

# The Importance of the Dalit Movement in India: Historical Roots, Dimensions, and Contemporary Implications

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## ABSTRACT

The Dalit movement in India symbolizes the struggle against social, economic, and political oppression faced by Dalits, derived from the Sanskrit word “Dalit,” meaning split or crushed. This movement arose in response to the caste system, which enforces inequality and assigns individuals to hierarchical roles based on birth and occupation. Key occupations often involve degrading work, reinforcing social stratification. As global awareness of class and caste issues intensified post-colonialism, the Dalit movement expanded its focus to include the intersection of caste with patriarchy, economics, and colonialism. Similar political movements in South Africa, Brazil, and Guatemala reflect the principles of the Dalit movement, while international and diasporic connections strengthen its global relevance. (Karingottazhikathu. John, 2005) (D. Brown & Sitapati, 2008)

**Keywords:** Dalit movement, Dalit, historical roots.

## 1. Introduction

Caste discrimination remains embedded in Indian society. Despite substantial socio-economic change and state-led democratic practices favoring the oppressed, individuals across India continue to face extreme forms of caste-inflected inequalities. India has seen increasing expressions of communal hatred, caste-based discrimination, and atrocity crimes (D. Brown & Sitapati, 2008). Caste hierarchy persists in rural and urban spatial domains, with Dalit groups occupying marginal and disenfranchised class-caste positions. Nevertheless, the Dalit movement remains vibrant and influential across the country. It has expanded its sphere of influence

to questions of class, gender, globalisation, and neo-liberalism. It has attempted to reconstruct the Dalit narrative and formulate activist strategies aligned with contemporary realities, pointing to important trajectories within the movement itself. The Dalit movement has become part of the global discourse on human rights and anti-discrimination in the twenty-first century. The movement's message resonates with the agenda of various United Nations bodies (Sadana Sabharwal & Sonalkar, 2015).

## **2. Historical Origins of the Dalit Movement**

The term “Dalit”, rooted in Sanskrit and historically signifying “to split” or “to crack”, has come to denote an oppressed group of people (Karingottazhikathu. John, 2005). First employed in the 19th century by reformer Jyotirao Phule to refer to outcasts and untouchables, the term acquired greater prominence under B. R. Ambedkar. In the 1970s, the Dalit Panther Movement adopted it to underscore the long-standing oppression and deprivation suffered by this group. Poverty, reflected in small, unhealthy homes, precarious food security, and a cycle of bonded debt and servitude to landlords, coopted Dalits into the jati system, where they lived and married within their own caste. Dalits maintained their own councils, and their customs and ceremonies around birth, death, and marriage mirrored those of caste Hindus, highlighting a shared Indian culture. These widespread practices led many to view caste divisions as a natural, immutable order. socio economic, cultural and political status of Dalit women and articulation of their identity also continues to be significant to reach greater equality and equity within the society (Sadana Sabharwal & Sonalkar, 2015). The RIP booklet of the Dalit Panther Movement states, “Ambedkarite Ideology or its Political Perspective, Political Rights and Political Ensemble of Life, Untouchability still one of the biggest and barbaric injustice, Crime against humanity, Economic level and discrimination still exists, A squeeze from society and Government.

The Dalit movement in India finds historical roots in the socio-economic and socio-political dimensions of Dalit life spanning almost three millennia (D. Brown & Sitapati, 2008). Different forces, intellectuals, movements, and agencies have influenced the Dalit movement. Figures and social movements with diverse ideologies and approaches have shaped Dalit activism, yielding numerous Dalit scholars and leaders. The Dalit question encompasses issues of existence, identity, rights to life, and social justice, with various interpretations of the term representing these diverse struggles, aspirations, and attitudes. The socio-economic status of Dalit women in India has placed them at the juncture of oppression, denial of rights, and marginalization based on class, caste, and gender. Caste-based discrimination and violations of human rights continue to afflict Dalits across the country, with nearby geographical locations and social structures exerting direct influences on the local machinery of oppression.

### **2.1. Social Caste Hierarchy and Oppression**

Caste has produced a counter-mobilizing politics—with demand for quotas (reservations), opposition to reservations, caste-party assertions, and dominant caste elites silence of caste in the name of

merit (Mosse, 2018). The 1990s saw intensified Dalit activism focusing on caste abuse, inequality, and economic exclusion, framing caste discrimination as akin to racism or "India's hidden apartheid," and around the figure of B.R. Ambedkar. Insistence on caste as a specific form of discrimination placed it on the development and human rights agenda through social movements and civil society campaigns. Dalit activism has since shifted to caste in the modern economy and broader development issues beyond reservations. Scholarly studies of caste highlight its complex, historical nature, shaped by colonial processes such as revenue systems and social restructuring. Caste involves social separation, graded status, and occupational specialization, with different dimensions affecting social and personal practice.

