

## Handout 23: Caste Movements (19<sup>th</sup> century)

Nikhil Sheth

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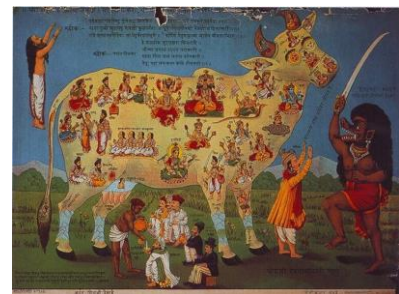
The socio-religious reforms movements of the 19<sup>th</sup> c were initially organized by the Indian elites and high caste Hindus. So, inspite of criticism of caste system and untouchability, no serious effort was made to bring some practical solution. So, it was the lower caste intellectuals who took the issues related to equality and social upliftment directly into their hands.

Caste Movement expressed mainly in two forms:

- **Sanskritization** (caste mobility)
- **Radical social protest** (rejection of caste system)

### Sanskritization:

- Some caste groups placed at the relatively lower level of caste hierarchy claim superior ritual status by following the upper caste behavioural norms, by accepting the taboos that the upper caste practiced. This is an **emulation of Brahmanical norms** relating to *private behavior or public postures*.
  - e.g. imitation of social practices such as sati, child marriage, prohibition of widow remarriage, temperance etc.
- Usually, such initiatives toward Sanskritization come from **relatively affluent sections** among the lower castes.
- Sanskritization was a **traditional method**. It had been continuing in Indian society for a long stretch of time. E.g. formation of Rajputs.
- Claiming ritual status on the basis of certain traditional behavioural norms also involved a certain **degree of revivalism** as well. Because invariably many of these caste groups actually would visualize a fairly respectable position of theirs in the past which they sought to restore. Example the **cow protection movement** in northern India.



## Bengal

- **Mhishya Movement (South and southwest Bengal)**
  - Sections of the Kaivarta community (a lower caste group) became materially wealthy and started claiming Kshatriya status claiming that they were offspring of Kshatriya rulers. started to call themselves Mahishya.
  - In 1897, they formed 'Jati Nirdharni Sabha'. In 1901, they established the central Mahishya Committee.
- Similar aspirations of claiming superior Kshatriya status was seen in **Rajbanshis of northern Bengal**.
- **Namshudra Movement:** A different kind of movement was of **Namshudra peasants in eastern Bengal**
  - These peasants belonged to a very low strata of the caste hierarchy.
    - They were historically classified as a lower-caste Hindu community, faced social discrimination and economic deprivation.
    - Unlike the Mahishyas, who could be admitted into the Brahmin households, the Namshudras were actually debarred from entering into Brahmin households and with them the Brahmins had no physical connection or touch
  - The Namshudra movement aimed to address social and economic discrimination and assert their rights and dignity. They became very organized. Led by reformers like **Harichand Thakur** (1812-78) and **Guruchand Thakur** in the 19th century, the movement sought to challenge the caste-based hierarchy and advocate for social equality.
    - Political significance was a major catalyst.
    - **Social Reform:** They emphasized education, social upliftment, and empowerment of the Namshudras through their teachings and writings.
    - **Sanskritization:** Aspirations even among the Namshudras were in part adoption of the behavioral norms of the upper caste. They asked their women not to go to the fields, not to serve in other households etc.
    - **Religious Reform: Matua protest sect.** It aimed to liberate the Namshudras from the dominance of higher-caste Hindus and promote an inclusive and egalitarian interpretation of Hinduism. This included challenging discriminatory practices and rituals imposed upon the community. This movement inherited some protestant elements of popular Vaishnavism of Bengal.
  - So, there was certain amount of transcendence of radicalism over Sanskritization. This movement thus tried to break the limitations of Sanskritization and acquired a more protestant, a more radical dimension, where Brahmanical orthodoxy was not only challenged but was sought to be subverted.

### Radical Social Protest: Non-Brahmin Movements

However, not all castes at all times followed this same behavioural trajectory. One cannot simply apply this framework for entire India because Indian society has a very strong regional feature. Caste movement used Sanskritization in varied manner to fulfil aspirations for mobility. At times, depending on situations, depending on the kind of leadership of the caste groups, the materially affluent section among some of these caste groups went against the Brahminical orthodoxy. They felt confident and powerful enough to challenge the Brahmanical domination and broke the limitations of Sanskritization. These were movements which instead of seeking positional changes within the caste system, questioned the fundamentals of this social organisation, the most notable of them being the non-Brahman movements in western and southern India and some of the more radical movements among the dalit groups.

