

How the Independence movement altered the ‘dream’ of a casteless society

indianexpress.com/article/research/how-the-independence-movement-altered-the-dream-of-a-casteless-society-9509145

August 12, 2024



Mahatma Gandhi's idea of religious accommodation of 'Harijans' was remarkably different from Ambedkar's views on caste-based socialism. (Photo generated by Dall-E)

“Of all the topics,” wrote historian Susan Bayly, “that have fascinated and divided scholars of South Asia, caste is probably the most contentious.” Like “race in the United States, class in Britain, and faction in Italy,” caste is increasingly “thought of as the paramount fact of life in the subcontinent, and for some, as the very core or essence of South Asian civilization” (Bayly 2001: 1). This is even more so in the wake of the calls for an Indian caste census, followed by the recent Supreme Court judgement on subclassification within reserved castes. Given that the last caste census in India occurred in 1931 — at the fag end of the British rule — it becomes imperative to take a closer look at the key events that shaped the history of caste movements in India during the freedom struggle.

By the end of the nineteenth century, caste began to obtain ubiquitous meaning in the daily lives of Indians. Definitions of caste often revolved around Brahminical notions of purity and pollution, and often aggressive resistance to such notions. In political scientist Gopal Guru's terse reading of B R Ambedkar's diagnosis of the problem, castes were and remain

‘constrained within watertight social compartments,’ with ‘social mobility’ between them ‘prohibited by control over women’s sexuality and the rigorous implementation of the concepts of purity and pollution’ (Guru 2016: 25).

Post-‘Mutiny’ paradoxes

It may appear methodologically erroneous to begin periodising the history of caste movements in modern India from during the heyday of the Independence movement or even the last decades of the nineteenth century. However, for the sake of simplicity, a somewhat meaningful point of departure could be traced to the 1870s, when the colonial administration brought legislations amounting to the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871, in North India, and later extended to the presidencies of Bengal (1876) and Madras (1911). It authorised the colonial state to designate entire communities as criminals — an Act that continued till 1949 and was replaced by the Habitual Offenders Act of 1952.

In recent times, it has been argued — by the anthropologist Anastasia Piliavsky, for instance — that the archetype of ‘criminal tribes’ was not entirely a colonial construct, as it had its roots in the conception of robber and thuggee communities in Jain, Buddhist, Hindu, Mughal, and early modern European travel accounts, even going back to the *Mahabharat*, *Ramayana*, and the *Jataka tales* (Piliavsky 2015). Arguably, the British administration exploited available stereotypes based on diet, marriage rituals, ceremonies, and other lifestyle choices to designate certain classes and communities of people as being too inferior in their jati and varna traits to be employed in the colonial army and state apparatuses.

By the beginning of the First World War, India’s English-educated elites outnumbered those of any other European colony and, although many of them sought to enunciate the language of universal human rights, citizenship and an incumbent constitutionality, caste remained one of the most powerful dormant factors in the nationwide discussions on the future of India. This was particularly true after 1858, given that the events of the ‘Mutiny’ drove the intelligentsia in Britain to compel the Indian administration to have an army ‘composed of different nationalities and castes and as a general rule mixed promiscuously through each regiment,’ thus ‘steadily purged of the higher castes’ not only in the armed forces but in colonial offices in general (Srinivas 1957: 532). Thus, as early as the 1880s, when colonial boards met to confer on the state of provincial education and employability of candidates in government service, caste emerged as an important criterion, whether to be fathomed or overcome, given the preponderance of Brahmins and Kayasthas in colonial offices.



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The Victorian administration's aspiration to eradicate traditional caste consolidations was simultaneously an expression of universal human rights and the will to divide and rule the subcontinent, especially as it recognised caste as a potential obstruction to the emergence of nationalist sentiments. However the colonial regime was itself heterogeneous. Acute nexuses between local colonial administrations and members of privileged castes were found to be working prominently in and around Bombay, Calcutta, and Madras, given the historical hegemony such castes seemed to have wielded since, at least, about the eighteenth century. Hence, Christian missionaries and colonial bureaucrats saw it fit to raise Indian 'lower' caste protagonists and leaders clamouring for their rights.

One such leader, 'Mahatma' Jyotiba Phule, the nineteenth-century Marathi activist and founder of the Satyashodhak Samaj, was among modern India's first anti-caste ideologues. Phule wrote *Gulamgiri* (1873), an account of the plight of 'untouchables' in India that paid rich tributes to Muslim rulers, Christian missionaries, and the British administration for instilling egalitarian consciousness in Indian society. He also introduced the word '*Dalit*' ('untouchables' or broken people) into the lexicon of anti-caste movements and promulgated his version of the Aryan invasion theory that projected the Vedic and Puranic pantheon of Hindu icons as exploitative and oppressive towards the nation's indigenes and tribes. In the words of sociologist Gail Omvedt, Phule's history of caste in India was "a history of violence, force and subjugation" as it was perpetuated through "the holding of state power, and the use of religious deception" to consolidate religious hierarchies (Omvedt 1996: 17). Phule's mobilisation of anti-caste ideas would later inspire Ambedkar.



