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# Dalit Empowerment and Resistance: Perspectives from Colonial Era.

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Abstract

This research paper delves into the multifaceted narrative of Dalit empowerment and resistance, spanning from the colonial era to the present day. Drawing upon historical analyses, socio-political insights, and contemporary discourses, it aims to unravel the complex dynamics that have shaped the experiences of Dalits in India. Beginning with the colonial period, characterized by systemic oppression and marginalization, this study examines the genesis of Dalit resistance movements and the emergence of leaders who challenged entrenched hierarchies. Through a critical lens, this paper investigates how colonial legacies continue to reverberate in contemporary Dalit struggles, shaping their socio-economic status, political agency, and cultural identity. It explores the enduring impact of discriminatory policies, caste-based violence, and socio-economic disparities on Dalit communities, while also highlighting their resilience and agency in the face of adversity. Furthermore, this research delves into the role of education, social mobilization, and legal reforms in advancing Dalit empowerment agendas. It scrutinizes the efficacy of affirmative action policies and their implementation in fostering inclusive development and dismantling caste-based discrimination. Overall, this research contributes to ongoing dialogues on social justice, human rights, and inclusive development by foregrounding Dalit perspectives and experiences. By elucidating the continuum of resistance and empowerment from colonial times to the present, it offers insights into the challenges and possibilities for achieving substantive equality and dignity for Dalit communities.

**Keywords:** *Dalit, Empowerment, Resistance, Colonialism, Caste, Inequality, Social Justice.*



## 1. INTRODUCTION

The article seeks to provide a comprehensive examination of the challenges faced by Dalits within the context of India's nationalist and communist movements. It highlights how important the Dalit movement was to the country's democratic development and how it can influence subsequent democratic movements. One important area of focus is the pressing necessity for communists to develop a solid theoretical framework in order to confront the pervasive problem of caste discrimination. The story highlights how caste-based repression is changing, as seen by contemporary incidents like those in Kanjhawala and Marathwada, where marginalized Hindu peasants have attacked Dalits

violently under the sway of wealthy landlords known as kulaks. This dynamic emphasizes how important it is to have a specific programme for the agricultural revolution that goes beyond simple corrective actions. The underlying complexity of caste interactions in rural regions must be addressed by such a programme, which also aims to create an unprecedented alliance between Dalits and non-Dalit laborers in agriculture and peasants. Because of the copious documentation of the Dalit movement spearheaded by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, the essay critically analyses the pre-Independence Dalit movement, with particular attention to events in Maharashtra. Due to practical constraints as well as the abundance of historical material that is now available, it acknowledges a prejudice towards Maharashtra while attempting to analyze the larger Indian context **(Berman, J. 1974)**.

Essentially, the paper argues for a more complex interpretation of Dalit struggles in relation to larger social and economic change. It advocates for a deliberate reassessment of conventional methods for combating caste-based subjugation, highlighting the necessity of forming cross-caste coalitions and pursuing a revolutionary agenda grounded in the unique conditions of rural India. The purpose of this study is to make a contribution to the current discourse in India on equitable society, reforming democracy, and revolutionary movements.

