

# Emancipation of Dalits in pre-independence India

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## Abstract

The Indian Caste System is historically one of the main dimensions where people in India are socially differentiated through class, religion, region, tribe, gender, and language. Although this or other forms of differentiation exist in all human societies, it becomes a problem when one or more of these dimensions overlap each other and become the sole basis of systematic ranking and unequal access to valued resources like wealth, income, power and prestige. The Indian Caste System is considered a closed system of stratification, which means that a person's social status is obligated to which caste they were born into. There are limits on interaction and behavior with people from another social status. Its history is massively related to one of the prominent religions in India, Hinduism, and has been altered in many ways during the Buddhist revolution and under British rule. This paper will be exploring the various aspects of the Indian caste system related to its hierarchy, its history, and its effects on India today.

India social structure is based on caste system. It is matter of shame that the Indian culture, which gave the message of world-brotherhood, but call some of its own brothers untouchables. After independence, the influence of caste in political field has increased. Whereas, the influence of casteism in social and economic life (such as the standard of living of dalits, poverty, education, literacy, income, employment, health) has decreased to some extent, in politics it has increased. The study has been framed with the objective to access the influence of casteism on social and economic life of the dalits and with special reference to Indian politics. Indian politics changed dramatically after the Mandal commission issue hit the national consciousness. In the present paper we have tried to explore movements of dalit in India and provisions made in the constitution of India for improving the conditions of dalits to bring them at par with other members of society and with the objective to access the influence of casteism not on social and economic life of the dalits and with special reference to Indian politics. For this purpose data was collected through secondary sources. We have found that as the development movements of dalits is increasing day by day and the role of casteism is also influencing Indian democracy.

*Keywords: caste, activism, dalit, mobilize, Adi-Karnataka*

## Introduction

Though attempts were begun by the dalit castes from the late 19th century to organise themselves, the various sections of the dalit liberation movement really began to take off from the 1920s, in the context of the strong social reform and anti-caste movements which were penetrating the middle-caste peasantry and the national movement which was beginning to develop a genuine mass base.

The most important of the early dalit movements were the Ad-Dharm movement in the Punjab (organised 1926); the movement under Ambedkar in Maharashtra mainly based among Mahars which had its organisational beginnings in 1924; the Nama-shudra movement in Bengal; the Adi-Dravida movement in Tamil Nadu; the Adi-Andhra movement in Andhra which had its first conference in 1917; the Adi-Karnataka movement; the Adi-Hindu movement mainly centered around Kanpur in UP; and the organising of the Pulayas and Cherumans in Kerala.

In most of the cases the Montagu-Chelmsford reforms provided a spark for the organization of dalits but the crucial background was the massive economic and political upheavals of the post-war period. The movements had a linguistic-national organisational base and varied according to the specific social characteristics in different areas, but there was considerable all-India exchange of ideas and, by the 1930s, this was beginning to take the shape of all-India conferences with Ambedkar emerging as the clear national leader of the movement. The founding of the Scheduled Castes Federation in 1942, and its later conversion into the Republican Party, gave dalits a genuine all-India political organisation — though this remained weak except in certain specific localities and did not by any means constitute the entire dalit movement.

### **Objective:**

this paper seeks to study the prevailing conditions of the Dalits in pre-independence movement

### **Conditions for Social reformation**

The social reform and anti-caste movements played an important nurturing and facilitating — though often an ambivalent — role in relation to the dalits. Thus the movements in Maharashtra and Madras to a significant extent came out of, and were influenced by the non-Brahmin movements in those areas, especially their radical sections — the Satyashodhak Samaj and Self-Respect movements. The Punjabi Ad-Dharm leaders had nearly all been previously in the Arya Samaj. Brahmo Samaj upper-caste reformers helped to instigate and aid the Nama-shudra movement and the Adi-Andhras. Dalits in Kerala were influenced and helped by the Ezhava-based movement under Sri Narayana Guru.

Thus, whereas the Punjabi Ad-Dharm movement broke with the Arya Samaj both organisationally and ideologically (though the Arya Samaj itself continued to foster some anti-untouchability activities), the dalit movements of the south and west accepted and even carried forward the general ideology of the broader non-Brahmin movements but criticised the middle-caste non-Brahmins for betraying this ideology and falling prey to Brahmanic culture as well as to pure self-interest in gaining government jobs and posts.