## **2.2. Early Reformist Responses and Voices**

Indian society has a long history of hierarchical division among various castes (Gorringe, 2013). Many reformist movements arose in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries to challenge caste discrimination. They sought to eliminate caste altogether and to end rituals that reinforced its power, advocating instead for newly-defined social rights for disqualified marginal groups. Caste-based stratification meant that the lives of Dalits could rarely be viewed outside the framework of caste. Many major thinkers—such as Periyar E. V. Ramasamy (Periyar) and B. R. Ambedkar—have challenged caste in the contemporary era. However, they did not go so far as to fully contest the entire caste system. They took the view that only caste could provide an adequate definition of society and base political concepts on that definition. Several early reform movements called for new political rights for the so-called Depressed Classes. They employed ideas and schemes different from those articulated by later leaders such as Periyar and Ambedkar.

## **2.3. The Emergence of Dalit Consciousness**

In pre-colonial India, the public character of caste was marked by relative collapse of Sanskritic norms and schisms in religious and political cultures under local and regional rule. Transformations were accentuated by the extensive demographic, agrarian and administrative reordering associated with the establishment of colonial rule during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. This disruption permitted the emergence of localised socio-religious reformation, whose critical legacy continues to inform cultural and political formations in the contemporary period (Kharel, 2007). Regions like Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, Bengal and Kerala became centres of vigorous intellectual exploration, taking classical and vernacular languages to make sense of historical experiences and cope with the pervasive societal changes wrought by colonialism, capitalism and modernisation. Renewal involved the rehabilitation of lower castes, a significant minority in South Asia and an accent on caste as a socio-political rather than a purely religious institution (Karingottazhikathu. John, 2005). The term "Dalit" is widely understood to have been coined by pioneer reformer Jyotirao Phule, used initially as a synonym for specific sub-categories of outcastes and untouchables but later to denote the collective agency of all communities categorised as scheduled castes, scheduled tribes and other backward classes in contemporary India. B. R. Ambedkar further popularised the

word and, with the rise of the Dalit movement during the 1970s, it became a symbol of social oppression, economic deprivation and political disempowerment (D. Brown & Sitapati, 2008). A contemporary expression of Ambedkar's formulation is provided by the Dalit Bahujan Samaj Party (DBSP) consciousness in which the erstwhile "untouchable" and former "criminal tribes" situated outside distinct major religious affiliations are defined as "Denotified and Declassed Dalits".

### **3. Theoretical Frameworks and Key Thinkers**

Key thinkers and frameworks used by Dalit intellectuals view the Dalit rights struggle as a human rights issue connected to identity and philosophy. B.R. Ambedkar's foundational rights in the Indian Constitution are pivotal for understanding contemporary human rights. The rights approach must be examined alongside state statements about rights. Ambedkar and E.V.R. Periyar are major figures in the Dalit struggle. Ambedkar promoted the idea that rights must be claimed, influencing many Dalit groups to highlight his view of Dalit rights within human rights. In contrast, Periyar rejected such claims, advocating a philosophy of transience that challenges caste rituals and outer salvation. He argued that rejecting reliance on external agencies entitles individuals to define their rights. Thus, reiterating Dalit rights can be seen as counterproductive, focusing on oppressors. While Ambedkar reflects a Gramscian view of hegemonic society, Periyar's perspective on power is Foucauldian, emphasizing disconnection from domination. (Gorringer, 2013)

#### **3.1. Ambedkar and the Quest for Rights**

In 1953, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, the chief architect of the Indian constitution and a leading figure in the Dalit movement, articulated the need for social rights and the significance of quality education as an avenue toward advancement. Born a member of the Mahar community in western Maharashtra (an untouchable caste) and encountering caste-based discrimination from a young age, Ambedkar's revolution strikingly differed from others premised on religion, class, or nationality. His life unfolded at the intersection of three seminal uprisings: the independence struggle against British colonial rule, the birth of Buddhism as a significant religious alternative in India, and the Dalit movement aimed at social equality and justice. Over the decades, Ambedkar developed a comprehensive social philosophy and radical critique of Indian society, through which he consistently bestowed a predominantly egalitarian dimension to contemporary political discourses in India.

Ambedkar urged Dalits, as oppressed human beings, to ensure the dignity of their disturbed existence before striving to secure other rights basic to humankind. He argued that the quest of social rights ought to supersede all other rights down to the establishment of fraternity in order to secure a dignified life free from oppression. An initial venture into political activism came through his engagement in the independence movement when he was asked to serve as one of the untouchable representatives to the British Round Table Conference in London (Aditya, 2019).

