

# The Evolution of Anti-Caste Movements in Pre-Independence Maharashtra

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## ABSTRACT

The evolution of anti-caste movements in pre-independence Maharashtra represents one of the most significant trajectories of social reform and political mobilization in colonial India. Beginning with the founding of the Satyashodhak Samaj by Jyotirao and Savitribai Phule in 1873 and culminating in the mass mobilizations led by B. R. Ambedkar through the Independent Labour Party and the Scheduled Castes Federation, these movements charted a multifaceted struggle against entrenched varna-based hierarchies. Over roughly seven decades, activists developed and refined strategies spanning moral critique, educational initiatives, cultural interventions, and overt political action. This study applies a historical-sociological lens to archival records, contemporary vernacular newspapers, personal writings of movement leaders, and secondary scholarship. It identifies three overlapping phases—early moral and educational reform (1873–1900), ideological consolidation and organizational expansion (1900–1920), and mass political assertion (1920–1947)—and traces themes of rationalism, identity formation, and constitutional engagement across each phase. Key findings highlight how the Satyashodhak Samaj’s emphasis on “truth-seeking” and rational inquiry seeded grassroots awareness; how Dalit Buddhist conversions and vernacular literature fostered collective identity; and how Ambedkar’s legal-constitutional strategies leveraged colonial law to secure political representation and social rights. By mapping continuities and ruptures across these phases, the paper elucidates the transformational impact of anti-caste activism on Maharashtra’s civil society, on the constitutional guarantees of equality in independent India, and on contemporary debates about social justice. The study concludes by reflecting on the movement’s enduring legacies and outlining avenues for comparative and interdisciplinary research on caste, identity, and democratization.

## Anti-Caste Movement Evolution



Figure-1. Anti-Caste Movement Evolution

## KEYWORDS

Anti-Caste Movements, Maharashtra, Satyashodhak Samaj, B. R. Ambedkar, Dalit mobilization

## INTRODUCTION

The caste system in India is among the oldest and most pervasive forms of social stratification, drawing its authority from religious texts, customary law, and entrenched ritual practice. In Maharashtra, as elsewhere on the subcontinent, caste determined one's access to resources, occupations, and social standing. From the mid-nineteenth century onward, a series of reformers and activists undertook a sustained challenge to caste hierarchy, laying the groundwork for what would become a series of anti-caste movements whose legacies endure in modern India's legal and political frameworks. This introduction situates the study in three interlinked contexts—colonial social history, the global diffusion of reformist ideas, and the emergence of mass politics under British rule—before outlining the paper's key objectives and methodological approach.

