

# Caste, Colonialism, And Contested Modernity: Politicization Of Identity In The Madras Presidency, 1870–1947

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## Abstract

This article analyzes how colonial governance in the Madras Presidency transformed caste into a modern political identity between 1870 and 1947, with a focus on Telugu-speaking districts. It argues that the colonial state's knowledge practices—especially the census and ethnographic classification—reified locally flexible social relations into standardized categories of rule, while agrarian revenue policies consolidated material power for dominant cultivating castes. Caste associations harnessed the opportunities of education, professional employment, and limited representative politics to pursue upward mobility, often by combining Western institutional forms with Sanskritic idioms of status. At the same time, radical anti-caste currents—from Phule and Periyar to Ambedkar—mounted a systematic critique of graded inequality, yet remained politically constrained by agrarian dependencies and the priorities of nationalist mobilization. The article concludes that colonial modernity did not dissolve caste; it politicized it, leaving institutional and discursive legacies that shaped postcolonial democracy.

## Keywords

Caste; colonialism; Madras Presidency; Telugu regions; agrarian political economy; census; caste associations; anti-caste movements; identity politics.

## Introduction

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Madras Presidency became a laboratory of colonial modernity. The British did not simply administer territory; they reshaped the categories through which society could be known, counted, and governed. Caste—long embedded in local economies, ritual life, and kinship—was increasingly reworked into an object of state classification and a medium of political action.<sup>1</sup>

This transformation was neither automatic nor unidirectional. Colonial knowledge practices stabilized categories that were often situational in everyday life, but communities themselves learned to contest these classifications, to petition for recognition, and to translate status claims into material and political advantages.<sup>2</sup>

This article advances two connected claims. First, colonial interventions created a new arena of “status competition” by tying caste labels to access—directly or indirectly—to education, employment, land, and representation. Second, this arena generated a “conflict for identity,” because the state's classificatory practices

invited rival communities to negotiate, dispute, and harden boundaries. In the Telugu-speaking districts of the Presidency, agrarian castes such as the Kammas, Reddys, and Velamas mobilized modern caste associations to consolidate land, sponsor education, and bargain for office. Their ascent, however, rarely challenged the underlying hierarchy; indeed, it often depended on it.<sup>3</sup>

At the same time, anti-caste currents articulated a more radical critique. From Phule's emphasis on truth-seeking and the exposure of Brahmanical domination, to Periyar's Self-Respect politics, and Ambedkar's theory of graded inequality, these movements demanded not mobility within hierarchy but the transformation of the social order itself. Yet in much of the Telugu region, where agrarian dependency and dominant-caste politics structured everyday life, radical anti-caste politics was often contained, co-opted, or fragmented.<sup>4</sup>

The analysis proceeds by linking the epistemic work of colonial classification to the political economy of land revenue and the associational politics of caste. It then assesses the limits of mobility, and the conditions under which anti-caste claims were marginalized within broader provincial and nationalist politics.<sup>5</sup>

### **Colonial Knowledge and the Codification of Caste**

By the late nineteenth century, colonial administration increasingly justified itself through a language of scientific governance. The state's "civilizing mission" emphasized order, rationality, and the production of authoritative knowledge about Indian society.<sup>6</sup> Within this epistemic project, caste appeared as the presumed fundamental unit of social organization. Enumerating caste promised a map of society that could be made legible to government: a grid of communities, each with a name, a rank, and a presumed set of customs.<sup>7</sup>

The census was the most consequential instrument in this transformation. From 1871 onward, the decennial census required individuals to declare a single caste identity that could be recorded, tabulated, and published. Such enumeration imposed fixity: locally variable jati affiliations and occupational identities were compressed into standardized labels, often ranked in official reports.<sup>8</sup>

The effect of this bureaucratic requirement was political as well as descriptive. Once caste rankings appeared in print, they offered a state-sanctioned schema of precedence. Communities learned to lobby enumerators and census superintendents, seeking higher placement through claims of Kshatriya or Vaishya descent, the production of genealogies, and the adoption of Sanskrit markers such as vegetarianism or the sacred thread.<sup>9</sup> In the Telugu-speaking districts, analogous contests surfaced among prominent cultivating groups. Claims to martial or Kshatriya origins, and efforts to narrate respectable histories, reveal how colonial classification created incentives for status engineering. The census thus became a "theater of numbers," where demographic strength and ritual rank could be translated into political claims.<sup>1011</sup>

