

Indian Feminisms Concepts and Issues
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Lecture-05
Gender and Anti-caste movements

Hello everyone, in the previous video lectures we learned about the history of Indian feminism in the pre- and post-independence periods. We saw how issues regarding women changed from the narrative of social reformation to agency, choice and rights. We saw how the feminist movement progressed from being under the ages of nationalism to independent assertion, presence in academia etcetera.

If you have any questions, you can go back to those lectures and go through them once again. One important point you must remember that there is no one strand of Indian feminism. In fact, what we discussed as the history of Indian feminism is often considered as the mainstream history of Indian feminism. Meaning, that it is a history of a certain group of women, mostly upper caste, upper-class Hindu women, how so? We will discuss in the next lectures.

Today we will learn about the non-dominant strands of Indian feminism specifically about Dalit women's activism. At the outset it is important to remember that the question of caste and gender is approached in 2 ways.

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Number 1, by incorporating the issue of gender within Dalit movements.

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And number 2 by initiating epistemological enquiry into the way in which the systems of caste and gender function intersectionally. You have to remember that these 2 approaches are often related. In this video lecture we are going to talk about Dalit women's participation in anti-caste movements in the 19th and 20th centuries. We will also explore how their presence necessitated a shift in perspective from looking at caste as a single axis of oppression to its intricate relation to gender.

Dalit women's participation in the non-brahmin movements had been pivotal since the last part of the 19th century.

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Dalit women participated in movements led by leaders such as Jyoti Rao Phule, B.R. Ambedkar and E.V. Ramaswamy Periyar. Their presence posed a challenge to Brahminical ordering of the caste system especially in the spheres of education, sexuality and work.

(Refer Slide Time: 02:47)



The 1990s saw a rise in autonomous Dalit women's organizations that brought the caste gender intersectional question both at the national and at the international platforms. The 19th century social reformation in India was jump started through the question of sati or widow immolation and widow remarriage. By 20th century the women's question as Partha Chatterjee puts it was resolved by introducing the home slash world binary which put the upper caste middle class women in the spiritual sphere of the home.

However, the 19th and 20th centuries have also seen the culmination of non-brahmin movements in the social and political fronts through Phule and Ambedkar. What makes both of them so instrumental to Dalit women's question is that? Both Phule and Ambedkar saw the liberation of Dalit women from their oppressed states as pivotal to the erasure of caste.

Phule's proposition of liberating the Shudras, Atishudras and women from the slavery of Brahmanism stands in stark contrast to the upper caste reformers who focused on the issues concerning upper caste women such as sati, widow remarriage etcetera and neglected issues concerning lower caste women.

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As he dies, I quote they, meaning the upper caste founders of various organizations and conferences pretend to be modernists as long as they are in the service of the British government.

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The moment they retire and claim their pensions, they get into their Brahmanical touch me not attire.

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If these leaders of men are genuinely interested in unifying all people, they must address themselves to the discovery of the root of eternal love of all human beings.

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Otherwise, to turn a blind eye to the divisions among the human beings at this hour is simply futile. Phule argued that caste domination has continued by restricting knowledge, recognizing the material and sexual consequences that function in overlapping ways in which Brahminical patriarchy exploits women of different castes. Phule contrasts the labour of lower caste women both inside and outside the house with the labour and leisure of savanna women.

He notes that in terms of labour lower caste women have to toil both inside and outside the house while upper caste women enjoy relative freedom.

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As Rege book said the frame of reference suggests that savanna women could progress because of the well education and well-educated conscious savanna men and there is hope that Dalit women will receive similar help and strength from their men.

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Now Phule's Satyashodak Samaj are known as the truth-seeking enterprise was specifically created to recognize the lower caste women who get affected by the multiple structures of caste, class and gender-based oppression.

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Phule began his endeavor by teaching his wife Savitribai Phule who actively participated in his social reformation. Savitribai Phule's letters provide an acute sensibility of the relationship

between power and knowledge and the need to have access to knowledge in order to overcome caste-ridden atrocities. She talks about women's right to education, right to choose marriage partner and so on.

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In a letter to her husband dated 10th October 1856 she writes 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. The love letters written by Savitribai to Jyoti Rao Phule are also mentioned as connecting the private with the public. In one such letter she criticizes her brother who tells her to stop social work because she is a woman.

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Drawing on similar notions of Phule and the satyashodhak samaj, Muktabai an 11 year old monk student in Phule school emphasizes on the access to knowledge. Muktabai goes beyond education and connects the factors of deprivation to lower caste to the laws of land. The hierarchies even within the lower caste communities and the different conditions and experiences of birthing for upper and lower caste women.

Explicating the caste division within lower caste communities, she writes in her essay which is titled about the Grievs of the Mangs and Mahars.

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But the Mahars here, no less untouchable than the Mangs consider themselves to be the superior to Mangs, so much so that they do not allow even the shadow of a Mang to fall over them. Here we see a clear consciousness about Dalit patriarchy and the hierarchy within the lower caste community. Muktabai observes the extremely unhygienic condition in which the lower caste women give birth as opposed to the clean place and scientific process which is adapted for an upper-caste woman's birthing.

