



## Caste Movement in India

**For Prelims:** [Political Parties](#), [Caste Census](#), [Sub-categorisation](#), [Criminal Tribes Act, 1871](#), [1857 Revolt](#), [Satyashodhak Samaj](#), [Gulamgiri](#), [Mahad Satyagraha](#), [All India Depressed Classes Association](#), [Independent Labour Party](#), [India Scheduled Castes Federation](#), [Self-Respect Movement](#), [Poona Pact](#), [Harijan Sevak Sangh](#)

**For Mains:** Caste Movement in India and its Impacts

Source: IE

### Why in News?

Recently, many [political parties](#) called for a new [Indian caste census](#) after the Supreme Court's judgement on [sub-categorisation](#) within reserved castes.

- Caste is often considered as central to [South Asian society](#) much like race in the United States, class in Britain, and faction in Italy.
- The **last caste census** at national level India occurred in **1931** during British rule.

### What is the History of Caste Movements in India?

- **Historical Context:** By the end of the **19th 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 by lower castes.
  - Castes remained '**constrained within watertight social compartments**,' with '**social mobility**' between them prohibited by **inter-caste marriages**.
- **Colonial Legislation:** Colonial administration brought legislation like [Criminal Tribes Act, 1871](#), in North India, and later extended to the **presidencies of Bengal (1876) in East and Madras (1911) in South**.
  - It authorised the colonial state to designate entire communities as criminals.
  - This designation was often rooted in **pre-existing biases** about certain caste or tribal groups, reinforcing negative **stereotypes** and institutionalising them through law.
  - They were considered **too inferior** in their jati and varna traits to be employed in the **colonial army and state apparatuses**.
  - The Act continued till 1949 and was replaced by the [Habitual Offenders Act, 1952](#).
- **Divide and Rule Policy:** The [1857 Revolt](#) which was apparently led by **upper class hindu and muslim elites** forced British leaders to push for a more **diverse Indian army** and **colonial offices** and reduce the presence of **one community dominance** in these roles.
  - Thus, caste emerged as an important criterion in **provincial education** and employability of candidates in **government service**.
  - Caste was recognised as a potential obstruction to the emergence of **nationalist sentiments** and helped in perpetuation of **British rule** in the subcontinent.

## What were the Key Figures in Caste Movements?

- **Jyotiba Phule:** He was a 19th century **Marathi activist** and founder of the [Satyashodhak Samaj](#) and was among modern India's first **anti-caste ideologues**.
  - He 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](#).
  - He promulgated his version of the [Aryan invasion theory](#) and projected texts like **Manusmriti** as **exploitative** and oppressive towards the nation's indigenes and tribes.
  - Phule's mobilisation of anti-caste ideas later inspired [BR Ambedkar](#).
- **BR Ambedkar:** He mobilised Dalits and members of **depressed classes** with the slogan, '**We must become a ruling community.**'
  - In 1927, he 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 denied to them by leaders of privileged castes.
  - In December 1927, Ambedkar publicly set fire to the **Manusmriti** which was seen as the source for perpetuation of the **caste system** and the practice of **untouchability**.
  - In 1930, he founded the [All India Depressed Classes Association](#).
  - Before the colonial administration, Ambedkar and Ambedkarites agitated for a **separate electorate** for Dalits and depressed classes.
  - **Other Initiatives by BR Ambedkar** were [Independent Labour Party \(1936\)](#), [All India Scheduled Castes Federation \(1942\)](#) etc.
- **M C Rajah:** The first major 20th 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.
- **Periyar:** In the Madras Presidency, Erode Venkatappa Ramasamy (or **Periyar**) founded the anti-Brahminical [Self-Respect Movement](#).
  - It became an important foundation in his rise to become the leader of the **Justice Party** in 1939.
- **Mahatma Gandhi:** After the announcement of **separate electorates** (under Communal Award) for **Depressed Classes**, Gandhiji decided to go on a fast unto death to protest against this supposed '**vivisection**' (**cutting**) of the Hindu community.
  - Gandhi and Ambedkar signed the historic [Poona Pact 1932](#) which secured **joint electorates** for all Hindus and awarded a **reservation to the depressed classes** of nearly double the number of seats in Communal Award.
  - In 1932, Gandhi founded the [Harijan Sevak Sangh](#) for eradication of untouchability and caste upliftment but Gandhi's focus on varnashrama was not liked by Ambedkar.
- **Reversal in British Policy:** Given the imminent pressures of the **Partition** of the subcontinent, the Ambedkarite movement was gradually **overshadowed** by the need to build **India's constitutional frameworks**.
  - By 1945, the colonial administration chose to **depoliticise caste** during the transfer of power for an united India.

