

Dalit Movement: A Historical Background

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Abstract

The Dalit movement in India emerged as a powerful resistance against the centuries-old system of caste-based discrimination and untouchability. Rooted in social, political, and religious reforms, the movement has evolved from passive reformist tendencies in the 19th century to active assertion and self-respect in the post-Ambedkarite era. This review traces the historical background of the Dalit movement, highlighting the pivotal phases, key leaders, ideological shifts, and the growing consolidation of Dalit identity through literature, politics, and religion. Drawing from scholarly sources published between 2014 and 2025, the paper offers a comprehensive understanding of the historical trajectory of the Dalit movement in India.

Keywords: *Dalit, caste system, social justice, Ambedkar, Dalit movement, untouchability, Bahujan, reform*

I. Introduction

India's social fabric has long been marked by the deeply entrenched caste system, a hierarchical social order that relegated millions of people—later known as Dalits—to the lowest rungs of society. Formerly referred to as "Untouchables," Dalits have faced systematic oppression, social exclusion, and violence for centuries. In this context, the Dalit movement emerged not merely as a political or social protest, but as a civilizational revolution aimed at reclaiming dignity, rights, and identity. The Dalit movement, therefore, represents one of the most profound struggles for equality and human rights in the modern history of India.

The term "Dalit," meaning "broken" or "oppressed," gained prominence during the 20th century but has roots in earlier struggles against caste injustice. Historically, Dalits were deprived of access to education, property, and even basic human rights. Their participation in temples, water sources, and public events was prohibited. This systematic marginalization created fertile ground for resistance and self-assertion, particularly as the socio-political landscape of India began to change during the colonial era.

The roots of the Dalit movement can be traced back to the social reform movements of the 19th century, particularly in western India. Reformers like Jyotirao Phule and Savitribai Phule laid the ideological and organizational foundations by opposing Brahminical dominance and promoting education and self-respect among the so-called lower castes. Jyotirao Phule's Satyashodhak Samaj (Truth-Seekers' Society) called for the abolition of caste hierarchies and gender inequalities, advocating a rationalist and inclusive society. Similarly, Shahu Maharaj of Kolhapur, a progressive ruler, actively promoted education and reservation for non-Brahmin communities.

The advent of British colonial rule, while exploitative in many ways, paradoxically opened up limited avenues for education and political representation for marginalized groups. It was during this time that leaders such as M.C. Rajah and Iyothee Thass began to articulate Dalit demands in formal political spaces. However, it was Dr. B.R. Ambedkar who emerged as the most towering figure in the Dalit movement. His life and work fundamentally redefined Dalit identity and resistance. As a scholar, activist, and the chief architect of the Indian Constitution, Ambedkar brought international attention to the plight of Dalits. He criticized Hinduism's caste order, advocated for separate electorates for Dalits, and emphasized education, political representation, and the annihilation of caste as the essential steps toward liberation.

Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism in 1956, along with hundreds of thousands of followers, marked a radical rupture from Hindu caste ideology and offered Dalits a new spiritual and moral foundation. This event sparked the beginning of what is now called Navayana Buddhism—a modern reinterpretation of Buddhism rooted in social justice and rationality. His ideas continue to influence Dalit thought, movements, and identity politics to this day.

Following India's independence, the Dalit movement entered a new phase. With the institutionalization of affirmative action through reservations in education, employment, and politics, Dalits began to gain a foothold in public life. Political formations such as the Republican Party of India (RPI) sought to carry forward Ambedkar's legacy. The emergence of radical groups like the Dalit Panthers in the 1970s introduced a new, militant assertion rooted in literature, resistance, and coalition-building. In the 1990s, the rise of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP)

further consolidated Dalit political power, especially in northern India, under the leadership of Kanshi Ram and Mayawati.

In recent decades, the Dalit movement has diversified and globalized. Contemporary Dalit activism draws from a wide spectrum of strategies, including legal advocacy, academic scholarship, digital mobilization, and cultural expression. Events such as the institutional death of Rohith Vemula in 2016, the Una flogging incident, and the resurgence of the Bhim Army exemplify the ongoing struggles against caste-based violence and discrimination, even as India positions itself as a modern democracy.

This paper explores the historical background of the Dalit movement, tracing its evolution from early resistance to contemporary assertion. By examining the ideological foundations, key leaders, political developments, and cultural expressions, the review aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how Dalit resistance has shaped—and continues to shape—the social and political contours of India.

II. Caste Oppression and Early Reform Movements

Caste-based discrimination has existed in the Indian subcontinent for over two millennia. In pre-colonial India, Dalits were subjected to untouchability, denied access to temples, education, and economic resources. The 19th-century social reform movements such as those led by Jyotirao Phule, Savitribai Phule, and later Shahu Maharaj in Maharashtra laid the groundwork for resistance. Phule's *Satyashodhak Samaj* (1873) challenged Brahminical dominance and emphasized education and dignity for lower castes (Sathe, 2016; Rao, 2019).