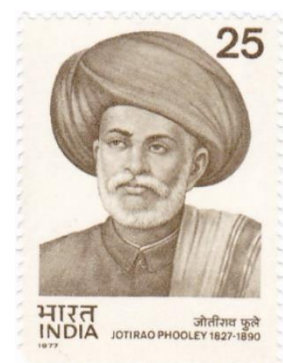
Apart from Sanskritization, there were **other avenues of social mobility** and claiming superior ritual status. British rule came with a certain opportunity for the low caste people.

- Colonial rule disengaged caste system from its pre-colonial contexts:
  - **Land** became a marketable commodity.
  - **Equality before law** became the established principle of judicial administration.
  - Opportunities that are created by the **new educational system** which was open to all.
  - **Public employment** was thrown open to all.
- **Christianity** provided many of these low caste groups with the possibility of an escape from a social order dominated by Brahminical orthodoxy.
- Beginning of **caste surveys, census operations** which enumerated and classified the population on all-India basis.

### Maharashtra

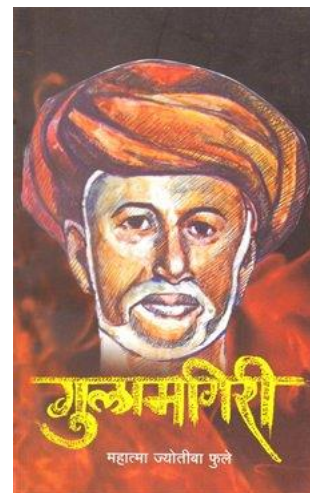
**Jyotiba Phule** took the lead and raised lower caste issues.

- He came from Mali (gardener) caste, the people who were Untouchables but who were becoming prosperous over time, got education and this education became a major incentive for him to claim a higher status for his community.
- His idea was to become more respectable but in order to establish their rights, Jotiba Phule was actually traveling back to history. He had a very **radical interpretation of caste problem** in India.
  - In his *Ballad of Raja Chatrapati Shivaji Bhonsale (1869)*, Phule depicted all lower-caste people as the original inhabitants of India and forgotten descendents of the



heroic race of Kshatriyas. The King Bali was refigured as representing the utopias of beneficence, prosperity and casteless order.

- He proposed his own version of Aryan invasion theory. As the old warrior castes, bahunas had once enjoyed a respectable position of pre-eminence in the society. The invading Aryans were Vishnu worshipper and they defeated natives and converted them into Shudras. He thus believed that Aryans had instituted the caste system as a framework for subjugation.
- He introduced a Marathi word **dalit** (broken, crushed) as a descriptor for those people who were outside the traditional varna system.
- He sought to unite both the non-Brahman peasant castes as well as dalit groups in a common movement. He underplayed the social-differences that divided mali-kunbi, mang-mahar or Shudra-Ati-Shudra.
- He had a **cosmopolitan view**
  - He kept an eye over developments in the US, was familiar with American civil war and abolition of slavery. In his book **Gulamgiri**, he compared the condition of African-American slaves with the status of low-caste Indians. In this book, he thanked Christian missionaries and the British colonists for making the exploited castes realize that they are worthy of all human rights.
- He also supported the **cause of peasants**.
  - In his book **Shetkaryancha Aasud** (1881), he analyzed the reasons behind the decline of Shudra peasants.
- He laid the foundation of **Satya Shodhak Samaj** (1873-74)
  - Through this samaj, he **opposed idolatry, priestcraft and denounced the caste system**.
  - Satyashodhak Samaj campaigned for the **spread of rational thinking** and modern education.
  - Started to publish **Satya Shodhak journal**.
- Finally, he worked for **women education**, along with his wife Savitribai Phule. He championed **widow remarriage**. He established an **orphanage** to reduce the rate of **infanticide**.





### Some more personalities:

- Later in Satara region Satya Shodhak Samaj progressed under **Mukundrao Patil**. Mukundrao Patil Published a journal **Dinmitra** from 1910 onwards.
- Later the leaders like **Keshavrao & Dinkarao Jawalakar** started to lead an 'Anti Brahmin Movement' in Poona.

- At the end of 19th Century, the Caste movement of Maharashtra started to be organized under the leadership of **Gopal Baba Walangkar**. He published the monthly journal **Vital-Vidhvansak** (destroyer of Brahmanical pollution) targeted at the Brahmanical Orthodoxy. It was the first journal in India with untouchable people as target reader group. In 1894, Walangkar presented a memorandum to the government in which he demanded status of Kshatriya & reservation in Jobs for 'Mahars'.