## 2. BEYOND TRADITION: DALIT NARRATIVES IN THE CONTEXT OF INDIAN CASTE STRUCTURES

A distinctive aspect of the Indian feudal system was the way in which people were bound not just to the land that feudal lords held, but also to certain jobs and responsibilities that were predetermined by their kinship groupings at birth. In Indian feudalism, people born into particular families, like 'sutars' (carpenters), were required to perform occupations specific to their kinship group and expected to get married within that group. This was in contrast to other feudal systems where peasants and craftsmen were usually given manual labor from birth. Two hierarchies emerged as a result of this structure in the conventional feudal society. Land ownership determined one hierarchy, with landlords at the top and several classes of peasants and field workers at the bottom, each with differing levels of authority and reliance. The second hierarchy included service providers and artisans, with priests and other aristocrats at the top, subsequently followed by master craftsmen like barbers and goldsmiths, and down to lower-class jobs like washermen, leatherworkers, and weavers. Systems like jajmani or balutedari, which outlined their responsibilities and interactions with landlords, served as a bridge between these groups. Furthermore, caste ideology which was predicated on ideas of purity, pollution, and inherited quality transmission contributed significantly to the maintenance of social structures. Due to the close links between the caste system and religion, people were assigned tasks and responsibilities that were approved by religious concepts, such as serving and interacting with deities **(Marriott, M. and Inden, R. 1974)**. In old Indian communities, one of two main varieties was frequently seen. The bulk of people living in peasant cultivator or ryotwari villages, which are usually situated in less agriculturally productive or hilly areas, were labouring peasants, frequently belonging to a single caste. These peasants would provide some of their produce to jagirdars, taluqdars, deshmukhs, desais, and deshpandes, who were the elected officials of the feudal State. The headman, who was generally a member of the majority peasant caste, and the accountant, who was usually a Brahmin and had certain rights such the right to rent-free property (watans or inams), represented the State in these villages. These advantages frequently made it possible for authorities to take part in the village's feudal exploitation. Additionally, the increased economic prospects in ryotwari areas permitted the further penetration of landlord estates into villages, as wealthier families bought watan rights and land **(Stokes, E. 1978)**.

Landlord or Zamindari villages were prevalent in India's more productive plains and valleys of streams. A class of non-cultivating landowners, usually local people inherited from the initial invaders of the region or belonging to previous family groupings awarded possession of the village, ruled over these communities. These property owners, who may be Brahmins, Rajputs, or members of other upper castes not related to the Brahmins, would frequently use the conversion of existing peasants into tenant farmers as a means of imposing their dominance over them. This group of regional landowners often functioned as an association of

"brotherhood," controlling the village's labor force, which included agricultural laborers and renters. Village administrators from ryotwari villages were not as important in these kinds of communities. In each case recounted, a separate class of outcast field servants arose from certain untouchable service castes, alongside peasant farmers, tenants, landlords, and feudal lords. Traditionally, these castes would work as artisans in fields like shoemaking, weaving, or handling the disposal of dead livestock. Even though their exact responsibilities differed, they were essentially the main labour force obligated to perform feudal labor known as 'veth-begar' in India by carrying out general menial work under the balutedarri or jajmani system for the village chief and higher State authorities. They also worked in the field for landowners and peasant farmers, sometimes being treated as semi-slaves by the landlord fraternity as a whole or by particular farmer families. The untouchable caste from whom these field slaves were inevitably recruited was usually the most numerous in a given area. The Mahars in Maharashtra, the Malas and Madigas in Andhra Pradesh, the Holeyas in Karnataka, the Pallars and Paraiyans in Tamil Nadu, and the Chamars in western North India are a few examples of these castes. These classes of field servants were not granted any land rights under the broader feudal philosophy, notwithstanding their crucial part in village labor. However, their own customs frequently depicted them as the archaic "sons of the soil," conquered by outsiders. It's interesting to note that their caste responsibilities occasionally included holding the power to decide on border disputes, indicating a strong bond with the land that the dominant ideology of the feudal system failed to acknowledge.

Throughout history, the untouchable field servant castes have been the most disobedient of all the untouchable communities, and they have been the driving force behind several Dalit militant activities. Research on modern village life frequently records stories of untouchable field workers in the area making fruitless attempts to oppose their persecution and reduced position. Some untouchable artisan castes, on the other hand, have a history of being more conventional and tolerant of the social hierarchy; these groups are often used by the village's exploitative elites to repress the dissident field servants. The importance of the untouchable field workers comes from both their sheer numbers and their vital contribution to agricultural output—even in jobs that essentially amount to forced labor. They have developed awareness as a result of their vital participation in agricultural operations, which has led them to launch different types of revolt. By contrast, if the peasants and landlords so wished, they could more simply do away with the services rendered by other untouchable artisan castes, including those of rope makers, leather workers, weavers, washermen, and sweepers **(Patankar, B. and Omvedt, G. 1979)**.