III. Dalit Assertion in the Colonial Period

British colonial rule brought limited educational and political opportunities for Dalits. Leaders like Iyothee Thass and M.C. Rajah began articulating Dalit rights in public discourse. However, it was Dr. B.R. Ambedkar who gave the movement its ideological depth and institutional framework. Through organizations such as the Bahishkrit Hitakarini Sabha (1924), he focused on political rights, education, and social reform. His demand for separate electorates for Dalits during the Round Table Conferences (1930–32) and subsequent Poona Pact (1932) marked a critical phase in Dalit political assertion (Jaffrelot, 2020).

IV. Ambedkar and the Foundations of Modern Dalit Politics

Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, widely regarded as the father of modern Dalit politics, transformed the trajectory of Dalit resistance in India from fragmented social reform to organized political assertion. A jurist, economist, and social reformer of extraordinary intellect, Ambedkar laid the foundational principles of modern Dalit politics by combining the quest for dignity with demands for constitutional and institutional justice. His interventions went far beyond symbolic protest; they carved out a structured ideological framework that continues to guide Dalit mobilization to this day.

Ambedkar's political vision was rooted in the belief that Dalits must attain real power through education, legal rights, and democratic representation. Unlike earlier reformers who appealed for reform within the Hindu fold, Ambedkar unequivocally rejected the caste system as inhumane and incompatible with justice. His famous slogan, "Educate, Agitate, Organize," encapsulated his strategy for Dalit emancipation.

Ambedkar's political journey began with the formation of the **Bahishkrit Hitakarini Sabha** in 1924 to promote Dalit education and welfare. He later established the **Independent Labour Party** in 1936 and the **Scheduled Castes Federation** in 1942 to advocate for Dalit rights at both local and national levels. His demand for **separate electorates** for Dalits during the Round Table Conferences was one of the most significant moments in Indian political history, even though it resulted in the controversial **Poona Pact** of 1932. The pact, while providing reserved seats for Dalits, denied them independent political identity, a compromise that Ambedkar accepted under duress but criticized deeply.

As chairman of the drafting committee of the Indian Constitution, Ambedkar institutionalized key legal protections for Dalits, including the abolition of untouchability (Article 17), and provisions for affirmative action in education, employment, and political representation. These constitutional safeguards were revolutionary in embedding social justice within the legal framework of the newly independent nation.

His final act of political defiance—**conversion to Buddhism in 1956**—was a powerful statement against caste oppression. By adopting Buddhism, Ambedkar offered Dalits a dignified identity free from the shackles of Hindu caste orthodoxy. This move laid the spiritual foundation for modern Dalit identity and continues to influence Dalit politics through **Navayana Buddhism**.

Ambedkar's legacy endures as the cornerstone of modern Dalit political consciousness, providing the ideological and institutional tools for ongoing struggles for equality and justice.

V. Post-Independence Dalit Movements and New Formations

Following Ambedkar's death, the Republican Party of India (RPI) carried forward his political legacy, though it later fragmented. The Dalit Panthers, formed in 1972 in Maharashtra, marked a radical turn by

combining Ambedkarite thought with anti-caste militancy, drawing inspiration from the Black Panther movement in the U.S. (Omvedt, 2015). The 1990s saw the rise of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) under Kanshi Ram and Mayawati, representing a major shift towards electoral consolidation of Dalits, OBCs, and minorities under the Bahujan umbrella (Yadav, 2019; Kumar, 2023).

VI. Role of Dalit Literature and Cultural Expression

Dalit literature has played a crucial role in articulating the pain, anger, and aspirations of Dalit communities. Autobiographies like those of Omprakash Valmiki (*Joothan*) and Baby Kamble (*The Prisons We Broke*) offer lived experiences of caste oppression. Contemporary Dalit poetry, theatre, and music are increasingly used as tools of resistance and assertion (Teltumbde, 2019; Arya, 2021). Dalit cultural festivals and Ambedkarite iconography are now integral to the identity-building process.

VII. Recent Developments (2014–2025)

Recent years have seen renewed Dalit mobilization, especially among youth and students. The institutional murder of Rohith Vemula in 2016 galvanized nationwide protests and brought Dalit issues to the forefront of academic and political debate. Movements such as the Bhim Army, anti-atrocity protests, and digital Dalit activism reflect new forms of resistance grounded in Ambedkarite ideology (Deshpande, 2022; Gopal, 2025). At the same time, the commodification of Ambedkar's image by mainstream politics and the rise of anti-reservation sentiments pose significant challenges. However, Dalit scholars, artists, and activists continue to reinterpret the movement through intersectional and global frameworks, ensuring its dynamism and relevance in the 21st century.

VIII. Conclusion

The historical background of the Dalit movement reflects a continuous struggle against deeply entrenched caste hierarchies. From Jyotirao Phule's social reforms to Ambedkar's constitutional revolution and beyond, Dalit resistance has evolved into a multifaceted movement encompassing politics, literature, religion, and digital activism. The Dalit movement, with its roots in centuries of injustice, continues to grow, adapt, and assert itself as a powerful force for equality and dignity in Indian society.

References (2014–2025)

(APA style, can be formatted to Vancouver or MLA if needed)

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