### **Agrarian Political Economy and the Consolidation of Dominant Castes**

Colonial knowledge practices were reinforced by agrarian policies that reorganized property, credit, and authority in the countryside. Two revenue regimes—Zamindari and Ryotwari—worked in different ways to consolidate wealth among elites and to intensify dependency among the poor.<sup>12</sup>

Where Zamindari arrangements prevailed, the colonial state recognized selected intermediaries as hereditary landlords, granting legal property rights over large estates in exchange for a fixed revenue payment. Such recognition translated social precedence into enforceable ownership, producing a rentier class whose authority was secured by colonial law and backed by administrative coercion.<sup>13</sup>

Ryotwari policy, dominant in much of the Presidency, was framed as a direct relationship between the state and the cultivator. Yet its cash revenue demands and inflexible assessments disproportionately burdened marginal cultivators during years of scarcity. Debt, distress sales, and land alienation enabled those with capital and networks—often from dominant cultivating castes—to expand holdings and to enter commercial agriculture.<sup>14</sup> By the early twentieth century, the countryside witnessed the rise of a rich peasant proprietary class, constituted through land accumulation and the conversion of agrarian surplus into education and political influence. Dominant castes could invest in schooling, law, and bureaucratic careers while maintaining control over local institutions and labor markets.<sup>15</sup>

For Dalits—especially Malas and Madigas—these shifts deepened landlessness and vulnerability. Their dependence on dominant-caste landlords for work, housing, and credit reproduced exploitative relations under a new legal form, since colonial property law largely protected owners rather than laborers. In this context, caste status and economic class became mutually reinforcing, even as colonial discourse framed caste as “tradition” rather than as a political economy.<sup>16</sup>

### **Caste Associations and Selective Modernity in the Telugu Regions**

From the 1890s, caste associations (sanghams and mahajana sabhas) proliferated across the Presidency. In the Telugu country, organizations such as the Kamma Mahajana Sabha and the Reddy Sangham emerged as influential vehicles for collective advancement. They adopted modern institutional forms—written constitutions, conferences, printed proceedings, and petitions—while retaining caste solidarity as their organizing principle.<sup>17</sup>

These associations pursued a practical agenda. First, they promoted Western education as a route into government service and the professions. Scholarships, hostels, and school-building converted agrarian wealth into educational capital, and educational capital into offices that enhanced collective prestige.<sup>18</sup>

Second, they sought economic consolidation. Cooperative credit, advocacy for irrigation, and the spread of improved agricultural techniques were framed as community uplift. Such initiatives also reduced dependence on rival intermediaries, including merchant moneylenders, and strengthened the capacity of dominant castes to invest in commercial crops and land acquisition.<sup>19</sup>

Third, they engaged in political bargaining. As representative institutions expanded in the early twentieth century, associations learned to lobby for recruitment, public works, and local appointments. Their petitions reveal how caste began to operate as an interest group within a colonial public sphere, translating community claims into administrative demands.<sup>20</sup>

This engagement with modernity was selective. Associations enthusiastically adopted the instrumental aspects of colonial modernity—education, bureaucratic rationality, associational life, and electoral negotiation—while largely rejecting its egalitarian implications. Their public rhetoric often celebrated “progress,” but progress was frequently imagined as the elevation of the caste within existing hierarchies rather than the transformation of hierarchy itself.<sup>21</sup>

Indeed, upward mobility often combined Westernization with Sanskritization. While schooling and professional careers offered new forms of authority, ritual reforms (standardizing ceremonies, promoting vegetarianism, policing marriage practices) offered symbolic capital. By emulating Brahminical norms, dominant castes could claim higher status without challenging graded inequality. This was mobility through imitation and incorporation, not through structural critique.<sup>22</sup>

The consequences for Dalit claims were severe. Dominant-caste associations were generally ambivalent or hostile toward measures that threatened ritual boundaries or labor control, including demands for equal access to public resources or temple entry. When reform did occur, it often took paternalistic forms that left the architecture of dominance intact.<sup>23</sup>

### **Anti-Caste Politics: Radical Critiques and Political Constraints**

In the same period, anti-caste movements articulated a radically different account of modernity—one grounded in equality, dignity, and the critique of Brahminical authority. Jyotirao Phule’s Satyashodhak Samaj, founded in 1873, offered an early and influential model. Phule’s writings challenged caste as a system of domination and linked it to gender inequality and economic exploitation.<sup>24</sup>