The "independent" or tenant peasant farmers, untouchable field labourers, craftsmen, and other service workers were among the several categories that made up the marginalised classes. Among them, the majority of craftsmen and peasant farmers were classified as Shudras in the varna system, but the lowest-ranking and field servants were regarded as filthy or untouchable since they were thought to contaminate craftsman service personnel. The term "Dalit" in this article refers to the later underprivileged field servants and untouchable servant castes. It is noteworthy that the Dalits do not quite fit the modern government's definition of "Scheduled Caste" in this particular situation. For example, while plainly belonging to the Dalit categorization, Neo-Buddhists are still not considered Scheduled Castes. On the other hand, in some areas, lower-class, semi-tribal communities such as the 'Rajbanshis' of Bengal are included in the Scheduled Castes list, even though they do not fit the criteria of Dalits given below **(Mitra, S. 1975)**.

## 3. COLONIAL GOVERNANCE AND THE PERPETUATION OF FEUDAL STRUCTURES

The important question that has to be asked is: How did British colonial rule affect this social structure? It is apparent that the main effect of British rule in India was the maintenance of the caste-based feudal system at least till the 1920s, when the oppressed classes started to revolt. At first, the political alliance that British imperialism created with the peasantry and feudal elites primarily served to reinforce their power. As new people and groups benefited from commercialization and became landowners (by buying zamindaris or acquiring land), they maintained the established village hierarchy and oppressed the underprivileged groups **(Patankar, B. and Omvedt, G. 1979)**.

Despite the nominal abolition of caste discrimination in criminal, civil, and commercial law, British laws perpetuated the hierarchical caste system in India. These changes were undercut by the policy of non-interference in social and religious norms, which went into effect in 1858. The courts upheld religious and ceremonial prohibitions, treating infractions as crimes, such as the barring of lower castes from temples. In the case of Dalits, who had the means to pursue legal recourse, courts seldom ordered meaningful police intervention and frequently disregarded the upper castes' punitive acts against lower caste rebellions. As a result, even though Dalits were given equal access to public facilities in theory, they really encountered considerable obstacles. Thus, caste systems were maintained by the British policy of non-interference, both legally and administratively. Dalit agricultural laborers were further marginalized by regulations in Punjab that attempted to prohibit land transfer to 'non-agriculturalists'. Contrary to the idea that colonialism imposed a 'bourgeois legal system' based on abstract property rights, the general tendency upheld caste differences, even though certain verdicts favored Untouchables **(Galanter, M. 1969)**. In India, the effects of colonial authority on the economy are frequently misinterpreted. The feudal system was mainly maintained by colonization, despite the popular belief that it upended the previous feudal village structure and offered new prospects for progress. The working class was split along caste lines, while the 'educated elite' was predominantly descended from higher castes. Dalits received the lowest wages and held the most marginalized and low-status jobs in both industry and agriculture. The working class's caste system made it difficult for Dalits to organize and resist, despite the fact that some jobs outside the village, including those in the military and railroads, permitted them to do so. Modern ideas of science, equality, and freedom were also given to Indians during British rule, but these ideas were accompanied with complex kinds of racism. The 'Aryan theory of race' propagated the view that Dalits and Adivasis were descended from non-Aryan peoples who had been subjected to slavery, whereas upper castes were said to be sprung from Aryan conquerors. This European-derived idea, which the educated elite of India embraced, served as a justification for their exploitation of lesser castes and an assertion of equality with the British. Thus, a 'new scientific' reasoning that combined racial and religious ideas to maintain the status quo social structure was used to justify the continuation of traditional caste divisions **(Keer. D. 1954).**