This brings into focus how the caste system forced the lower caste women to live in utter dirt. As a result of which lower caste children often die during birth or were born with disease and malnutrition.

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She writes, when our women give birth to babies, they do not even have a roof over their houses. How they suffer in the rain and the cold. Please try to think about it from your own experience.

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If they get some disease while giving birth, where will they get money for the doctor or medicines?
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Was there ever any doctor among you who was human enough to treat people free of cost?
Muktabai's article focuses on the issues of hygiene during birthing and the consequences of caste-based segregation which affect specifically Dalit women and children. Due to their untouchable status lower caste people lived on the fringes or outside the villages in harrowing conditions.

However, as Muktabai's article shows the unhygienic conditions caused physical harm in gender-specific ways to Dalit women and not to Dalit men.

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The attack on Brahmanical structure of the society which perpetuates gender and caste based discrimination was pointed out by Tarabai Shinde in her book Stree Purush Tulana. In English it is translated into a comparison between men and women.

(Refer Slide Time: 10:04)



What makes her work all the more important is that although she belong to a socially elite Marathi caste, she recognized the impact of Brahmanical patriarchy and other non-Brahminical forms of patriarchies which often adopt Brahmanical standards such as enforced widowhood. She criticized the representation of women in shastras.

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Such as Manjughosha, Muktamala and Manorama. She argued that such portrayals present a binary in women characters, the eloping bad daughter versus the wife who saves her virginity due to her virtue. But Tarabai argues is that just because a girl elopes does not mean that she is not good.

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She asks, “Manjughosha was known as virtue incarnate; then how could she desert her jeweled palace and forsake it is pleasures for a strange prince whose name and origin she did not know?” She also mentions the impossibility of saving one's virginity due to her virtue in front of a lustful strong man and challenges the rationality of the justification of gender discrimination.

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In a fiery language she writes, one comes across several charges against women both in the written literature and in everyday discourse. But do men not suffer from the same flaws that women are supposed to have?

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Do men not cheat as women do? Theft, incest, murder, robbery, deception, fraud, swindling of government funds, taking bribes, changing truth to falsehood and falsehood to truth—do men not do any of these?" She further goes on to accusing the Hindu god who created both men and women but brand women with nothing but agony. Tarabai's account thus connects the sphere of both the domestic where women are caged and the public, exclusively masculine. Taking a radical stance

for her time she voices women's independence from the patriarchal world by having the choice to choose a partner.

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Do you know what a woman idea of happiness is? First, a husband of her choice. One whom she can love. Once their hearts are united, she will not worry about poverty. She will endure any calamity for him.

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She will suffer hunger or thirst and put up with him for any kind of harassment for the sake of the man she loves. She will be happy even in the worst circumstances possible and the right to education was another aspect that she also promoted. It is interesting that the issues of women's

choice in marriage which becomes so central in the Ambedkarite period gains momentum in the writings of a non-Dalit woman.

By this I do not mean to say that Tarabai was drawing a common comparison between all women. Rather her recognition of multiple patriarchies shows that she was aware of the differences within women. Hence by making Brahminical patriarchy her point of accusation she draws links between caste and gender. She draws an important insight on women's sexuality, she argues that concepts about women are mostly stereotypical and they need to be challenged.

In the Ambedkarite period ranging from 1920s to 50s and 60s the major concerns that were taken up are education, sexuality and labour. Women's right to education and occupation has become instrumental in the progress of Dalit communities is reiterated by Ambedkar in his proposed and much debated Hindu court bill. In women leaders are not interesting in the social progress of women, Ambedkar points out the distinct attitude taken by mainstream feminist leaders.

He writes the fact that the bill was opposed by all the quarters of Savarna groups proves that it intended to disrupt the caste and patriarchal controls over processes of production and reproduction. Ambedkar encouraged self-respect among Dalit women by asking them to give up the profession of devadasi, prostitution and embrace cleanliness and wear sarees like upper-caste women.

In order to challenge the Brahminical order which binds the lower caste women in visible signifiers or markers of impurity, sexual availability and immorality.

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Geetabai Pawar recollects an incident from 1942 in a meeting presided by Ambedkar where she and her female friends decided to dress up in clean clothes. Seeing which Ambedkar applauded.

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It makes me happy to see my sisters so neatly dressed. Who will say they are Maharanis? As a consequence, to his encouragement for Dalit women to come on the stage and give speech and form groups. By the 1930s several Dalit women's organizations were coming up, they held independent meetings and also conferences and passed resolutions against child marriage, enforced widowhood and lack of provision for education of the lower-caste.

Dalit women also took part in Gaayans which means writing and singing songs about Ambedkar and Bhima. What links Ambedkar so closely to Dalit feminism is his assertion that? Caste functions through endogamy and subordination of women's sexuality. Ambedkar viewed Manu's turning of Brahmanical idea of ideal womanhood which means exalting the husband following Pativrata ideology and so on, into state laws for being the major perpetrator in enhancing and continuing a hierarchy.

