

NPTEL
Nation and Narration

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Transcript from the Video

Hello everyone! In the previous lecture we looked at dalit women's participation in the Ambedkarite movement challenged both caste and patriarchy, offering an alternative to dominant nationalist narratives. Urmila Pawar and Meenakshi Moon's *We Also Made History* documents this activism through personal interviews and historical research, showing how Dalit women became agents of change and narrators of their own history. The book emphasizes lived experience as political and highlights how Ambedkar's ideas, such as rejecting caste-based dress codes, were aimed at reclaiming dignity. Dalit women also expressed resistance through cultural forms like folk songs, blending the personal and political in everyday life. These songs, often performed in domestic settings, turned homes into sites of memory, resistance, and feminist assertion. In doing so, Dalit women reshaped the legacy of Ambedkar and carved out a distinct space for Dalit feminist consciousness within the anti-caste struggle.

In this lecture we will look at women's participation in the Self Respect Movement led by EVR Periyar. We have already discussed Periyar's life and works in the previous lecture. As we have learned in the previous lectures, the Self-Respect Movement was a bold and revolutionary campaign against the caste system, started by E.V. Ramasamy Periyar in 1925. It challenged deeply rooted social hierarchies and called for equality, especially for the oppressed lower castes. The movement quickly gained momentum in Tamil Nadu, sparking widespread protests, debates, and acts of resistance. For nearly twenty years, it shook the foundations of traditional society, encouraging people to question caste discrimination, religious authority, and gender inequality. As time went on, the movement changed and took new forms. In 1944, Periyar transformed the movement into a political and social organization called the Dravidar Kazhagam (DK), which focused on promoting rationalism, atheism, and social justice. However, not everyone agreed with Periyar's approach, especially his decision to stay away from electoral politics. In 1949, a group of younger leaders who wanted to participate in elections and bring about change through political power broke away and formed a new party called the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK). This marked a new chapter in the Dravidian movement, one that would go on to play a major role in Tamil Nadu's political landscape.

Periyar's vision for radical social change extended powerfully to the question of women's rights. S. Anandhi writes in her article, "Women's Question in the Dravidian Movement c. 1925-1948", "Within the ambience of the Self Respect Movement he was not content with taking up such conventional themes of women's emancipation like widow-remarriage and women's education which, even if successful, did not undermine the existing structure of patriarchy; but he raised questions relating to basic pillars of patriarchy, like the monogamous family and the norms of chastity prescribed for and enforced upon women." Even in supporting women's education, Periyar aimed to use it as a weapon against patriarchy. He wrote, "The quality of education imparted to woman till now has been one of training woman

to be an efficient house-wife—by designing the curriculum to include cooking, music, tailoring etc. Thus woman's education has been an advertisement to acquire a 'qualified' husband." He insisted that women's education should serve the goal of employment and economic independence.

Periyar's most radical and influential ideas revolved around marriage and family, which he saw as central pillars of patriarchy. Because marriage often reduced women to the status of male property, he argued that the institution itself should be abolished. Speaking at a women's meeting at Victoria Hall, Madras in 1948, he declared, "The concept of husband-wife relationship has been one of master-slave relationship. The essential philosophy of marriage has been to insist on women's slavery ... why should human beings alone keep such contract of one-man-one-woman relationship ... until women are liberated from such marriages and from men, our country cannot attain independence." While Periyar opposed traditional marriage, he did endorse a kind of union based on equality and personal choice, rejecting all ritualistic practices tied to religious or social customs. He was especially critical of the practice of tying the tali around the bride's neck, which he saw as a symbol of women's subjugation. He opposed arranged marriages and advocated for the freedom of individuals to choose their own partners. Another core aspect of Periyar's critique was the cultural obsession with women's chastity, which underpinned the monogamous family structure. In his 1928 pamphlet, *Why Did Women Become Enslaved?*, originally published as a series of articles, he wrote, "The imposition of 'pativratha' qualities on women has destroyed their independence and free-thinking and made them unquestioning slaves—to men—who are supposed to demonstrate undue faith over chastity." In speeches delivered in 1935, he argued, "Divorce is a protective instrument in the hands of many oppressed women. Along with Divorce Act there should be a provision for compulsory registration of all marriages."

V Geetha in her article, "Periyar, Women and an Ethic of Citizenship", notes that, "Free to remake themselves in whatever manner they desired and tied to men in their lives through ties of mutuality, women acquired a new identity: that of the citizen, the woman of civic virtue, and one who could claim and act on an identity which did not subordinate her to men, nor define her as essentially different from them. While Periyar sometimes argued that women's reproductive functions restricted them from laying claim to complete autonomy in the present scheme of things, he also insisted that motherhood could be rejected, in fact, ought to be disowned by women themselves, in favour of parenthood." In fact, Girija Devi, a self-respecter and fiction writer, wondered if there should not be a special government department which would initiate such action, as would ensure the progress of women in all fields.

Periyar was a visionary who paid immense attention to women's issues. His journal *Revolt* incorporates his ideas on marriage, widowhood, abortion, legal rights for women, to mention a few. As Geetha and Rajadurai point out, "Revolt holds a veritable mirror to the times, and allows us to see the Self-respect movement in its context, and appreciate its – and Periyar's – perspective on various matters."