## 4. BREAKING CHAINS, CLAIMING RIGHTS: THE STORY OF DALIT UPRISINGS

Although the Dalit castes began organizing in the late 1800s, several groups within the Dalit liberty struggle did not become particularly strong until the 1920s. This explosion took place against a background of active social reform and anti-caste movements that were beginning to gain traction amongst middle-class peasants, as well as the early stages of a really mass-based national struggle. The Ad-Dharm movement in Punjab (1926), the Ambedkar movement in Maharashtra (1924), the Namashudra movement in Bengal, the Adi-Dravida movement in Tamil Nadu, the Adi-Andhra movement (which began with its first conference in 1917) in Andhra Pradesh, the Adi-Karnataka movement, the Adi-Hindu movement, which centred mainly on Kanpur in Uttar Pradesh, and the Pulayas and Cherumans' organising attempts in Kerala were some of the important early Dalit movements **(Houitart, F. and Lemercinier, G. 1978)**. Though often ambivalently, the Dalit cause was nurtured and facilitated in large part by the social reform and anti-caste movements. Movements in Maharashtra and Madras, for example, sprang substantially from and were impacted by the non-Brahmin movements in those areas, especially its radical wings like as the Self-Respect and Satyashodhak Samaj movements. The Arya Samaj was once linked to a number of the leaders of the Punjabi Ad-Dharm movement. Movements among the Namashudras and the Adi-Andhras were aided and abetted by Brahmo Samaj reformers belonging to higher castes. The Ezhava-based movement led by Sri Narayana Guru had an impact on and provided support to Dalits in Kerala. With the support of individuals like Shahu Maharaj, Ambedkar's campaign acquired momentum in Maharashtra. A large number of workers were recruited from the Satyashodhak movement and non-Brahmin leaders' schools. Ambedkar frequently referred to his identity as a scholar who was 'non-Brahmin,' as opposed to just a "untouchable," and he actively supported all non-Brahmin organizations in the legislative assembly.

He frequently used Satyashodhak movement vocabulary in his Marathi talks. But he was always critical of the opportunism of leaders who were not Brahmins. Ambedkar's movement ultimately grew more separatist as the non-Brahmin movement melded with the Congress party under Gandhi's guidance and its extreme parts sank into oblivion **(Ram, R. 2006)**. Initially, intellectual Dalits in Madras sided with the Justice Party. But after the party came to dominance, a rift developed, partially due to disputes amid a textile mill strike and partially because of claims that the Justice Party was underrepresenting Dalits and favouring non-Brahmins of higher castes. The well-known untouchable leader, M. C. Rajah, and his followers left the party. Following this, a large number of Dalits joined E V Ramasami's Self-Respect movement, which personified the most extreme facets of the non-Brahmin movement **(Patankar, B. and Omvedt, G. 1979)**. The youthful, well-educated Chamars of Punjab who started the Ad-Dharm movement first became associated with the Arya Samaj because of its ideas, which suggested that the lower castes may be purified (shuddhi). But they lost interest in the movement due to the upper castes' hegemony, and they opposed the shuddhi's paternalistic implication that untouchables must be "cleansed." More investigation is needed on the changing nature of these localised arrangements. While Dalits harboured conflicting emotions towards anti-caste Hindu activities, their connection with the national movement was increasingly antagonistic **(Ram, R. 2006)**.

