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## Dalit movements in India and the role of Ambedkar

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### Abstract

When we talk about social Movements in India one comes across various types of movements including subjects like environment, tribal, gender and so on. This article sheds light on how caste system has been a prevalent practice and India and the role of B.R Ambedkar in arousing the consciousness among the depressed and oppressed sections and how that knowledge about the evil practices of discrimination transformed itself into the caste movements and presents before the readers the present Indian Scenario about caste.

**Keywords:** Dalit, caste, movements, social

### Introduction

The Dalit movement was started to improve the socio-political and economic conditions of Dalits in India. The exploitation of Dalits by the upper castes continued for a long time for centuries. Due to the prevalent Varna system and caste system in India, Dalits have always been victims of exploitation and oppression. The Chaturvarna system (four varnas) prevailing in India in which mainly Brahmin Kshatriya Vaishya Shudra was the hierarchy system. Under which Shudras i.e. Dalits were kept at the lowest rung whose main function was to serve the above three classes.

However, in the changing scenario, there was a change in the Chaturvarna system, which had taken the form of the caste system during the transition period. The changing political and administrative systems in India had an impact on the Dalit castes as well. With the passage of time there was a change in the social structure and consciousness of the Dalits. The new polity, post-modern administrative structure, rational judicial system, present forms of tenancy and taxation, new modes of business, liberal education system and network of communication laid special emphasis on the spirit of freedom, equality and social justice for the Dalits. Raman Sutradhar (2014), who writes on the Dalit movement and Dalit officials, writes that the "Dalit movement is like a social revolution, its goal is to establish a new social order based on democratic ideals of liberalism, equality, fraternity and social justice". He also points out that Dalit consciousness has emerged due to the socio-economic, political and religious boycott that has been going on for centuries with Dalits. In this, factors like Phule Ambedkar, Dalit literature and Dalit Panthers have played a big role in this which further gave birth to the Dalit movement in India. Postmodern researchers, writers and thinkers, social scientists and educationists have shown interest in studying Dalit movements. Dalit movements in the background of the ongoing social movements in India have attracted the attention of all sections of the society. Ambedkar's contribution and role to the Dalit society has played its role in giving direction to the Dalit movement in future India. Various Dalit leaders in independent India have mobilized the Dalit society through the organization. Dalit leaders have started movements to increase reservation in political parties and offices, welfare programs and government policies and government jobs. It is also called the new political movement of Dalits. The present Dalit movement is challenging the caste system of Indian society and is giving special emphasis on the fight for self-respect.

The Prominent question that needs an answer here is- what is the understanding of the term Dalit Who is a Dalit in reality? What is their position in society? Dalit is a Marathi word which literally means 'repressed' who have been oppressed for a long time. Therefore, the meaning of the term is used collectively for all these castes, which have been considered untouchable for hundreds of years at the lowest rung in the Hindu social system. After that it was introduced in Maharashtra by Dalit Panthers.

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By which he meant 'Society of untouchable caste'. Subsequently, in broadening this definition, it came to be used for any oppressed group. Those who were presented as untouchables or atishudras. The Dalit population in India is about 16.6%. Mainly this population is more in the state of Uttar Pradesh, Punjab, Bihar, West Bengal, Tamil Nadu Andhra Pradesh, Rajasthan Orissa Maharashtra. Dalits in these states are mainly in the rural economy as poor farmers, shareholder farmers and agricultural labourers. Whereas in urban economy basically workers and laborers are in the form of population (Chandra 2004). Several studies show that there has been no significant change in the status of Dalits across the country. (Mendelshon and vicziyani 1998) In India, various states made policies for the welfare of the poor sections of the society, but they failed to improve the condition of the Dalits. After independence, the governance system has failed to distribute the resources in a systematic manner to the people belonging to the downtrodden sections of the society, In which facilities like basic facilities, health, education and general welfare are there. As a result of the policy of defensive discrimination, a middle class has definitely emerged among the Dalits. And this middle class has taken advantage of government policies and government jobs. As DL Seth says, 'earlier only upper castes came in the middle class, Now a small section of Dalits and lower considered castes also come in this class.' Despite these changes, we can divide the Depressed Classes in independent India into two parts -One in which there is a small compressed square in which one section is happier than the large Dalit population. We can consider this as a positive change. And the other one is this small neo-middle class that appears more vocal of the demands and rights of Dalit society (Shah 2001).

