sources of history. As Spivak points out, they are not objects of pity to be explained by upper caste women.

In *We Also Made History* writing becomes a collective enterprise. The process of gathering information from dalit women activists helps build a network of “affection, friendship, patience and a sense of solidarity” (Pawar and moon 39). Re-writing the experiences of these women helps reclaim dalit women’s agency and subjectivity. By mapping a narrative that goes beyond the limits of temporality and by including collective narrative mode, the linearity and individuality of an autobiography is disturbed. It is not merely an author’s remembrances of things past. It is a journey from the present to recover the collective memory.

Pawar and Moon write, “The purpose of doing all this was to try and form a picture of the neglected, underrated woman activists of the Ambedkar movement: her capability, the history she had made in the most adverse circumstances, the change that took place in her because of that history, the way she was shaped and influenced, her longing for education and her deep feeling for the importance of education, her ethical integrity, her courage, and her development as an individual. We wanted to bring her contribution to public view” (pawar and moon, pp 41). Here the singular pronounce ‘her’ signifies the collective. The public act of writing ‘an autobiography of the collective’ thus brings visibility to dalit women activists and their contributions in history.

Historian and political activist, Y.D. Phadke, in the foreword to the book has criticized it for providing such as narrow scope of ‘indian women’ by including only dalit women and thereby ignoring the upper caste women participants and sympathizers of the Ambedkarite movement. Such criticism, as Vasant Moon points out in the reply to the foreword, completely misses the central argument of the book, which is tracing an alternative history from the viewpoint of dalit women. This articulation itself presents a schism in the concept of Indian woman. It shows that unlike Phadke’s claim, ‘Indian woman’ cannot be seen as a universal homogeneous category. In fact, the need to have a distinct autonomous politics for and by dalit women rises from the realization of their difference from upper caste women and dalit men.

Wandana Sonalkar in the introduction to the book writes, “A significant aspect of the narrative in this section is the naming of women who took part in various meetings and conferences during

the 1930s and later. The content of their speeches is of course important, and, as the authors tell us, the act of going on stage and articulating their views in public was a liberating experience and an achievement for these women. But the mention of women's names carries a certain weight in a history of this kind. It is interesting to note that in the biography-interview section, many of the women interviewed also take pains to mention the names of other women who were involved in the movement with them. There is an act of solidarity in this naming, an act which the authors of this book carry forward into print" (28).

Now let us see how women's participation in Ambedkarite movements differed from dominant nationalist ideas. To understand the Ambedkarite movement through a gendered lens, Urmila Pawar and Meenakshi Moon turn to Dr. Ambedkar's writings and speeches, especially those addressing the sexual oppression of Dalit women. These reflections lead them to revisit the anti-caste struggle from a feminist perspective. One key example is their reinterpretation of the Mahad Satyagraha. While Dalit history often celebrates the satyagraha as an early collective victory in reclaiming public space, Pawar and Moon focus on how Ambedkar's speech at the event challenged both caste and gender oppression faced by Dalit women.

During his speech at Mahad, Ambedkar urged Dalit women to reject caste-based markers in their appearance—like wearing saris above the knee or leaving their breasts uncovered. Instead, he encouraged them to wear saris like Brahmin women because, as he said, Dalit women were just as respectable. This message had a powerful impact. As Pawar and Moon observe, "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 act symbolized more than just a change in clothing—it reflected an awareness that caste-based humiliation was also gendered. In Dalit feminist thought, the annihilation of caste necessarily includes the fight against such layered inequalities. It is crucial to understand that Ambedkar was not promoting Brahmanical patriarchy by asking women to dress like upper-caste women. Rather, his critique was aimed at how caste-specific clothing—like leaving the breasts uncovered—was historically used to degrade Dalit women and mark them as sexually available, especially because they worked in public spaces. Therefore, Ambedkar's suggestion was not about upholding upper-caste norms, but about reclaiming dignity and self-respect for Dalit women. It was a call to reject a system that used dress codes to humiliate them, not an embrace of the Brahmanical idea that women are merely the 'honour' of their families or communities.