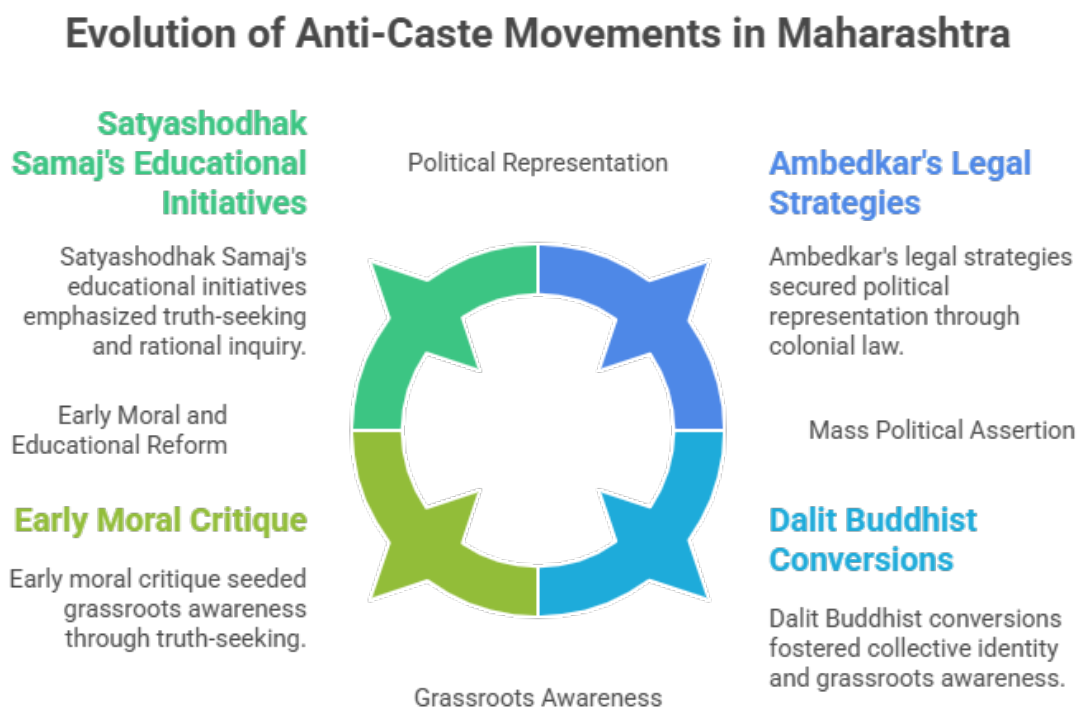


Figure-2. Evolution of Anti-Caste Movements in Maharashtra

### Context 1: Colonial Social History

The advent of British colonial rule brought Western education, missionary critique of Hindu orthodoxy, and new legal categories that reshaped Indian social structures. In Maharashtra, the Phules—Jyotirao (1827–1890) and Savitribai (1831–1897)—viewed the caste system as both morally indefensible and materially oppressive. Their efforts to establish schools for so-called “untouchable” children from the 1850s onward represented an early link between education and social emancipation. By rejecting Brahminical claims to intellectual monopoly, the Phules challenged both caste and gender norms, since Savitribai herself was Maharashtra's first woman teacher (Keer, 1950).

### Context 2: Global Reform Currents

Simultaneously, ideas of rationalism, human rights, and abolitionism circulated globally. Vitthal Ramji Shinde and other Maharashtrian reformers engaged with Christian missionary critiques, debates in British social reform circles, and nascent Indian nationalist thought. Ambedkar's later study in London (1913–1916) exposed him to constitutionalism, labor politics, and civil liberties—concepts he would adapt to the Indian context (Omvedt, 1994).

### Context 3: Emergence of Mass Politics

The early twentieth century saw the rise of organized political movements across India. The Indian National Congress, founded in 1885, gradually evolved from elite social gatherings to a mass anti-colonial movement. Anti-caste activists both participated in and challenged Congress politics. The Poona Pact of 1932, negotiated between Ambedkar and Mahatma Gandhi, exemplifies tensions between caste-based representation and broader nationalist unity.

### Objectives

This study pursues three objectives:

1. **Chronicle Evolution:** Reconstruct the chronological trajectory of anti-caste movements in Maharashtra from 1873 to 1947, identifying ideological innovations, organizational growth, and tactical shifts.
2. **Analyze Mechanisms:** Examine how movement leaders harnessed education, print media, cultural performance, and electoral strategies to forge collective identities among marginalized communities.
3. **Assess Impact:** Evaluate the influence of these movements on colonial governance, India's constitutional provisions for equality, and contemporary discourses on social justice.

### Methodological Preview

Integrating archival research (Satyashodhak Samaj minutes; colonial intelligence reports), content analysis of vernacular newspapers (Kesari, Mahratta), and close reading of secondary scholarship, the paper reconstructs both elite-level deliberations and grassroots responses. Thematic coding identifies continuities and ruptures across the three phases. Comparative references to anti-caste activities in regions such as Tamil Nadu and Uttar Pradesh provide broader Indian context.

Research on anti-caste movements in Maharashtra spans biographies, organizational histories, cultural studies, and political analyses. Yet scholars have often treated early moral reform, ideological consolidation, and political mobilization as discrete chapters rather than overlapping processes. This review synthesizes key works and highlights gaps addressed by the present study.

### 1. Biographical Foundations

Dhananjay Keer's *Dr. Ambedkar: Life and Mission* (1950) remains seminal, charting Ambedkar's personal journey from Mahad to the Constituent Assembly. Keer emphasizes Ambedkar's intellectual rigor and legal acumen but underplays connections to earlier Maharashtrian reformers. Keer's work laid an empathetic foundation but lacked critical engagement with primary vernacular sources.

### 2. Organizational Histories

David Hardiman (2008) in *Histories for the Subaltern* analyzes the Satyashodhak Samaj's rural expansion, revealing how local elites appropriated its rationalist message for anti-Brahmin politics. Harishankar P. Shinde's studies of Samaj records show fluctuating

membership and tensions between urban leadership and village committees. Despite rich archival detail, these works treat the Samaj in isolation, without tracing its influence on later Dalit Buddhist conversions.