Most of the time, the leadership of the Congress was made up of upper-caste conservatives who were not only indifferent to Dalit problems but strongly fought against them, with the exception of Kerala, where leaders of the party aggressively pursued anti-caste activities. As a result, Dalit spokespersons preferred to claim that 'British rule was preferable to Brahmin rule' and looked for ways to avoid being eclipsed by caste Hindu nationalists, including special participation, distinct electorates, and alliances with Muslims. It is important to stress that, wherever Dalits were organized in violent organizations, their separation from the organized national movement (the Congress) was a widely held feeling and not just the product of a few leaders' personal gain. Furthermore, the Congress leaders did not do much to heal divisions or promote Dalit solidarity and faith before to Liberation. Even while Dalits did take a nationalist stand under Ambedkar, this came from their sincere conviction that independence was essential. Even if the Mahars continued to emphasize an "adi" (distinctive or native) individuality, Ambedkar's movement distinguished out as an especially notable one that did not. Ambedkar was basically on the same trajectory when he converted to Buddhism during his later life, discarding Hinduism and longing to return to what he saw as an inclusive and "original" Indian faith. The large-scale movements in the 1920s to remove ceremonial obstacles barring Dalits from entering public temples and water tanks were especially notable. The most famous and well planned satyagrahas took place in Maharashtra; they were the Kalaram temple satyagraha in Nasik from 1930 to 1935, the Parvati temple satyagraha in 1928, and the Mahad tank satyagraha in 1927, which resulted in the burning of the Manusmriti. Likewise, notable efforts like the Vaikom temple road satyagraha (1924–25) and the Guruvayoor satyagraha (1930–32) occurred in Kerala **(Abbasayalu, Y.B. 1978)**.

It is possible to argue that, at its core, the British Raj did very little to change caste feudalism or lessen the worst forms of untouchability. Whatever action was done took place when the wars were ending and Indian nationalists were receiving concessions. In 1917 the Congress switched its stance of excluding social improvements and enacted an ordinance advocating for the requirement, fairness, and virtue of eliminating every impairment caused by traditions on the Depressive Classes, adhering to the organization of the first 'depressed classes' meetings in Bombay, where Dalits and non-Brahmins argued for separate electorates. In the 1920s, enlightened princely kingdoms as well as the governments of Madras and Bombay, swayed by non-Brahmin organizations, published declarations reaffirming Dalits' rights to equitable utilization of public spaces, schools, and wells. Nevertheless, these actions were mostly ineffectual and offered minimal support. A platform of basic rights was presented in 1931 during the Karachi Congress session. It promoted unfettered opportunity for public job opportunities for all people, irrespective of caste, and the right to take advantage of public roads, wells, schools, and other services. Between 1932

and 1936, measures pertaining to temple access were presented in the legislatures of the Central Assembly, Madras, and Bombay. Following the election of Congress governments in 1938, laws pertaining to temple admission were enacted in Madras and Bombay. In this light, the motion passed by the Constituent Assembly upon its convocation, which declared the outlawing of untouchability in all its forms and declared it unlawful to impose any disadvantage on that basis, was in line with the development of the Congress movement during the preceding 25 years. Nonetheless, the 'safeguarding segregation' system—which reserves government office and educational institution jobs for members of Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes was not in line with Congress (or Gandhian) thought. Consequently, it was much more obviously a result of the Dalit movement than it was a reaction to nationalist ideas or the uprisings of the Dalit community **(Galanter, M. 1969)**.

## 5. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the Dalit liberation movement during the colonial period stands as a testament to the resilience and determination of marginalized communities in India. Despite enduring centuries of oppression under the caste system and facing indifference or resistance from both colonial authorities and nationalist leaders, Dalit activists tirelessly fought for social justice, equality, and dignity. The movement saw various strategies employed, from grassroots organizing and mass campaigns to legal and political advocacy. While British colonial rule exacerbated caste-based inequalities and discrimination, it also inadvertently provided avenues for Dalit mobilization and resistance. The emergence of leaders like B.R. Ambedkar, who challenged entrenched social norms and fought for the rights of Dalits on multiple fronts, marked a significant milestone in this struggle. Moreover, the eventual inclusion of provisions against untouchability in the Indian Constitution, along with affirmative action measures, reflected the impact and legacy of the Dalit liberation movement in shaping post-colonial India's social and political landscape. Despite the challenges and setbacks faced, the movement laid the foundation for ongoing efforts towards greater inclusion, justice, and empowerment for Dalits in contemporary India.

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