## What is the Difference Between Gandhi's and Ambedkar's Ideologies?

Aspect	Mahatma Gandhi	B.R. Ambedkar
Views on Freedom	Freedom must be <b>wrested</b> from authority by the people.	Expected freedom to be <b>bestowed</b> by rulers.
Democracy	Sceptical of mass democracy; preferred <b>limited government</b> and <b>local self-rule</b> .	Advocated <b>parliamentary democracy</b> as a means for pressure and advancement of the oppressed.
Political Ideology	Believed in <b>non-violence</b> and practical alternatives to	Inclined towards <b>liberal ideology</b> with emphasis on institutional

	ideologies.	frameworks.
Views on Village System	Supported ' <b>Gramraj</b> ' ( <b>village self-rule</b> ) as true independence.	<b>Criticised 'Gramraj'</b> for perpetuating caste and social inequalities.
Approach to Social Reform	Used <b>moral persuasion</b> and non-violent methods for change.	Emphasised <b>legal and constitutional reforms</b> , opposed the use of force.
View on Untouchability	Addressed untouchability as a <b>moral issue</b> , promoted ' <b>Harijan</b> ' as a term.	Criticised Gandhi's approach; viewed untouchability as a major issue to be addressed by <b>legal means</b> .
Religion and Caste System	Believed caste system was a <b>degeneration of varna</b> ; not a religious mandate.	Denounced <b>Hindu scriptures</b> for perpetuating caste and untouchability.
Legal vs. Moral Approach	Emphasised moral and <b>ethical approaches</b> to solve issues.	Preferred <b>legal and constitutional methods</b> for reform.

**Drishti Mains Question:**

Q. Discuss ideological differences between Mahatma Gandhi and BR Ambedkar. Also, give a brief account of the caste movement in pre-independence India.

**UPSC Civil Services Examination, Previous Year Question (PYQ)**

**Prelims**

**Q. With reference to the history of ancient India, which of the following statements is/are correct? (2021)**

1. Mitakshara was the civil law for upper castes and Dayabhaga was the civil law for lower castes.
2. In the Mitakshara system, the sons can claim right to the property during the lifetime of the father, whereas in the Dayabhaga system, it is only after the death of the father that the sons can claim right to the property.
3. The Mitakshara system deals with the matters related to the property held by male members only of a family, whereas the Dayabhaga system deals with the matters related to the property held by both male and female members of a family.

**Select the correct answer using the code given below:**

- (a) 1 and 2 only
- (b) 2 only
- (c) 1 and 3 only
- (d) 3 only

**Ans: (b)**

**Q.The Vital-Vidhvansak, the first monthly journal to have the untouchable people as its target audience was published by (2020)**

- (a) Gopal Baba Walangkar
- (b) Jyotiba Phule
- (c) Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi
- (d) Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar

**Ans: (a)**

**Q.Satya Shodhak Samaj organized (2016)**

- (a) a movement for upliftment of tribals in Bihar
- (b) a temple-entry movement in Gujarat
- (c) an anti-caste movement in Maharashtra
- (d) a peasant movement in Punjab

**Ans: (c)**

**Q.Which of the following parties were established by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar? (2012)**

1. The Peasants and Workers Party of India
2. All India Scheduled Castes Federation
3. The Independent Labour Party

**Select the correct answer using the codes given below:**

- (a) 1 and 2 only
- (b) 2 and 3 only
- (c) 1 and 3 only
- (d) 1, 2 and 3

**Ans: (b)**

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### **Mains**

**Q.**"Caste system is assuming new identities and associational forms. Hence, caste system cannot be eradicated in India." Comment. **(2018)**

**Q.**Mahatma Gandhi and Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, despite having divergent approaches and strategies, had a common goal of amelioration of the downtrodden. Elucidate. **(2015)**

**Q.**Debate the issue of whether and how contemporary movements for assertion of Dalit identity work towards annihilation of caste. **(2015)**