#### **3.2. Periyar and Dalit Philosophy**

Periyar E. V. Ramasami (1879–1973), a prominent social reformer in Tamil Nadu, launched the Self-Respect Movement in 1925 to combat Brahmin hegemony in society and the economy. While he

addressed issues of caste and class in Tamil society and beyond, he maintained a philosophy—dubbed ‘Dravidian’—close to Marxism that emphasized the centrality of anti-Brahmin and anti-North Indian struggles in the liberation of the oppressed. Despite Periyar’s movement achieving some success, it often did not resonate with untouchables, suggesting that the Dalit experience, while shaped by Brahmin hegemony, was broader than Periyar’s philosophy encompassed. Building on early influences, B. R. Ambedkar systematized Hindu scaffolding into a model of caste hierarchy based on social, economic, and political relations among groups. The Dalit experience within Hinduism transcended the Tamil socio-historical context and continued into the post-colonial period (Gorringer, 2013).

### **3.3. Systemic Interpretation: Gramsci, Foucault, and Subaltern Studies**

Studies of modernity in history, political science, and cultural studies reveal that there is no single model for understanding class, economic exploitation, and labor struggles. Scholars influenced by Gramsci, particularly those connected to the “cultural turn,” analyze macro-structures like capitalism and colonialism differently. While global capitalism presents barriers for postcolonial subaltern subjects, coloniality creates obstacles to their participation in national narratives. The legitimacy of the subaltern concept and the varying agency of subaltern subjects form a significant interpretive angle. Those studying the “subaltern” emphasize agency as crucial, as the term, linked to Gramsci, denotes individuals in precarious positions—like exploited migrant workers—who are often hindered by economic crises that prompt emigration. Critiques from Edward Said have led Spivak to use “subaltern” to analyze how “third-world” women are silenced under imperialism, arguing that identifying subjects, such as “women,” risks being overly simplistic. In edited collections by Spivak and others, “subaltern” encompasses various roles and subjects hindered by colonial conditions from expressing their will. (Navarro Tejero, 2004)

## **4. Organizational Structures and Milestones**

Movement scholars identify three dimensions of the Dalit movement: organizational structures, historical milestones, and theoretical frameworks. Organizational analysis reveals political mobilization, party formation, social movements, grassroots practices, and legal reforms. Key historical milestones encompass challenges related to caste, Dalit identity formation, and the universalist versus particularist debate, alongside Marxist influences. Theoretical frameworks consider the pursuit of rights, Dalit philosophy critiquing Brahminism, and subaltern analyses informed by Gramsci, Foucault, and Spivak. Political mobilization began in 1935 with legislative Act elections, leading to Ambedkar's party in 1936. The struggle for a separate electorate (1942-46) highlighted caste consciousness. The 1942 Scheduled Castes Federation marked Dalit political emergence. Post-independence, Ambedkar's Republican Party garnered significant support, and the 1971 merger of vocational forwards with untouchables became key for Dalit mobilization. (D. Brown & Sitapati, 2008)(Kharel, 2007)(Kenneth Carroll Conlon, 2016)

### **4.1. Political Mobilization and Party Formation**

The effort to assemble Dalits in opposition to the British led to the formation of the first Dalit party, the Scheduled Castes Federation, in 1942, but it lacked a popular base (Gorringer, 2013). In 1934, the All India Depressed Classes Conference in Pune had recognised the need to convene a political conference for the Dalits, but this did not take place. After Independence, the All India Scheduled Castes Federation was constituted in 1942 and affiliated with the Indian National Congress. Among its significant numbers in the Madras presidency the federation was considerably weak in the state of Travancore. The Indian National Congress had recommended that two women, who were members of the Federation, should be nominated to the Travancore Legislative Assembly. The adjustment to the change was quite fast. More people got involved in the movement only when they saw leaders like M. C. Rajah and C. S. M. Chakkarai taking active participation in Travancore because they happened to be the members of the federation party.

#### **4.2. Social Movements and Grassroots Practices**

In the Dalit movement, the police system seems protective, but it acts selectively. In 1927, Ambedkar led the historical Mahad Satyagraha to secure drinking water rights, which the state did not accept. Sometimes the police oppose Dalit assertions, but much of the time they support them, especially on educational and temple-access issues. Police remain involved in disputes over land, quotas, temple access, and highway drainage. A critical analysis reveals that, as a system of power that operates through institutions, protocols, and personnel, the state cannot be reduced to a source of repression. It provides openings and avenues for negotiation, and even perspectives for conceptualizing alternatives (Funahashi & Ishizaka, 2013).