The 19th century Marathi activist and founder of the Satyashodhak Samaj, Mahatma Jyotiba Phule (Wikimedia Commons)

On the road to 'separate' electorates

Following the First World War, the question of caste gained a whole new political currency around the time of the Government of India Act (1919) which envisaged a phased devolution of administrative powers in a dyarchy between the imperial government and provincial governments. Dalit political consciousness is said to have emerged by then among the Ad-Dharmis in Punjab, Adi-Hindus in Uttar Pradesh, and Namashudras of Bengal, for instance. However, given their relative lack of resources, they tended to ally with non-Brahmin movements of Maharashtra, Madras, and Mysore, which also included zamindars, peasants, and educated urban sections. Ambedkar, a Dalit leader, himself openly allied with non-Brahmin movements. At the same time, he mobilised Dalits and members of depressed classes with the slogan, 'We must become a ruling community.'

The first major twentieth-century event of pan-Indian Dalit movements was the All India Depressed Classes Leaders' Conference at Nagpur, in 1926. It resulted in the formation of the All India Depressed Classes Association, presided by Rao Bahadur M C Rajah, and with Ambedkar as one of its vice presidents. In the Madras Presidency, Erode Venkatappa Ramasamy (or Periyar) founded the anti-Brahminical Self-Respect Movement, which became an important foundation in his rise to become the leader of the Justice Party in 1939.



Bhim Rao Ambedkar (File Photo)

A year after the 1926 conference, Ambedkar led the Mahad Satyagraha to agitate for the rights of 'untouchables' to draw water from a public tank in Mahad, in Maharashtra, that was hitherto sealed off from them by leaders of privileged castes. Later that year, Ambedkar

oversaw a procession organised to stage the public burning of *Manusmriti* — the ancient Indian text that both Phule and Ambedkar saw as among the greatest evil influences on the perpetuation of the caste system and the practice of untouchability. In 1930, also the year of the First Round Table Conference, Ambedkar founded the All India Depressed Classes Congress. On the streets, Dalit mobilisations agitated for land awards, the eradication of caste-specific employment, the consolidation of workers' unions in and around mills and factories, internal social reforms between depressed classes like intermarriage between subcastes, and the elimination of devadasi-type of prostitution. While in dialogues with the colonial administration, Ambedkar and Ambedkarites agitated for a separate 'minority' electorate for Dalits and depressed classes.

Following the Second Round Table Conference, which concluded in December 1931, the Ambedkarite worldview attracted challengers from among the depressed classes. In 1932, the All India Depressed Classes Association announced its decision to pursue joint electorates with the larger Hindu community, following the signing of the 'Rajah-Munje Pact' between Rajah and B S Munje, the All India Hindu Mahasabha president. In August 1932, the colonial administration, under Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald, announced separate electorates for Muslims, Sikhs, Europeans, Christians, and Scheduled Castes. M K Gandhi, then a prisoner at the Yerwada Central Jail in Pune, decided to go on a fast unto death to protest against this supposed 'vivisection' of the Hindu community. As a piecemeal resolution of their internal differences, the following month, Gandhi and Ambedkar signed the historic Poona Pact, which secured joint electorates for all Hindus and awarded a reservation to the depressed classes of nearly double the number of seats that MacDonald's announcement had earlier offered.

Meanwhile, a caste uplift movement initiated by Vinayak Damodar Savarkar and allied factions of the emerging Hindutva movement had also been striving to annihilate untouchability and caste schisms, through attempts at homogenising ritualistic and symbolical hierarchies between various castes in Maharashtra.

Towards Constitutionalism

Over the next few years, Gandhi's own version of eradication of untouchability and caste uplift proceeded under the banner of his organisation, the Harijan Sevak Sangh, which seemed to unite him with Ambedkar, and the Poona Pact's provisions with the tenets of the new Government of India Act of 1935. But this collaboration dissipated soon, when the Congress formed the All India Depressed Classes League, and installed the Dalit leaders, Babu Jagjivan Ram as its president, and Prithvi Singh Azad as the general secretary. In response, Ambedkar founded the Independent Labour Party, in 1936, again underscoring his separation from the Gandhian and Congress folds.

Ambedkar and the Congress were politically successful in Bombay and Central Provinces, respectively, but could not make inroads in Muslim-majority provinces, such as Bengal. When Ambedkar founded the All India Scheduled Castes Federation in 1942 — later to become the Republican Party of India in 1956 — he sought to designate scheduled castes as distinct from Hindus and even enlisted the support of his estranged former colleague, Rajah. The Congress' popularity among Dalits in northern India also grew by leaps and bounds. And so did the rift between the Gandhian and Congress ways of the religious accommodation of 'Harijans' and Ambedkarite socialism.

According to historian Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, “organised Dalit politics in all-India terms never represented a monolithic structure. It always was a contested terrain, where the Federation and the Congress constantly jockeyed for exclusive space” (Bandyopadhyay 2000: 900). One significant factor that potentially curtailed the Dalit base of both the Congress and the Ambedkarite movement was the Communists, who, in the 1940s, mobilised Dalit peasants in the east (Tebhaga in Bengal) and south (Telangana in Andhra), staging violent revolt movements. Another factor was the Periyarite movement in and around the Madras Presidency, which, despite its ideological alliance with the Ambedkarite movement, was ethnically different from the latter, thus acquiring a substantive political base in the 1940s.