Dalit women's participation in Ambedkarite movements also found expression through cultural sphere. The so-called 'private' or domestic sphere takes on new meaning in the songs of post-Ambedkarite Buddhist Dalit women singers, who found their own unique ways to reclaim Ambedkar. These women rose to prominence mainly in the cultural realm after Ambedkar's death. Their songs often celebrated Ambedkar and his first wife, Ramabai, and were sung by women during everyday activities—"while working with the grindstone, at birth ceremonies, naming ceremonies and on harvesting occasions" (Guru 2001: 182). This shows how the line between private and public life was blurred, both in the way Ambedkar was remembered and in the choice of spaces where this memory was kept alive. Homes, fields, and ceremonies became places of political expression and resistance.

One powerful example is a Marathi ovi (a type of traditional women's folk song):

Jati Bhed Ghalviny Sathi,

Bhimani Keli Brahmin Rani!  
Gangadhrech Nirmal Pani  
Mahnive Sarvani Bhimachi Gani (Quoted in Guru 2001: 184)

[Translation: To expel caste discrimination, Ambedkar (who is also called Bhima) married Savitabai who was a Brahmin. He showed that this marriage is pure like Ganga water. Everyone sing in praise of Bhima.]

This song reflects how Dalit women saw inter-caste marriage as a radical step toward ending caste discrimination. The reference is to Ambedkar's second marriage to Savita Ambedkar, a Brahmin woman, thirteen years after the death of his first wife, Ramabai. In highlighting this marriage, the song presents it not as a controversial act, but as a symbolic and transformative one—pure “like Ganga water.” Through such verses, these women were not only honoring Ambedkar, but also reimagining caste abolition from a deeply personal and feminist perspective. By singing about Ambedkar in their everyday lives, these women brought feminist and anti-caste consciousness into the heart of domestic routines. As Gopal Guru writes, this tradition of singing can be seen as part of a broader “feminist cultural consciousness” (2001: 181). He notes that while Dalit women were often kept in the background during the pre-Ambedkarite period, in the post-Ambedkarite era, they broke their “cultural silence and stormed into the public transcript” (182). Importantly, these women used folk forms of expression that were familiar and accessible. Songs like *palna* (a lullaby sung during naming ceremonies) and *ovi* (a form of oral folk poetry used during labor and chores) became powerful tools for resistance and memory. As Guru explains, “While the *palna* form was used only on the occasion of Ambedkar's birth anniversary, *ovi* was used as a very effective cultural idiom to create and conserve the critical energies among Dalit men and women” (182). In this way, Dalit Buddhist women didn't just remember Ambedkar—they reshaped how he was remembered, using everyday songs to bring political meaning into private life, and to link anti-caste struggle with a feminist cultural voice.

Now let us summarise today's lecture. In this lecture we looked at dalit women's participation in the Ambedkarite movement offers a powerful alternative to dominant nationalist narratives that often center Gandhian politics and overlook marginalized voices. In movements like Ambedkar's and Periyar's Self-Respect Movement, Dalit women challenged both caste and patriarchy, presenting a different vision of freedom, equality, and agency. This is compellingly documented in *We Also Made History* (1989) by Urmila Pawar and Meenakshi Moon, a groundbreaking work that reconstructs Dalit women's history through archival research and interviews. The book does not just document events—it redefines historical writing itself by treating Dalit women as both subjects and narrators, validating personal experience as a political and historical source. It offers “mini-narratives” that center collective memory and lived realities over linear, elite-driven accounts. Pawar and Moon highlight how Dalit women's transformation, desire for education, and ethical conviction shaped their activism under difficult conditions. In doing so, the book reclaims agency for Dalit women and challenges the homogenized idea of the “Indian woman,” asserting the need for a distinct Dalit feminist politics. A key example is their reinterpretation of the Mahad Satyagraha, where Ambedkar's call for Dalit women to abandon caste-based clothing practices was not about emulating Brahmin norms, but about reclaiming dignity and rejecting the casteist sexualization of their bodies. This gendered reading of Ambedkar's anti-caste politics reveals how the fight for self-respect was deeply intertwined with the fight against sexual and

social humiliation. Furthermore, Dalit Buddhist women extended their activism into the cultural realm through folk songs like ovi and palna, which were sung during everyday domestic rituals. These songs, often about Ambedkar and his wife Ramabai, brought political consciousness into private spaces and transformed the home into a site of resistance. As Gopal Guru notes, these women broke their “cultural silence” and inserted themselves into the public discourse through familiar, accessible forms of expression. By doing so, they not only remembered Ambedkar but reimagined his legacy through a feminist, anti-caste lens rooted in daily life and collective memory.

In the next lecture we will look at the issue of gender in Periyar’s Self Respect Movement.