#### **4.3. Legal Reforms and Policy Impacts**

Since the Constitution of India was enacted on January 26, 1950, various legislative measures have aimed at empowering the scheduled caste (SC) community. Key laws include the Protection of Civil Rights Act (1976), the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act (1989), and the Employment of Manual Scavengers (Prohibition) Act (1993), along with the Maternity Benefit Act (1961) and the Dalit Areas Development Programme (1979). The 73rd and 74th amendments reserved 33% of local self-government seats for women. These measures sought to address the longstanding disadvantages faced by SCs in education, employment, and political representation, fostering equal opportunities. However, after fifteen years of applying antidiscrimination legislation, advocates have pinpointed cultural laws, political ignorance, and a lack of support for Dalit culture and language in higher education as significant obstacles to fulfilling the constitutional promise of equality. ((Rachel) Kurian & (David) Singh, 2017)(D. Brown & Sitapati, 2008)

#### **5. The Dalit Movement in Contemporary India**

Caste-based discrimination is a serious concern in modern India. The term Dalit, meaning oppressed, encompasses communities marginalized by the caste system. The Dalit movement has significantly influenced modern India. Many movements have emerged to combat caste-based discrimination and establish basic rights for Dalits, leading to the establishment of organizations

like the Scheduled Caste Federation, the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe Association of India, and the Bahujan Samaj Party. Political mobilization for reservation rights predates India's independence. The constitution guarantees equality to all citizens, yet discrimination persists against Dalit communities. Specific economic policies have detrimental effects on Dalits, making these communities more vulnerable to global socioeconomic developments (D. Brown & Sitapati, 2008).

Despite the welfare policies created since independence, the situation of Dalits remains deplorable. Dalit women experience triple deprivation due to the combined effects of caste, class, and gender. They invented horrifying words to depict their socio-economic status. Several instances highlight the extent of violence perpetrated on Dalit women and communities. Policies pertaining to gender, environment, and development are devoid of any issue related to Dalit women. The notion of empowerment has different connotations within the Dalit communities. Such cases amplify the urgent need for the Dalit movement on the Indian social, economic, and political landscape (Sadana Sabharwal & Sonalkar, 2015).

## **6. Global Resonances and Diasporic Perspectives**

The Dalit movement has global resonance, inspiring marginalized groups in the Global South, including Mexico, Brazil, Jamaica, Senegal, and Mali, who relate their struggles against caste or race to the Dalit pursuit of equality. While the Indian context is uniquely shaped by its socio-historical factors, the Dalit struggle informs movements elsewhere, raising questions about its broader significance and adaptability to different cultures and regions. Outside India, the Dalit concept supports "young social movements" advocating for oppressed rights. In Brazil, there are increasing calls for research on the Dalit Movement in relation to Afro-Brazilians' historical struggles. Other Caribbean, Latin American, and African nations also grapple with caste-like systems. For example, Mali seeks appropriate terms to address caste discrimination. Such countries with complex caste or race dynamics raise similar questions. Works like the *Traité des célèbres et célèbres de l'Empire du Mali* and the Guinean novel *Le dernier espoir critique* caste discrimination, highlighting the plight of those seen as "born slaves" denied "human rights." (Mishra, 2019)

## **7. Critical Assessments and Future Trajectories**

Even after the Dalit chief minister's passing, the term "Dalit" has significantly evolved in contemporary politics, much like "Bahujan," which now demands stricter criteria for inclusion. New terms such as "Tribal," "Indigenous," and "Scheduled Tribes" highlight the ecological imbalance and enrich the stark realities, prompting further reflection to transcend anticipated Kafkaesque crises. Caste operates on a long-established social evolutionary framework rooted in ancient Indian civilization, with true liberation feeling like a distant mirage. Some have unlinked "man" from "independent." Both the "Dalit movement" and the "multi-dimensional Dalit movement" appear limited in scope, with the focus shifting to the pressing question of what to dismantle next. The evolution of Neo-Buddhism illustrates the struggle against the comfortable unaccountability humans

hold. The panchayathi elections on Independence Day exemplified a need for progress, yet the viability of any future Dalit movement remains in question, overshadowed by commercial concerns. The nature of humanity, capable of mutual support, seems stagnant, as free will dissipates before realization, suggesting that the Dalit movement is trapped in a paradox of inclusion both at macro and micro levels.

## **8. Conclusion**

Despite being marginalized from mainstream narratives, Dalits have a rich tradition of social thought. Their struggle against caste oppression has led to reflections on rights, democracy, dignity, community, and national identity. Recently, Dalit thinkers have acknowledged the negative impacts of global capitalism, marked by economic inequality, environmental degradation, and cultural dislocation, critically engaging with the paradox of “development.” The Dalit movement is an ongoing effort, as birth-conferred status continues to influence the lives and aspirations of many. The interplay of caste with class, gender, and religion impacts access to education and empowerment. Inter-caste marriage remains rare, and the dominance of caste language hampers political endeavors. Nonetheless, the creativity and resilience of contemporary Dalit cultural expression highlight the strength of this movement. (Sadana Sabharwal & Sonalkar, 2015)

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