Thus, in Maharashtra, Ambedkar's movement developed with support from leaders such as Shahu Maharaj and with many activists coming from the Satyashodhak movement and out of schools founded by non-Brahmin leaders. Ambedkar frequently referred to himself as a 'non-Brahmin' (not simply an 'untouchable') scholar, and became a spokesman in the legislative assembly for all the non-Brahmin ('backward' and 'depressed classes' in British terminology) groups. His Marathi speeches often used the shetji-bhatji terminology of the Satyashodhak movement. Yet he consistently criticised the opportunism of non-Brahmin leaders and, in the end, after the non-Brahmin movement was absorbed into the Congress party under Gandhi's leadership and its radical elements forgotten, the separatism in Ambedkar's movement came to dominate.

In Madras, educated dalits were part of the Justice Party; but a rift grew after the party won power, partly stimulated by disputes in a textile mill strike and partly due to charges that the Justice Party was not giving sufficient representation to them but was monopolizing posts for higher caste non-Brahmins. M C Rajah, the most prominent untouchable leader, withdrew with his followers; though after this many participated in E V Ramasami's Self-Respect movement which represented the more radical thrust of the non-Brahmin movement.

In Punjab, the young educated Chamars who founded the Ad-Dharm movement had first been in the Arya Samaj, attracted by some of its ideals which held open the promise of purification (shuddhi) to the low castes, then became disillusioned by the control of upper castes in the movement and rejected completely the paternalistic implication of shuddhi that untouchables needed to be 'purified'. The pattern of these regional configurations needs to be more thoroughly studied.

But, in contrast to the ambivalence of the dalits' relations with caste-Hindu-based anti-caste movements, their relationship to the national movement was, even worse, an antagonistic one. The fact was that, with the notable exception of Kerala where the Congress leaders themselves undertook anti-caste campaigns, almost everywhere the Congress leadership was in the hands of upper-caste social conservatives who were often not simply indifferent to dalit demands but actively resisted them. Thus dalit spokesmen were inclined to argue that "British rule was preferable to Brahmin rule" and to look for any means — special representation, separate electorates, alliance with Muslims - that might prevent them from being swamped by caste Hindu nationalists.

### **The Rise of Dalit Movements**

It has to be stressed that this alienation from the organised national movement (the Congress) was not just the result of the self-interest of a few leaders but was a widespread opinion wherever dalits were organised on militant lines, and that the Congress leadership up through the time of Independence did almost nothing to heal the split and build up dalit confidence and unity. Though dalits under Ambedkar did take a nationalist position, it was as a result of their own conviction that Independence was necessary.

These movements then organised struggles in various ways over the rejection of all the forms of feudal bondage imposed on dalits. The most spectacular mass campaigns in the 1920s were efforts at the ritual level, i e, to break down the restrictions barring dalits from use of common temples and water tanks. The biggest, and very carefully planned, campaigns took place in Maharashtra (the Mahad tank satyagraha of 1927 which culminated in the burning of the Manusmriti, the Parvati temple satyagraha of 1928, and the Kalaram temple satyagraha in Nasik of 1930-35) and in Kerala (the Vaikom temple road satyagraha of 1924-25 and the Guruvayoor satyagraha of 1930-32).

Thus the movements were highly involved in founding schools, hostels, and other educational associations; and they consistently demanded fellowships, positions in existing educational institutions and reserved government jobs. The final outcome of this was the system of 'concessions' which has become so controversial today. It is important to note that such concessions were necessary, because existing caste discrimination (caste and kin-based recruitment pattern and the cultural as well as economic disabilities of the low castes) had resulted in a heavily divided working class.

**Dalits and the National Movement: The Issue of Power**

"We want to become a ruling community", was a saying of Ambedkar, and in fact the drive to achieve power or a share in power was seen by him and by many not simply as the negation of the extreme feudal subjugation of dalits but as the basis for achieving any other kind of gain. But, because the national movement did not consciously organise to build alternative revolutionary systems of power in which dalits would find a place, this demand for a share in power became expressed in the demand for special, separate representation within the bourgeois parliamentary forms being institutionalized in India. An additional motivating fact was the strong feeling among dalits that they must represent themselves, that caste Hindus could not be trusted to represent them (nor for that matter could the British government), that the nature of caste and class conflict was so great that no caste Hindus could speak for their interests.

The conflict took specific form in the dalit demand for separate electorates (constituencies only of dalits choosing dalit representatives to the parliament) versus the original nationalist unwillingness to concede anything until finally a 'compromise' of reserved seats (dalit representatives chosen by general, i.e., caste Hindu plus dalit, constituencies) was forced on them. The issue here was different from that of separate electorates for Muslims because there was at no point a dalit demand, or the possibility of a demand, for a separate homeland. Rather, the question was one of how to achieve the unity of the Indian nation. Gandhi's firm opposition to separate electorates, too, had nothing to do with the threat to Indian unity but rather the threat to Hindu unity and came from his religiously motivated insistence that dalits were part of the Hindu community.