Over time, the non-Brahmin movement in Maharashtra split into two distinct tendencies.

- One was the kind of aspiration was to **claim a superior status in the past**. Some people tried to **rise up in the social hierarchy and in the ritual hierarchy**.
- The other was a **more radical tendency** which became an **attack on the caste system itself**. Subsequently, some of these men who participated in this kind of a social movement against casteism became linked with the Congress.

Shahu Maharaj of Kolhapur (1874-1922)	Vitthal Ramji Shinde (1873-1944)
	
<p>He carried out various progressive reforms for the lower caste subjects of his state. <b>Primary education</b> to all regardless of caste and creed was one of his most significant priorities. He also ensured suitable employment for students thus educated, thereby creating one of the <b>earliest affirmative action</b> (50% reservation to weaker sections) programs in history.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>He formed <b>Depressed Classes Mission</b> in 1906 in Bombay.</li> <li>In 1919 he gave evidence before the Southborough Franchise Committee, asking for the special representation for the untouchable castes.</li> <li>In his book <b><i>Bhartiya Asprushyatecha Prashna</i></b> (1933), he examined the Hindu religion and social culture to oppose the caste system, idol worship, meaningless rituals and inequities against women and depressed classes.</li> </ul>

## Dr. BR Ambedkar (1891-1956)

- During the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the first graduate among Mahars i.e. Bhim Rao Ambedkar was active and he was radical in his approach also.
- He rejected the caste system and Brahmanic supremacy. He pleaded for the abolition of the practice of Mahars carrying waste and dead animals. He fought to abolish mahar vatans, to relieve Dalits of their socio-economic oppression.
- He participated/led in three satyagrahas for Dalits:
  - Kalaram temple entry movement, Nashik
  - Mahad Satyagraha for equal access to public tank, Colaba
  - Parvati temple entry movement, Pune
- In the first Round Table Conference, he raised the demand for separate electorate for untouchables on the ground that they are separate from Hindus.
- In 1956, he, along with 3.5-4 lakh followers became Buddhists and led to the formation of Navayan Buddhism.
- Newspaper
  - Mooknayak, Bahishkrit Bharat
- Books by Ambedkar
  - Castes in India
  - The Annihilation of Caste
  - Riddles in Hinduism
  - Who were the Shudras?
  - What Congress and Gandhi have done to the Untouchables
  - The Buddha and His Dhamma
  - Pakistan, or The Partition of India
- Parties and Organizations
  - Bahishkrit Hitkarini Sabha, Independent Labour Party, Scheduled Caste Federation



***(more to be discussed later)***



## Kerala

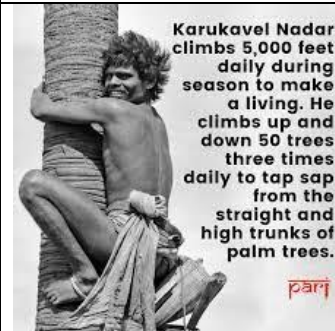
(a) **Nadars** were actually toddy-tappers. They were known as **Shanans** and they were untouchables. A section once they became somewhat wealthy through participation in commerce they wish to be known as **Nadars**. Over time they started a movement to gain respectability. They gradually transformed themselves—between the 1820s and the 1880s—from being ‘unclean toddy-tappers’ to ‘Kshatriya’ Nadars.

Nadar in the 18th century became exposed to Christianity. Some of them **became Christians** to become upwardly mobile. Others following the **model of Sanskritization claimed Kshatriya status** and tried to gain self-respect.

- The occasion for this transformation was a controversy over the wearing of breast cloths by the women of this caste in the 1820s. Nadar women had to fight for many decades from 1820s till 1850s to gain the right to wear upper garments in public (Channar revolt)
- Radical Shanans countered their unclean status by adopting the sacred thread, giving a twist to this symbol of prestige.
- They participated in the temple entry movements.
- Soon, they began to express their political ambition soon after.



Nangeli's sacrifice



Toddy Tapper, Kerala (PARI)

(b) **Ezhava community** once again was of toddy tappers. They also participated in the choir industry.