### Pre-Independence movements

If we look at the background of the Dalit movements before independence, then we can see its beginning in the movement of Bhakti period. Mainly this movement begins in the 15th century. All sections of the society played their part in this movement. In this, social reformers like Kabir and Ravidas were in the lead role. All such personalities rejected the caste system prevalent in Hinduism and talked about equality in the society through their poems which affected all sections of the society.

Neo Vedantic movements and non-Brahmin movements played an important role in some parts of the country. These include people like Dayanand Saraswati, the founder of Arya Samaj. The constant belief of such social reformers was that the caste system was a political institution created for the betterment of the society and not on the basis of natural or religious specificity.

In the 19th century, Jyotiba Phule, who laid the foundation for the movement of Dalit society and gave education rights to the Dalits, made a significant contribution towards the reforms and founded the Satyashodhak Samaj in 1873. We can consider Jyotiba Phule as the initiator of the Dalit movement along with Wife of Jyotiba who also opened the first women's school during the colonial period.

Ambedkar was instrumental in carrying forward the legacy of Jyotiba who changed the course of the Dalit movement in India which we will discuss next. We also cannot underestimate the role of Gandhiji in this sequence who talked about ending the evil of untouchability in Hinduism itself. When Mahatma Gandhi was in South Africa he

became a direct example of the problem of social discrimination. Gandhiji was in favor of the fact that the development and building of the nation is of utmost importance which we can achieve only by improving the social condition of the untouchables. Gandhiji called the Dalits as Harijans which means 'people of God'. Gandhi had laid the foundation of Harijan Sevak Sangh in 1932 for the upliftment of Harijans. Before independence, more emphasis was laid on social reform factors than on the Dalit movement. But Ambedkar is one of those names who remained the only leader of Dalit consciousness and Dalit upliftment.

### Post Independence movements

After independence, the conversion of Dr. Ambedkar came as a new path for the Dalit movement. This further provided an opportunity to the Dalit society to convert to a new religion. Due to this changing scenario the Dalit movement also got a new direction. During the Mahar Conference in Bombay Presidency in 1936, Ambedkar firmly believed that there was no other way to liberate Dalits than through conversion. Ambedkar realized that the foundation of Hinduism was the caste system, as long as Dalits remained Hindus they will continue to fight for food, water, social gathering etc. So in 1956 Ambedkar accepted the path of Buddhism with millions of his followers. Ambedkar was the main architect who laid the foundation of this movement. Like Ambedkar considered Marxist ideology suitable for the exploited class for a nation that was Not falling under its influence, he laid a solid foundation for the Dalit movement. In this sequence, the Dalit Panther movement played an important role in independent India. The Dalit Panther Movement was a new social movement. This movement was influenced by the Black Panther movement of the 1970s by American Negroes regarding apartheid. Its founder, Namdev Dhasal, along with famous Marathi litterateur J.V. Pawar founded the Dalit Panthers in 1972. Dalit Panthers was a movement of radical and revolutionary ideas mainly of young revolutionaries. His followers mainly propounded the ideas of Phule Ambedkar and Karl Marx.

The Dalit movement in independent India got its vocal voice due to this Dalit Panther. (Kumar 2016) says that the movement of Dalit Panthers was towards more extremism as compared to the earlier Dalit movements. However, with the speed with which the movement emerged, it also calmed down at the similar pace.

Ambedkar was the first to advocate social, political and economic rights for the Dalits in India. But the one Dalit leader who has played the role of bringing a big change in Indian politics and Dalit society by taking forward his ideology is Kashiram. Badrinarayan, who wrote the biography of Kashi Ram, says that the ideology of Kanshi Ram is a form of Ambedkar's ideology, he further says that the political system and its operation in the Hindi region. Kanshi Ram had felt her very deeply and found a way to change it. The way forward was by occupying the power of the state, to develop the people and through it to bring about social change. Therefore Kanshi Ram founded a political party 'Bahujan Samaj Party' in 1984. Kashi Ram created Bahujanism. The combination he made for Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes and Other Backward Classes was a new experiment for Indian politics. Kashiram was successful to a great extent in establishing the Dalits to power through the Dalit movement and organization.