It might also be added that the idea of separate electorates, or "functional" representation of specific social groups or classes, was one that went beyond bourgeois democratic forms entirely and in a sense could be seen as an aspect of proletarian democracy, whereas reserved seats not only allowed caste Hindu control of dalit political representation (as Ambedkar so bitterly and effectively established in "What Congress and Gandhi Have Done to the Untouchables") but also proved an ideal method for the bourgeois State to absorb and negate the dalit movement, giving dalits some semblance of power within the bourgeois framework but at the cost of giving up militancy. The issue, however, was very rarely seen in this way. Instead, considerations of power prevailed (the upper class/caste drive to control the legislatures through control of Congress, and the fact that dalits did not simply have the same political clout as Muslims); the demand for separate electorates was seen by most non-dalits as one leading to separatism and disunity.

Here it is worth noting that, when Ambedkar and Gandhi met for the first time in 1930, Ambedkar not only felt he had been treated rudely, but Gandhi himself admitted that he had not known that Ambedkar himself was a dalit but thought rather that he was a Brahmin social reformer aiding the untouchables! In other words, Gandhi had not only done substantially nothing himself on the issue of untouchability up to this time, but he betrayed a crucial ignorance of the movement which had been going on for over a decade and of its leadership. Indeed he unwittingly betrayed his assumption that dalits themselves were incapable of doing much on their own or of producing their own leadership, Ambedkar, therefore, insisted on separate electorates. Gandhi insisted equally adamantly that dalits were Hindus and must be represented by Hindus as a whole (and

was met on his return from London by a black-flag demonstration of 8,000 Bombay dalits). The British Communal Award gave Ambedkar his separate electorates; and Gandhi undertook his fast-to-death in protest. Here again it has to be stressed that this first fast over the 'issue' of untouchability was not a fast against the British for nationalist causes or against the oppressive caste system, but was a fast against dalits themselves to force them to give up their demands. Ambedkar conceded—knowing that if Gandhi died there would be massive reprisals on his people throughout India—and the result was the Poona Pact of September 25, 1932, which as a compromise gave dalits the reserved seats that Ambedkar had demanded in the first place. For dalits and for Ambedkar, the lesson was clear: not a faith in the ability of satyagraha to 'change the hearts' of caste Hindus, rather that only by fighting for their rights would dalits win anything at all.

After 1932, Gandhi made 'untouchability work' a major programme of the Congress and for many a crucial moral part of the Indian national movement. And yet Gandhi's essential paternalism and insistence that above all dalits were Hindus remained in the choice of the term 'Harijan', in the insistence that caste Hindus and not dalits should control the Harijan Sevak Sangh.

However 'radical' Gandhi's own views on caste became (in approving of inter-dining and inter-marriage, for example), he never dropped the belief in chaturvarnya or the idea that children should follow their fathers' professions, themes that stood in direct contradiction to the anti-feudal principles of the dalit movement. Even worse, anti-untouchability became identified with the Gandhian, that is the conservative wing of the Congress and remained a distraction and diversion to the radicals within Congress (and for that matter the communist Left) who never developed a programme of their own on the issue of caste.

In 1917 — after the first depressed classes' conferences were organised in Bombay, and dalits as well as non-Brahmins made proposals for separate electorates—the Congress reversed its policy of excluding 'social reform' and passed a resolution urging upon "the people of India the necessity, justice and righteousness of removing all disabilities imposed by custom upon the Depressed Classes". In the 1920s, the governments of Madras and Bombay (controlled or influenced by non-Brahmin organisations) passed resolutions confirming the rights of dalits to equal use of government facilities, schools and wells; so did several progressive princely states. These did little, however, to provide reinforcement, and remained almost totally ineffective. In 1931, the Karachi Congress session propounded a programme of fundamental rights which called for equal access for all to public employment etc, regardless of caste, and equal right to use of public roads, wells, schools, and other facilities. Temple entry bills were introduced between 1932-36 in the Central Assembly, Madras and Bombay legislatures and generally met with opposition from both the government and conservatives in Congress. Baroda and Travancore states proclaimed temple entry in 1933 and 1936. In 1938, after Congress legislatures were elected, temple entry bills were passed in Madras and Bombay.

### **Dalits and the Left: The Issue of Land**

The relation between the dalit movement and the emerging communist and Left movement was, unfortunately, little better than that with the national movement. The Left evolved no programme of its own, regarding the abolition of caste. And, in regard to working class organizing, a history of antagonism was built up. The major exception was in fighting feudalism in

agrarian relations where the All India Kisan Sabha (AIKS) programme did make an important contribution. This, however, remained partial and isolated from the organised dalit movement.