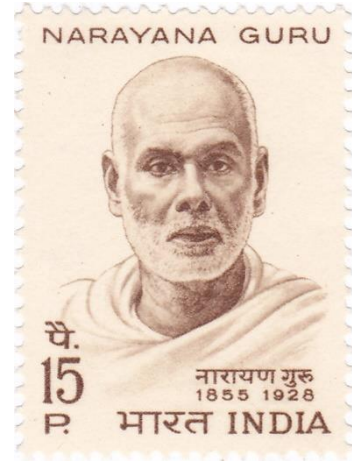
- By that time, it was a flourishing choir industry. Some of these Ezhavas became quite prosperous. They earned money by participating in coir trade and they got into these new institutions of learning. So just like among Nadars, you see rise of elites also among Ezhavas as well which was capable of challenging the forces of orthodoxy.
- They claimed a superior status and such claims came to be sustained by a certain degree of material prosperity which the Ezhava elites had acquired through participation in new professions, new educational system, through practice of medicine and ayurvedic lessons in Sanskrit schools.



A female labour working in coir industry

Ezhavas started a major movement under **Sri Narayan Guru** (1856-1928) in Travancore.

- In 1902-03 Shri Narayan Guru, Dr. Palpu (first Ezhava graduate) & a great Malayali poet, N. Kumaran Asan (disciple of Narayan Guru) formed an institution called **Sri Narayan Dharma Pariipalana Yogam (SNDP Yogam)**, which worked for the social upliftment of Ezhavas.
- Sri Narayana Guru focused on socio-economic empowerment and cultural reforms for the underprivileged. He navigated the challenges posed by caste Hindu rulers of Travancore, apathy of the British state and proselytization by missionaries.
- **Sanskritization**
  - One of the main thrusts of this movement was to challenge the Brahmanical order by adopting their ritual codes for the Ezhava community.
  - He asked his follower to discontinue toddy-tapping and prefer better professions.
  - One of the ways to question the domination of the orthodoxy was to create their own institutions, they setup their own Shiva temples and Ezhava priests were administering spiritual needs of the fellow members SNDP managed these temples. So, this movement operated within Sanskritization.
- But by the turn of the century, there was a **greater degree of radicalism** and there were attempts to cross the limits of Sanskritization.
  - Narayan Guru had given a slogan 'one god, one religion, one caste'
    - "All human beings are born from a mother. Brahmin and Paraya both are born in the same way. Hence, they belong to the same Jathi, Narajathi (humankind)."
    - He said, "Ask not, say not, think not caste". Guru supported inter-caste marriages and inter-dining. He himself officiated several inter-caste marriages.
  - When he was stopped from entering the temple, his disciples started the temple entry movement for untouchables **Vaikom Satyagraha** in 1920s.
  - Guru proclaimed that there was no distinction of Religion or God between human beings and called upon people to abstain from violence and religious conflicts to promote universal peace, harmony and prosperity.
    - Guru convened the first religious parliament in Asia at Aluva Adwaita Ashram on 10th February 1924 in which leaders of almost all religions took part.
- Later, they began to adopt more radical ideas and started using the language of atheism. His disciple **Sahodaran Ayyapan said, "no god no religion no caste."**





**Ayyankali (1863-1941)** worked for the betterment of Pulayar community and removing disabilities of untouchables in Kerala.



### Tamil Nadu

Similar patterns were visible in **Madras Presidency** where you see some **intermediate powerful groups** like the Nayars, Vellalas, and Kammars, who are powerful for reasons of material prosperity, who were English educated. They were intermediary groups who claimed superior status.

Here, **a distinct Dravidian identity** was sought to be forged as a counterpoint to Brahmanic dominance. The lead here was taken by members of the **Vellala** caste.

- In the late-nineteenth century Madras Presidency, the Brahmins, comprising only 3 percent of the population, held 42 percent of government jobs.
- They prided themselves on their education, especially in English, and viewed Sanskrit as a prestigious classical language, while dismissing Tamil, the language of the common people. This fueled the anti-Brahman movement in the south, where **Tamil language became a symbol of devotion and provoked strong emotions**.
- Additionally, the non-Brahman Tamil elite drew upon missionary and Orientalist **theories of the Aryan invasion** to argue that the caste system was not indigenous to the south, that it was an imposition by the Brahmins from the north who tried to colonize Tamil–Dravidian culture.

The anti-Brahman movement found its political forum in the **Justice Party** that came into being in 1916.