### Ambedkar's role

The work of uncovering the consciousness of Dalit and Dalit movements in India. Ambedkar played an important role in it. Basically Ambedkar is the father of Dalit consciousness in India who played an important role in emancipating the Dalits. What Babasaheb Ambedkar has given to the Dalit society through his thoughts and work remains unmatched with someone else's contribution. If we look at Ambedkar's life, then he appears as a multi-faceted personality. He is one who is an efficient social, political, and reformer along with an educationist, lawyer, journalist by profession. He has played an important role in awakening the Dalit consciousness. Dhanjay Keer, who wrote Ambedkar's biography, considers Ambedkar a social revolutionary rather than a social reformer who gave a vision idea to the deprived class exploited for centuries in India.

If we throw light on Ambedkar's life, there are two dimensions of his life in which first is his social life and second is his political life. If we look at Ambedkar's social life, it is clearly visible that he starts his social life with the 'Mahad Satyagraha' movement. The Mahad Satyagraha movement was a movement for the Dalits to get the right to drink water from the pond. The Mahad Satyagrah was the first social movement by Ambedkar to give social rights to the Dalits. In this sequence, Ambedkar did the second Satyagraha in March 1930, the second biggest movement for the entry of untouchables in the famous Kalaram temple of Nashik. However, Ambedkar was not getting great success from these movements. But what was visible was the fact that awareness about their rights was definitely coming among the Dalits. Despite all these developments Christoph Jaffrelot considers Ambedkar as the first political Dalit leader. He was the one who was far more modern than the leaders of his time. Ambedkar first emerges politically during the Round Table Conference where separate electorates demand as political rights for Dalits was put up. After that Gandhiji's fast unto death and the Poona Pact agreement recognize Ambedkar as a new political leader in Indian society. In 1936, Ambedkar's announcement of leaving Hinduism and writing a succinct article like annihilation of caste brought an uproar in Indian politics. With the passage of time, Ambedkar put himself in a strong position. Ambedkar began to be counted as a main leader in Indian politics. With this, Ambedkar founded many political and social organizations. Some of the important organisations mainly the Independent Labor Party, Republic Party, schedule caste federation organization was created in 1937. Ambedkar also published magazines like Samta and Muknayak. From 1942 to 1946, Ambedkar maintained his image as a nationalist leader, and in 1946 he was appointed to the Constituent Assembly.

After that he was made the chairman of the Drafting Committee of the Constituent Assembly. He is known as the constitution maker in this country. Some analysts also call him the modern Manu. Broadly, He opened the doors for the emancipation of the Dalits.

Ambedkar's life was always inspiring for the Dalit society. After independence, the Dalit leaders and agitators of the organization in India considered Ambedkar as their leader. Dalit movements in India were always started with Ambedkar and his thought as the focal point. The literature written by Ambedkar plays an important role in awakening the Dalit society. All the political and social organizations in

present-day India talk about carrying forward the ideological legacy of Ambedkar. But despite all this, the caste system still prevails in the society. Although the caste barriers have relaxed a bit in the present time, but there is a long struggle in ending the caste system completely.

### Conclusion

In summary, there is no doubt that the traditional hierarchy system of Indian society has been changed to a great extent by the Dalit movements. It has encouraged democratic ideals of liberty, equality and social justice among people of different castes and classes. Dalit movements have raised problems related to the identity of Dalits and the notions of reservation for Dalits in political posts and government jobs have strongly opposed the practice of discrimination and untouchability. The Dalit movements brought their demands into the mainstream of politics and made them occupy important administrative positions in different parts of the country. Dalit movements have organized Dalit literature and Dalit intellectuals to claim their rights and maintain their identity in the hierarchical society. A brief survey of dalit mobilization and movements in contemporary India shows that dalit organization work at all India level had started with Ambedkar's efforts even before independence. Even after independence the image of Ambedkar's commitment to the Dalit movement and his achievements is still so powerful that it is capable of taking any new Dalit movement and political action to new heights.

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