A category of 'agricultural labourers' was identified and this presumably included almost all dalit toilers, but they were seen in European terms as peasants dispossessed of the land. The Kisan Sabha leadership was ambiguous about their inclusion, but where they argued for unity of interest between 'kisans' and 'agricultural labourers' it was in terms of the fact that middle-poor peasants were rapidly becoming impoverished, losing lands, and becoming landless labourers. The special, traditional, position of dalit field servants with their hereditary connection to the land was simply not taken note of. A 1947 AIKS resolution on the abolition of landlordism stated: "All agricultural labourers must have a minimum wage. All other tillers of the soil must get proprietary rights in it under their direct cultivation, and cultivable waste land must be distributed among poor peasants and agricultural labourers".

Thus, while, dalits here were somewhat ambiguously seen as 'tillers' they were not considered to have any rights in the land at all; only their wage interests were to be protected and their land hunger satisfied by leftover — i e, 'waste' — land. Thus, in spite of the participation of poor peasants and landless toilers in Kisan Sabha agitation, it is not surprising — because only middle-caste cultivating peasants were seen as having rights in the land — that the end result was land reforms which even in their most radical version (e g Kerala) have benefited rich peasants. 'Land to the tiller', then, systematically excluded dalits. On the other side, the dalit movement itself also took up the issue of land, but in an equally partial way. Campaigns against veth-begar and specific menial and degrading caste duties (carrying away dead cattle, serving officials) were, as noted above, an important part of the movement and were, of course, equivalent to the AIKS opposition to 'feudal forced labour'. But generally these were undertaken by the dalit movement in such a way that the alternative was seen, not as revolutionary land reform in the villages or transformation of the villages, but rather as moving from the villages altogether to new jobs in industry and service. The inability to see any real opportunity for advance within the village was, of course, realistic in the absence of a revolutionary movement. No direct struggles for land for dalits were apparently taken up before Independence, but as far as Ambedkar at least was concerned it seems the issue of land was always present. Again, though it was a question of looking beyond the village, in one of his earlier meetings he argued that dalits should look for land for colonization. In later meetings, he considered the possibility of settlements in Sind. The climax of this, however, came in 1942 at the conference which founded the Scheduled Caste Federation when a resolution was passed on separate village settlements. This was a demand that dalits from all the villages in one area (later sometimes specified as a taluka) should be given land (to be provided both from unoccupied government land and from land bought up by the government for the purpose) so that they could form independent settlements of their own. This has come to be known as the 'dalitstan' demand.

## Conclusion

One of the most striking features of the anti-feudal movement in colonial India was its fragmentation — a fragmentation which reflected the divisions among the exploited sections that were so characteristic of Indian caste feudalism. While social reform and anti-caste movements arose throughout India, and all provided some kind of ground for dalits to begin to move ahead, the non-Brahmin movements of south and west India posed a genuine possibility of a radical movement against caste traditions that could unify both caste Hindu toilers and dalits. Their ideology itself and the principles of their most radical

organisations — the Satyashodhak Samaj and the Self-Respect movement — posed a thorough challenge to caste hierarchy and in fact provided the central ideological themes for the dalit movements. But such unity did not materialize as the more conservative wing of these movements gained strength among caste Hindu peasants and educated sections. It might have been expected that a national movement, dominated by bourgeois and upper-caste forces would prove resistant to dalit demands and respond only in a nominal and co-opting way. Most serious really was the failure of the Left to provide a radical and unifying anti-feudal alternative. The communists organised the working class in its struggle for survival and at points this organisation aided the lowest sections of that class, but they failed really to put the working class politically in the leadership of the anti-feudal movement and as a result the class remains divided and the organisation benefited mainly its skilled and more upper-caste sections.

Kisan Sabha organizing, in its areas of strength, benefited dalits more directly. The fight against feudal forced-labour struck at bondage within the village; the organisation of agricultural labourers, which had its beginnings in the 1940s, also involved a challenge to feudal servitude: as a Kerala landlord put it, "His body and his father's body are my property and he dares to ask for wages. Is it right?"

Still the achievements of the dalit movement are impressive, and are too often overlooked. They have given birth to a tradition of struggle in many areas, not only on cultural and ritual issues but on breaking feudal bonds. They have mounted powerful pressure on the national movement resulting in constitutional provisions for reservations and laws making untouchability an offence; unsatisfactory as these have been, they have still provided weapons in the hands of low-caste organizers. They have created a deep-seated conviction of equality and self-confidence which is inevitably making itself heard. If this has not yet achieved a revolutionary transformation in the life of the most exploited sections of society, it is because of the incompleteness of the revolutionary and democratic movement itself. If this is to go forward, the dalit movement will inevitably be a part of it.

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