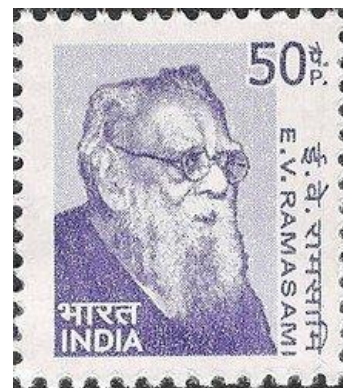
- Founded by Sir Pitti Theagaraya Chetty, Dr T M Nair, and Dr C Natesa Mudaliar.
- Consciously constituted as a party of non-Brahmins, the Justice Party published a Non-Brahman Manifesto and opposed the Congress and its political programme.
- The party showed its full loyalty to the colonial administration and vied for privileges offered by government-sponsored reforms. Indeed, it demanded separate representation for non-Brahmins in legislative councils, as had been granted to the Muslims in the Morley–Minto reforms of 1909.
- Following the allocation of reserved seats to non-Brahmins in the Montagu–Chelmsford reforms in 1919, the Justice Party contested the elections to the Madras Legislative Council, in open opposition to the Congress programme of non-cooperation. The Congress

had boycotted the elections. The Justice Party remained in power until 1926, and then from 1930-37.

However, it soon came into clashes with a **more militant group of non-Brahmans**, who had developed **non-Brahmanism** as a political theory and ideology, drawing upon the writings, in Telugu and Tamil, of **S. Raghavayya Chowdary** and **E. V. Ramaswamy Naicker** respectively.

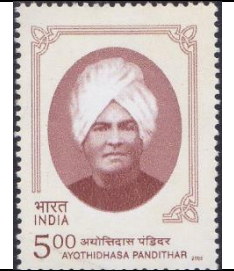
### **E.V. Ramaswamy Naicker or Periyar (Great Man) (1879-1973)**

- He joined Indian National Congress in 1919 and was associated with Gandhian Non-Cooperation Movement of 1920. Later he was disillusioned and started organising lower caste movements in **Self Respect movement**. (1925) It took a different political trajectory than Justice Party's stance. He was more radical and argued for overthrow of caste system altogether.
- He started a Tamil weekly journal called **Kudi Arasu** (People's Government) in 1925 and **Revolt** in English in 1928. Kudi Arasu became the main vehicle for propagating the political programme of the 'Self-Respect' movement.
- **Father of Dravidian Movement**
  - He promoted the principles of **rationalism, self-respect, and women's rights**.
  - He took a radical stand **against the caste system**.
    - He wanted to abolish untouchability. He took part in the **Vaikom Satyagraha**. He fought for access to temples and wells for all.
    - He promoted abandoning the usage of caste prefixes.
    - Marriage ceremonies performed by him himself without support of any Brahmin. (**self-respect marriages**)
    - Periodically, the movement organized dramatic assaults on religions and priestly symbols like beating of priest and idols with shoes, and burned sacred texts.
  - This was **more radical** than the Justice Party, which rebuffed Brahmans for their 'skills to pass exams'. He almost equated **anti-Brahminism** with **anti-Hinduism**.
  - In 1937, C Rajagopalachari (CM, Madras Presidency) introduced Hindi as a compulsory language in schools. It led to a series of **anti-Hindi agitations** which were supported by Ramasamy. He opposed the domination of Hindi and emphasised the distinct cultural identity of the Tamil nation.
  - In 1938, the Justice Party and Self-Respect Movement came together, representing the merger of the party and the movement and Ramasamy became the head of the **Justice Party**, and in 1944 it transformed into **Dravidar Kazhagam**.



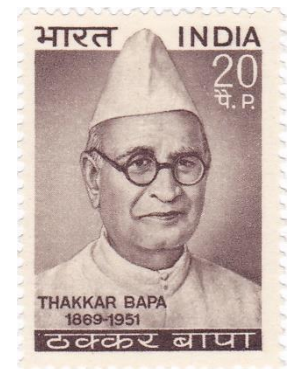
- DK was anti-Brahmin, anti-Congress, and anti-Aryan (i.e. North Indian), and launched a movement for an independent Dravida nation. He advocated for an *independent Dravida Nadu*.

**Iyothee Thass** (1845-1914) was a prominent anti-caste activist from Tamil Nadu. He famously converted to Buddhism and called upon the Paraiyars to do the same, arguing that this was their original religion. He had opposed Swadeshi Movement as led by Brahmins.



Later **Mahatma Gandhi** himself took the cause of the lower castes.

- He made anti-untouchability programme as a part of non-cooperation movement.
- After Civil disobedience movement, Gandhi fully concentrated over this question. The **Harijan upliftment programme** was organised under his guidance.
  - He formed an 'All India Harijan Sangh' in 1932.
  - In 1932 he formed an 'Anti Untouchable League'
  - Started to Publish a Journal 'Harijan'



**Thakkar Bapa** was another prominent leader of lower caste group. Gandhi called him 'Father of Harijans'.