By which marriage, kinship and the degradation of women link structurally in reproducing graded inequality in society. In his celebrated article annihilation of caste, he presents intermarriage also known as endogamy as the real remedy to abolish caste system.

(Refer Slide Time: 16:33)



In annihilation of caste he writes, I am convinced that the real remedy is inter-caste marriage. Fusion of blood can alone create the feeling of being kith and kin and unless this feeling of kinship or being kindred becomes paramount, the separatist feeling-the feeling of being aliens created by caste will not vanish.

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Among the Hindus inter-marriage must necessarily be a factor of greater force in social life than it need be in the life of the non-Hindus. Where society is already well knit by other ties, marriage is an ordinary incident of life.

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But where society is cut asunder, marriage as a binding force becomes a matter of urgent necessity. The real remedy for breaking case is inter-marriage; nothing else will serve as the solvent of caste.”

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During the 1920s a non-Brahminical movement that was gaining prominence was the self-respect movement under the leadership of E.V. Ramaswamy Periyar. It was launched with a view to challenge the Brahmanical system and creates a new social order of equality for the adidravidas. His challenge against the congress party and the Gandhian ideologies was based on their caste and gender stereotypes.

While congress was trying to create a nation based on unity by erasing and appropriating the differences between Hindu, Muslim and other religions. Gandhi attempted to disconnect untouchability from Hindu religion and present it as a deteriorating custom. Thus, in both these cases the Brahminical Hindu religious structure is maintained. Periyar tried to construct an alternative identity based on non-brahmin lower caste perspectives.

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As Kannabiran points out such step could emerge only through a radical transformation of structures of feeling and material conditions.

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Periyar's demand for inter-caste and inter-religious marriages, women's choice in birth-control rising the age of consent, giving women the right to divorce and freeing them from the profession of prostitution immediately align the sexual and moral domination of lower-caste women to the Brahminical structure and aimed at providing them with an agency to choose. These concerns grew out of several events are occurring at the same time.

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The Devadasi Abolition Bill of 1927, the age of consent bill of 1924 and Katherine Mayo's book Mother India. In this way he challenges the Brahmanical notions of purity and pollution, male versus female by tracing contours of marriage.

(Refer Slide Time: 19:28)



As Anandhi notes within the ambience of 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;

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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. And he argued women's education should have the aim of providing employment for women and thus making them economically independent. Anandhi's understanding of Periyar presents him as being critical of the nationalist reformation of the women's question which emphasized issues of widow-remarriage and education of women.

In this way Periyar not only challenges the centrality of caste in Dalit politics but also challenges the nationalist and early 20th century nationalist feminist notions of female emancipation.

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The post Ambedkarite period saw women's participation mainly in the Dadasaheb Gaikwad led struggle for land rights from 1958 to 64 and the Namantar movement from 1977 to 82. However, a study by Gopal guru on Dalit women's organizations in the Akola region has pointed out that through songs and poems they were creating counter narratives to the political in the other words the congress party and the social organizations.

In the examples provided by guru we see that the songs about Ambedkar and his wife Ramabai were sung by Dalit women. While working with the grindstone at birth ceremonies, naming ceremonies and on harvesting occasions. This shows a tradition of merging the domestic with the public not only in terms of how Ambedkar is reclaimed but also in choosing the locations where songs are being produced.

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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 sings in the praise of Bhima. Here goes the original in Marathi you will see it on screen.

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The reference here is to Ambedkar's marriage with Savitabai a brahmin woman whom he married 13 years after the death of his first wife Ramabai. This song therefore reclaims Ambedkar at the domestic or personal level. In this OV or song Dalit women view inter-caste marriage as a crucial step in eradicating the caste system. Now let us summarize what we learned today.

We saw that parallel to the nationalist movement in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, there was a strong anti-caste sentiment present. Under the leaderships of Phule, Ambedkar and Periyar, Dalit women participated in these movements. These anti-caste movements like the social reformist movements made gender a central agenda however the approach was completely different.

As we have seen earlier the reformist movements talked about women's progress without disturbing the gender hierarchy. Anti-caste movements on the other hand stroke at the heart of the patriarchy by showing the connection between gender and caste. In the process they also recognize the difference among women of different castes. Thus, we see Phule talking about women's education in a way that is not restricted to companion at marriage.

We see Ambedkar making crucial contribution by highlighting endogamy or marriage within caste as the root of oppression. Periyar aimed for a holistic change by raising questions relating to the basic pillars of patriarchy like the monogamous family and the norms of chastity prescribed for

and enforced upon women. This is where the relevance of anti-caste movements in the pre-independence periods lies.

In the next lecture we will take a look at the emergence of autonomous Dalit feminist and Dalit women's organizations especially in the 1990s and the evolution of the question of caste and gender in the post-independence period. Thank you.

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