Periyar emphasized the deep connection between the control of property and the oppression of women. He argued that the subjugation of women and the institution of compulsory marriage were closely tied to the desire to accumulate private property. Reflecting on the historical relationship between property ownership and the subordination of women, he stated: "When people were totally free without property in land, I do not think there were these slavish practices of women's oppression and compulsory marriage contracts. When there was no concept of accumulating private property... there could not have been any

compulsion for acquiring heir for the family-property-through child-birth. Only when the desire for private property came into practice the concept of marriage and imprisoning women to protect the family property also came into practice.” According to Periyar, once the desire to own private property became a societal norm, marriage was used as a tool to ensure that women were confined within the home as the guardians of men's property. “Once a woman was made the guardian of man's property, she herself became his property to produce heir for the family... women lost their right to worship their gods but only their husbands.”

For Periyar, this subjugation was directly linked to the concept of inheritance. Women were not seen as individuals with rights to property or spiritual autonomy, but as instruments to ensure the continuity of the family's wealth through the birth of male heirs. Periyar's critique of private property extended to his broader vision for women's liberation. He argued that the very structure of private property, which required heirs to maintain ownership across generations, was a fundamental cause of women's oppression. He believed that in order to achieve true freedom for women, private property, as the cornerstone of patriarchy, had to be completely dismantled: “The private property which has been the main reason for women's oppression has to be totally destroyed in order to achieve women's liberation.” In this context, Periyar's advocacy of birth control takes on added significance. He saw birth control as a vital tool for women to reclaim their autonomy. By giving women control over their own reproductive rights, birth control would allow them to escape the cycle of compulsory childbearing required to inherit property. Periyar viewed the ability to control one's reproduction as a critical step toward ending the patriarchal control over women's bodies and lives, which was intimately connected to the desire for property inheritance and the social structures built around it. Thus, birth control was not just a matter of personal choice for Periyar—it was a radical tool for social and economic liberation.

Periyar's ideas found shape in the journal *Revolt*. The weekly journal *Revolt* was launched in Erode, the birthplace of Periyar E.V. Ramasamy, on November 7, 1928. This date was chosen with symbolic intent, as Periyar described it in the first anniversary issue as “that memorable day in the history of the nations, the day of the anniversary of the immortal Revolution in Russia, the day which is looked upon as the violent explosion of human liberty, the day which is memorialised by millions in Russia for the mighty mixing up of monarchs and the masses.” The journal was printed and published by Periyar's wife, Nagammal, at the Unmai Vilakkam Press (Truthseekers Press). Initially based in Erode, *Revolt* was briefly moved to Madras before returning to Erode, where it ceased publication in early 1930. In the official declaration submitted to the Judicial Magistrate for the journal's registration, Nagammal explained its purpose: “By the word ‘Revolt’, I mean breaking with restrictions. That is, breaking against that constraint which goes against nature and reason – whether in politics, in bureaucracy, capitalism or in gender relations – whichever constraint that violates human welfare (dharma) and human nature” (Kudi Arasu, 22.4.1928).

Revolt was both agitational and educational, aimed at reshaping public consciousness and everyday logic. Alongside coverage of political Non-Brahminism and the Self-Respect Movement, it reported on conferences, delivered speeches, and featured articles on contemporary politics and social reform. It also ran regular columns on science, religion, and atheism. The journal's writers actively engaged with the pressing issues of the time, such as the Simon Commission boycott (1927), the release of the Nehru Committee Report (1928), and the debates surrounding the Child Marriage Restraint Act and the Devadasi Abolition Bill (1927–28). These developments were seized as opportunities to communicate critical, indigenous ideas of self-respect, equality, progress, and justice to a broader audience beyond the Tamil-speaking world. With its tone often indignant and sharply humorous, *Revolt* articulated a philosophy rooted in social compassion, freethought, atheism, and radicalism. It

offered a vital counterpoint to the often moralizing tone of mainstream political and social discourse in Tamil Nadu. Undeterred by sharp criticism from orthodox circles and the nationalist press, *Revolt* remained committed to its radical stance and continued to challenge established norms.

Now let us summarise today's lecture. This lecture focuses on women's participation in the Self-Respect Movement led by E.V. Ramasamy Periyar, emphasizing his radical views on women's rights and social justice. The movement, launched in 1925, challenged caste discrimination and patriarchy, gaining momentum in Tamil Nadu. Periyar transformed the movement into the Dravidar Kazhagam (DK) in 1944, which later gave rise to the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) in 1949, focusing on social and political change. Periyar's views on women's rights went beyond traditional issues like education and widow-remarriage. He criticized the patriarchal structure of marriage and the norms of chastity, advocating for women's economic independence through education. Periyar proposed the abolition of marriage, seeing it as an institution that reduced women to property for the purpose of inheritance. He supported divorce as a tool for women's protection and rejected arranged marriages and rituals like tying the tali, which symbolized women's subjugation. Periyar linked the oppression of women to the control of property, arguing that the desire to accumulate wealth led to women being confined to the role of producing heirs. He believed that dismantling private property was essential for women's liberation and supported birth control as a means to grant women control over their reproductive rights. His radical ideas were expressed in the journal *Revolt*, which advocated for freethought, atheism, and social change, critiquing traditional social structures. Periyar's work laid the foundation for a transformative approach to gender equality and social justice in Tamil Nadu.