Periyar with Ambedkar and Jinnah (Wikimedia Commons)

Given the inherent pluralism of the Dalit movements in India and the imminent pressures of the Partition of the subcontinent, the liberatory potential of the Ambedkarite movement was gradually consumed by the need to build India's constitutional frameworks. Ambedkar had conceived of the Dalits, Shudras, and tribals as natural allies in the pursuit of the 'destruction' of the hegemonic 'Hindu social order.' However, by 1945, the same colonial administration, that had previously reconstructed caste as a new currency of colonial emancipation of the underprivileged — while chastising recalcitrant babus and rebellious tribes — chose to depoliticise caste during the transfer of power to the independent Indian state. According to Bandyopadhyay, "this amounted indeed to a total negation of a powerful colonial course on caste developed since the late nineteenth century and abrupt reversal of the erstwhile dominant trend in colonial policies on representation and franchise, followed since the early years of twentieth" (Bandyopadhyay 2000: 940).

Besides, the phase between 1917 and 1950 also saw the parallel emergence of a new rhetoric of an ostensibly modernising face of Hinduism riding on Gandhi's vision of Ram Rajya as a utopian welfare state. Given the electoral lead that the Congress took over the Ambedkarite and Periyarite movements, Dalit politics had to brace itself against charges of letting cultural and colonial intrusions into traditional 'Hindu' ways of life. This became an opportunity for Congress sympathisers to develop the new logic of Hinduism as a reformist force that could empower the new egalitarian nation, based on legendary ideals said to have been observed by Lord Ram, who had embraced the underprivileged and had eaten food from their hands.

The Gandhian view — what some thinkers have called a Vaishnavite reorientation of Indian society — that not only the Scheduled Castes but also Islam and Christianity were sects within Hinduism was radically unacceptable to the religious minorities of India but Dalits and anti-Brahminical ideologues were divided on the issue. In Omvedt's terms, the 'Brahman-bourgeois Congress' co-opted Dalit politics in the ultimate phase of British rule (Omvedt 1994: 304), following Mohammad Ali Jinnah's demands for an independent theocratic state, which pivoted Ambedkar more towards a centrist Congress, despite his overarching disagreement with what seemed to him as the party's Hindu-centric ideas. Others, like Eleanor Zelliot (1988) and M S Gore (1993) suggested that co-opting Ambedkar into the Congress fold was owing to the party's farsightedness and ecumenicism.

Contemporary social scientists, like Ashwani Kumar and Harish Wankhede (personal conversations), remind that the Ambedkarite anti-caste movement was too robust to be considered a casualty or as playing second-fiddle to the Congress' cooperative politics. According to Kumar, Ambedkar represented a vigorous strain of '*homo aequalis*' that European thinkers like Louis Dumont (who nominated India's caste system as one of a static '*homo hierarchicus*') could not comprehend (Kumar 2006: 15). Likewise, Wankhede sees the Ambedkarite strain continuing as the dominance of caste as a discursive currency in twenty-

first-century Indian politics and popular culture (Wankhede 2022), with its sociological identity appearing to become minimised while its political manifestations have only increased.

Annihilation of caste as a 'breach of peace'

Seen in the light of twenty-first-century caste movements in India and the recent Supreme Court judgement, the agency of the caste question today may be seen to contain atavistic throwbacks to the era of the Independence movement and its aftermath. Back in the 1950s, as new constitutional safeguards for reserved sections of Indian society came to be seen as boons to caste identity and politics, one irate political leader went on to argue, in 1955, that “the politician who wants caste and communal distinctions should disappear is at the same time aware of its vote-catching power, and is thus faced with a real dilemma.”

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From time to time, scholars, like M V Nadkarni have, in influential though controversial studies, tried to caution that the 'caste system' is not historically an uninterrupted and internally coherent part of Hinduism since much of its manoeuvrings appear to be extrinsic to the mandates of ancient Hindu scriptures and doctrines, with notable exceptions like *Manusmriti* and other *dharmashastras* (Nadkarni 2003). However, such hypotheses seem to bring little change in the powerful anti-Brahminical momentum that the caste discourse has accelerated in present-day India.

Arguing with Gramscian bravura, Arundhati Roy asserts that peace, in modern India, is largely an outcome of 'upholding the caste system' and, that, like the annihilation of caste, “Dalit aspirations are a breach of peace” (Roy 2019: 6). As sociologists and historians of caste today believe, this assertionist tendency in caste politics is neither new nor undesirable — certainly not anymore — as long as it plays out within constitutional boundaries. After all, the chief architect of that book strove for the annihilation of caste not by means of denying or abnegating caste structures and manifestations but by their reconfiguration as tools of political liberation rather than yokes of sociocultural oppression.

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First uploaded on: 12-08-2024 at 13:11 IST

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