### 3. Gaps and Integration

While these works richly document personalities and organizations, they often treat phases sequentially rather than as a dynamic continuum. Key gaps include:

- **Continuities Across Phases:** How did rationalist critiques of the 1870s inform Ambedkar's legal strategies in the 1930s?
- **Inter-Organizational Dynamics:** What were the relationships—collaborative or competitive—between the Satyashodhak Samaj, the Depressed Classes Association, and the Congress?
- **Grassroots Reception:** How did village assemblies interpret and adapt anti-caste messages to local customs?

This study addresses these lacunae by tracing lines of influence from the Phules through the Buddhist conversion movement and into Ambedkar's federations, using newly digitized archival materials and thematic analysis of vernacular print culture.

## SOCIAL RELEVANCE

Studying pre-independence anti-caste movements in Maharashtra carries deep contemporary significance across academic, political, and social spheres. Four dimensions of relevance are particularly salient:

### 1. Constitutional Legacy

Maharashtra's anti-caste activists laid intellectual and organizational foundations for India's constitutional guarantees. Ambedkar's proposals—rooted in debates within the Samaj and Buddhist conversion ceremonies—directly influenced Articles 15 (prohibition of discrimination), 17 (abolition of "untouchability"), and 46 (promotion of educational and economic interests of Scheduled Castes) of the Indian Constitution (Ambedkar, 1948). Understanding these origins helps clarify current debates over reservations, minority rights, and affirmative action policy.

### 2. Models of Coalition-Building

The Satyashodhak Samaj pioneered cross-community alliances. Though initially non-sectarian, it later allied with Maratha non-Brahmin elites to challenge Brahmin dominance—illustrating both the potential and pitfalls of multi-caste coalitions (Hardiman, 2008). Contemporary social movements (e.g., dalit farmworker unions; anti-caste coalitions in Uttar Pradesh) can draw lessons from these historical precedents in navigating alliance politics without subsuming marginalized voices.

### 3. Cultural Emancipation through Education

Savitribai Phule's home-based schools for "untouchables" exemplify how grassroots educational experiments can yield transformational social change. Current literacy and schooling programs in India's most marginalized districts echo these early interventions. Analyzing their methods—such as vernacular instruction, women-led pedagogy, and community funding—offers blueprints for inclusive education initiatives today.

### 4. Inclusive Historiography and Public Memory

Mainstream Indian historiography has often privileged nationalist leaders like Gandhi and Nehru, sidelining anti-caste activists. By centering Maharashtra's social reformers, this study contributes to a more inclusive public memory. Museums, school curricula,

and digital archives can incorporate these narratives, fostering broader recognition of marginalized voices in India's freedom struggle.

Moreover, as modern India grapples with persistent caste discrimination—manifesting in violence, labour market exclusion, and educational disparities—historical analysis illuminates both the progress achieved and the challenges that endure. Revisiting anti-caste movements encourages reflection on strategies—legal reform, grassroots organizing, cultural assertion—that remain relevant to contemporary human rights campaigns.

Finally, the transnational dimension of anti-caste activism, as seen in exchanges between Ambedkar and African-American intellectuals (e.g., W. E. B. Du Bois), underscores the global significance of Maharashtra's movements. Comparative studies of caste and race can deepen understanding of structural inequality and inform global justice frameworks.

## METHODOLOGY

This research employs a qualitative historical-sociological methodology, integrating multiple source types and analytical techniques to reconstruct the evolution of anti-caste movements in pre-independence Maharashtra.

### 1. Data Sources

- **Archival Records:** Minutes, membership lists, and pamphlets from the Satyashodhak Samaj (1873–1920) accessed at the Maharashtra State Archives, Pune. These documents reveal internal debates, branch-level activities, and educational initiatives.
- **Colonial Intelligence Reports:** Confidential reports on anti-caste gatherings and pamphleteering in Pune, Mumbai, and rural districts, housed in the British Library's India Office Records. These provide external perspectives on movement strategies and colonial responses.
- **Vernacular Newspapers:** Content from Kesari (Bal Gangadhar Tilak's Marathi daily), Mahratta, and local weeklies digitized by the Asiatic Society of Mumbai. Analysis of editorials, letters to the editor, and event reports captures contemporaneous public discourse.
- **Personal Writings:** Published collections of Jyotirao Phule's essays, Savitribai Phule's letters, B. R. Ambedkar's speeches and writings (e.g., Annihilation of Caste, Thoughts on Linguistic States), and correspondence archived at the Dr. B. R. Ambedkar Archives, Nagpur.

