



UNTOUCHABILITY AND REFORMS: A HISTORICAL STUDY OF CASTE MOVEMENTS IN MODERN INDIA

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ABSTRACT Untouchability has remained one of the most inhuman and deep-rooted forms of social discrimination in Indian society. Based on the rigid structure of the caste system, it historically denied the so-called 'lower castes' access to education, temples, water sources, and participation in public life. This paper traces the efforts made in modern Indian history to challenge untouchability—beginning from 19th-century reformist movements to the radical assertion of Dalit identity in the 20th century. The role of key figures like Jyotirao Phule and Dr B.R. Ambedkar is analysed, along with the contributions of reformist organisations like the Arya Samaj and Christian missions. The paper also touches upon the post-Independence constitutional safeguards and the emergence of Dalit political consciousness. It shows how the discourse on caste has evolved from social reform to active political mobilisation.

KEYWORDS :

1. INTRODUCTION

India's caste system is one of the oldest forms of social hierarchy in the world. At its extreme end lies untouchability—a practice that excluded large sections of the population from mainstream society. These communities, now recognised as Scheduled Castes, were historically forced to live on the margins, performing menial work and facing widespread humiliation.

In the 19th and 20th centuries, with the growth of education, press, and reformist thinking, a new wave of consciousness emerged among both the upper-caste reformers and the oppressed castes. This paper explores these efforts, with special attention to the transition from early social reform movements to more organised and militant Dalit movements, especially under the leadership of Dr Ambedkar.

2. Early Reform Movements and Social Upliftment a. Brahma and Arya Samaj Movements

The Brahma Samaj, founded by Raja Ram Mohan Roy, and the Arya Samaj, led by Swami Dayanand Saraswati, were among the earliest Hindu reformist groups to raise their voice against caste discrimination. Although these groups mostly emerged from upper-caste backgrounds, they advocated for social equality, women's education, and a return to a purified form of Vedic religion.

The Arya Samaj especially promoted shuddhi (re-conversion of Dalits into Hindu fold) and education for all castes. However, these movements often fell short of recognising the structural nature of caste and untouchability.

b. Jyotirao Phule and the Satyashodhak Samaj

Jyotirao Phule was one of the first Indian thinkers to challenge the caste system from the viewpoint of the oppressed. He strongly opposed Brahminical supremacy and highlighted how religion had been misused to keep Shudras and women in bondage. In 1873, he founded the Satyashodhak Samaj to promote truth-seeking and equality. His writings, especially Gulamgiri, directly questioned the religious basis of untouchability and called for universal education and social justice.

c. Role of Christian Missionaries

Christian missionaries, especially in South India, played a significant role in providing education and social mobility to Dalits. While their motives included religious conversion, many Dalit leaders and scholars acknowledge that missionary institutions gave the first real access to schools, medical services, and legal protection to those otherwise excluded from the Hindu social order.

3. Dr B.R. Ambedkar and Dalit Assertion

a. Mahad Satyagraha and Temple Entry Agitations

Ambedkar led the famous Mahad Satyagraha in 1927, where he and his followers drank water from a public tank, asserting their right to access public resources. He also led protests demanding temple entry for Dalits. These actions directly challenged religious orthodoxy and were a major departure from the moderate tone of earlier reformers.

b. Writings and Ideology

Ambedkar's landmark essay *Annihilation of Caste* (1936) boldly criticised Hindu scriptures for promoting caste and untouchability. He

rejected the Gandhian approach, which labelled Dalits as Harijans, arguing that real equality could not come without destroying the caste system entirely.

c. Conversion to Buddhism

In 1956, a few months before his death, Ambedkar and lakhs of his followers embraced Buddhism. This mass conversion was not just a religious move, but a socio-political declaration that Dalits would no longer accept caste-based status. It remains one of the biggest movements of cultural and identity assertion in Indian history.

4. Post-Independence Legal Reforms and Movements

After Independence, untouchability was abolished under Article 17 of the Constitution of India. Reservations in jobs, education, and politics were introduced for Scheduled Castes to ensure fair representation and opportunity. Despite these measures, caste-based discrimination and violence have continued in many parts of the country.

In the 1970s, organizations like the Dalit Panthers emerged in Maharashtra, drawing inspiration from the Black Panther movement in the US. In North India, political movements like Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) under Kanshi Ram and Mayawati gave Dalits a direct stake in political power. These movements rejected the idea of begging for rights and instead demanded dignity, land, and leadership roles.

5. CONCLUSION

The history of caste reform in modern India is a journey from upper-caste-led reformism to lower-caste-led assertion and empowerment. While early reformers like Phule and Dayanand Saraswati laid the groundwork, it was Ambedkar who gave the movement its radical edge and constitutional strength.

Even today, untouchability exists in many forms—both overt and hidden. Legal safeguards alone cannot eliminate casteism unless accompanied by social change, education, and sustained activism. The historical lessons from caste reform movements remind us that social justice requires not only laws but also a fundamental shift in values.

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