In the south, non-Brahmin politics took organizational form through the Justice Party, which sought to challenge Brahmin dominance in education and public employment. The party’s campaigns opened a space for debates about representation and helped institutionalize early forms of communal reservation.<sup>25</sup>

Periyar’s Self-Respect Movement pushed beyond distributive claims to a foundational critique of caste and religion. By attacking ritual authority, advocating rationalism and women’s rights, and promoting self-respect marriages without Brahmin priests, it aimed to disrupt the moral economy of caste. Although its strongest base lay in Tamil districts, its influence circulated more widely through print culture and political debate.<sup>26</sup>

Ambedkar’s intervention was more systematic still. For Ambedkar, caste constituted a regime of graded inequality embedded in Hindu social order. Political freedom without social democracy, he argued, would leave the most oppressed without substantive liberty. His insistence on the annihilation of caste set him in conflict with elite nationalist priorities that privileged unity against colonial rule over internal social transformation.<sup>27</sup> The confrontation over separate electorates for the Depressed Classes in the early 1930s revealed the structural limits of nationalist inclusion. Ambedkar’s critique of Congress and Gandhi’s politics underscored how joint electorates could subordinate Dalit representatives to the preferences of caste-Hindu majorities.<sup>28,29</sup>

In the Telugu regions, several factors constrained the growth of a mass anti-caste movement on the scale seen

in Tamil Nadu or Maharashtra. Agrarian dependence made independent mobilization costly; caste divisions within Dalit communities weakened organizational unity; and reformist Hindu projects sought incorporation within a “reformed” Hinduism rather than the dismantling of caste. The combined effect was that anti-caste critique often remained episodic or mediated through broader nationalist and reformist frameworks.<sup>303132</sup>

### **Colonial Legacies and Postcolonial Continuities**

Independence in 1947 did not dissolve the categories forged in the late colonial period. Instead, they were re-embedded in the architecture of democratic governance. The constitutional abolition of untouchability and the introduction of reservations for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes were historic interventions; yet the administrative use of caste categories for redistribution relied upon classificatory logics sharpened by colonial enumeration.<sup>33</sup>

Electoral politics further amplified identity as a tool of aggregation. Parties constructed “vote banks” and caste coalitions, often translating demographic head counts into patronage strategies and candidate selection. This was not merely an inheritance from “tradition,” but a continuation of forms of political reasoning encouraged by colonial governance, where society had been made legible as an assemblage of communities.<sup>34</sup>

In Andhra Pradesh, the colonial-era consolidation of Kamma and Reddy influence continued to shape party competition and elite formation in the postcolonial decades. Even as democratic participation expanded, the structure of dominance often persisted through control of land, institutions, and political networks.<sup>35</sup>

Finally, colonial knowledge practices left a durable discursive imprint. Orientalist and ethnographic accounts that portrayed caste as timeless and textually grounded shaped how Indians and outsiders alike understood society. The persistence of caste as a dominant explanatory category—sometimes crowding out class or regional political economy—testifies to the power of these inherited frameworks.<sup>36</sup>

### **Conclusion**

Between 1870 and 1947, caste in the Madras Presidency was remade in the crucible of colonial modernity. The census and related classificatory practices did not simply record social realities; they stabilized categories, invited contests over rank, and connected identity claims to administration. At the same time, agrarian revenue regimes consolidated material power among dominant cultivating castes, enabling them to translate land into education and political influence.<sup>37</sup>

Caste associations institutionalized this transformation by adopting modern organizational forms to pursue community advancement. Their selective modernity married Western education and political participation to Sanskritic idioms of status, yielding mobility for some without challenging graded inequality for all. Anti-caste movements articulated a more radical alternative, but in much of the Telugu countryside these claims faced structural constraints rooted in agrarian dependency, fragmentation, and the priorities of nationalist politics.<sup>3839</sup> The central legacy of this history is not the endurance of caste as an ancient survival, but its transformation into a modern political identity. Colonial governance politicized caste by making it legible, countable, and

actionable within institutions of property, education, and representation. Postcolonial democracy inherited and reworked these categories, producing both avenues for redress and new arenas of competition. A historically grounded understanding of this politicization remains essential for contemporary debates on representation, social justice, and the meaning of equality in India.<sup>40</sup>

### Endnotes

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