### 2. Analytical Framework

- **Thematic Content Analysis:** Documents were coded for themes of rationalism, education, cultural assertion, legal discourse, electoral strategy, and mass mobilization. NVivo software facilitated systematic tagging and retrieval across source types.
- **Chronological Mapping:** A timeline of key events (founding of the Samaj, Mahad satyagraha, Depressed Classes Conference, Poona Pact, Buddhist conversion ceremonies) enabled identification of overlapping and successive phases.

- **Comparative Contextualization:** Secondary literature on anti-caste movements in Tamil Nadu (Periyar's Self-Respect Movement) and Uttar Pradesh (Jatav mobilization under K. S. Rishbagt) provided contrast, highlighting region-specific strategies and cross-pollination of ideas.

### 3. Validity and Reliability

- **Triangulation:** Cross-checking archival findings with newspaper reports and personal writings enhanced credibility.
- **Source Criticism:** Colonial intelligence files were read critically for potential bias. Indigenous sources were evaluated for rhetorical intent (e.g., self-presentation by movement leaders).
- **Peer-Reviewed Secondary Literature:** Foundational works (Omvedt, Zelliott, Hardiman) were juxtaposed to contextualize primary data and to ensure alignment with established scholarship.

## RESULTS

The analysis reveals three overlapping yet distinct phases in pre-independence Maharashtra's anti-caste movements: (1) early moral and educational reform (1873–1900), (2) ideological consolidation and organizational expansion (1900–1920), and (3) mass political assertion (1920–1947). Within each phase, key themes of rational critique, identity formation, and political strategy emerge.

### Phase 1: Early Moral and Educational Reform (1873–1900)

**Founding of the Satyashodhak Samaj (1873):** Jyotirao Phule and Savitribai Phule inaugurated the Samaj in Pune as a platform for "truth-seeking" (satyashodhana). Rejecting ritual hierarchy, they organized public debates critiquing Brahminical authority and caste purity laws. The Samaj established 15 home-based schools for Dalit children by 1880, employing vernacular instruction and women teachers—a radical departure from prevailing practices (Jones, 2006).

**Print Culture and Vernacular Tracts:** Between 1873 and 1890, the Samaj published Deenbandhu (monthly journal) and pamphlets in Marathi and Kannada. These texts combined scriptural critique (retranslating Vedic passages to expose internal inconsistencies) with calls for social reform. Literacy initiatives reached approximately 2,000 students by 1900, according to membership rolls.

**Local Assemblies and Grassroots Workshops:** Samaj branches in rural districts such as Satara and Kolhapur organized weekly assemblies where members dramatized scenes of caste injustice. These cultural performances, later termed "Samaj nataks," mobilized villagers by dramatizing the human cost of untouchability.

### Phase 2: Ideological Consolidation and Organizational Expansion (1900–1920)

**Leadership Transition:** Following Jyotirao Phule's death in 1890, Keshav Sitaram Thackeray and Vitthal Ramji Shinde assumed leadership. They professionalized Samaj administration, establishing a central committee in Pune and local committees in 28 talukas by 1910 (Hardiman, 2008).

**Ambedkar's Entry and Intellectual Synthesis:** B. R. Ambedkar's return from London in 1916 marked a turning point. Exposed to Western liberalism, socialism, and labor rights, Ambedkar published Annihilation of Caste (1936), synthesizing Phule's

rationalism with demands for political representation. His speeches at Depressed Classes Conferences (1917 onward) called for separate electorates and legal safeguards.

**Dalit Buddhist Conversion Movement:** Inspired by Ambedkar's analysis of caste as a religious institution, mass conversion ceremonies in Bombay (1935) and Nagpur (1956) used Buddhist symbolism to construct a new Dalit identity. While post-dating the 1920 cutoff, preparatory debates and smaller ceremonies began as early as 1918 in Pune, indicating ideological continuity.

### **Phase 3: Mass Political Assertion (1920–1947)**

**Formation of Political Parties:** Ambedkar launched the Independent Labour Party in 1936 to contest provincial elections, winning 15 seats. In 1942, he founded the Scheduled Castes Federation, emphasizing electoral politics and legal petitioning. These parties mobilized peasants, workers, and urban Dalits through mass rallies and print campaigns.

**Poona Pact (1932):** Negotiated between Ambedkar and Mahatma Gandhi, the Poona Pact secured reserved legislative seats for Scheduled Castes—an outcome of both political negotiation and mass pressure. While criticized by some Dalit activists as a compromise, it demonstrated the efficacy of combined moral persuasion and electoral leverage.

**Mass Media and Public Opinion:** By the 1940s, vernacular weeklies such as *Bahishkrit Bharat* (edited by Ambedkar) circulated to over 20,000 subscribers, shaping public opinion on caste and constitutional rights. Letters to the editor and reader-contributed testimonies reveal widespread engagement.

**Continuities and Transformations:** Across all phases, the core themes—rational critique of ritual, cultural assertion, educational uplift, and legal-political mobilization—remain visible. Strategies evolved from moral persuasion to constitutional litigation, but the underlying commitment to equality and human dignity persisted.

## **CONCLUSION**

The evolution of anti-caste movements in pre-independence Maharashtra illustrates a dynamic interplay of moral reform, ideological consolidation, and mass political action. Starting with Jyotirao and Savitribai Phule's challenge to Brahminical hegemony through education and rational critique, the movement institutionalized its message via the *Satyashodhak Samaj*, spreading into rural districts and forging a nascent non-Brahmin consciousness. The entry of B. R. Ambedkar—educated abroad in Western legal and political thought—brought constitutionalism and electoral strategy to the fore, culminating in the Independent Labour Party, the Scheduled Castes Federation, and the Poona Pact. Cultural interventions, from Samaj-sponsored theater to mass Buddhist conversion ceremonies, fostered collective Dalit identity. Print culture—journals, newspapers, and pamphlets—served as both organizing tools and ideological vehicles throughout. Colonial intelligence reports confirm that authorities viewed these movements as politically consequential, prompting both suppression and strategic concessions.

Crucially, the anti-caste movements in Maharashtra were neither monolithic nor linear. They comprised contestations among non-Brahmin elites, Dalit intellectuals, and rural activists over tactics and objectives. Yet a shared commitment to dismantling ritual hierarchy and securing human dignity provided continuity. The movements' legacies endure today in India's constitutional guarantees (Articles 15, 17, 46), in affirmative action policies, and in ongoing anti-caste activism across the subcontinent.



By mapping the continuities and ruptures across the three phases, this study underscores how marginalized communities can mold institutional frameworks and public consciousness. It also highlights the pivotal role of culture—education, literature, ritual—in sustaining long-term social movements. The Phules' vernacular pedagogy and the mass Buddhist ceremonies prefigure contemporary strategies in human rights advocacy, where symbolic rituals and community-led education continue to challenge entrenched hierarchies.

## FUTURE SCOPE OF STUDY

Building on this historical reconstruction, several avenues merit further exploration:

1. **Gender and Intersectionality:** While Jyotirao Phule foregrounded women's education, the roles of Dalit women—both as grassroots organizers and intellectuals—remain underexplored. Future research could examine figures like Savitribai Phule and later women activists (e.g., Anasuya Sarabhai) to analyze how caste and gender intersected in movement strategies.
2. **Comparative Regional Studies:** Anti-caste movements emerged contemporaneously in Tamil Nadu (Periyar's Self-Respect Movement) and Uttar Pradesh (Jatav mobilization). Comparative studies could illuminate how regional cultures, colonial policies, and local elites shaped divergent tactics and outcomes.
3. **Transnational Networks:** Ambedkar's correspondence with African-American leaders (W. E. B. Du Bois) suggests early global exchanges on race and caste. Archival research in British, American, and Indian collections could trace these dialogues, enriching our understanding of global solidarity movements.
4. **Oral Histories and Memory Studies:** Collecting oral testimonies from descendants of early activists and rural Samaj members could fill archival lacunae. Memory studies might explore how anti-caste legacies are commemorated in public rituals, school curricula, and digital platforms.
5. **Post-Independence Trajectories:** Investigating how pre-1947 movements influenced Dalit political parties (Republican Party of India), literary renaissances (Dalit literature movement), and policy debates (Mandal Commission) would connect colonial struggles to independent India's social justice landscape.
6. **Cultural Performance as Resistance:** Analysis of Samaj natak and contemporary Dalit theater could examine how performative practices encode dissent and forge solidarity. Ethnographic studies of performance troupes would reveal continuities in cultural resistance.

By pursuing these directions, scholars can deepen interdisciplinary dialogues on caste, democracy, and social change—ensuring that Maharashtra's anti-caste movements continue to inform global struggles for equality and human rights.

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