

Caste Movements in India

January 4, 2026 • vajiramandravi.com



Caste movements in India have been pivotal episodes in the country's history, reflecting the struggles of marginalised communities against centuries-old social hierarchies and discriminatory practices. These movements, which had their roots in a prevalent caste system, **emerged to oppose the dominance of the upper castes**, especially the Brahmins, and to promote social, economic, and political equality for the disadvantaged segments of society. These Caste Movements were **initiated by visionary leaders and reformers** who recognised the injustices and exploitations perpetuated by the caste system.

They **aimed to dismantle the oppressive Brahmanical religion and culture**, perpetuating social inequalities and denying lower-caste individuals opportunities. By rejecting the traditional authority of Brahmin priests, advocating for alternative wedding ceremonies, and promoting temple entry for all Hindus, these movements **challenged the hegemony of the Brahmins**.

Types of Caste Movements in India

The leaders of the **Caste movements**, such as **E.V. Ramaswamy Naicker, Jyotiba Phule, Sree Narayana Guru**, and others, rallied the oppressed communities and advocated for the empowerment and upliftment of the lower castes. They sought to create a society based on **principles of equality and social justice**, where merit

and character would be valued over birth or caste identity. The impact of these Caste Movements was profound, leading to significant structural changes and social reforms.

They brought awareness to the exploitation faced by marginalised communities, paved the way for greater inclusivity, and challenged traditional norms and customs that perpetuated discrimination. The caste movements also played a crucial role in mobilising communities, fostering unity, and advocating for affirmative action policies, which sought to address historical injustices and provide opportunities for socio-economic advancement.

Movement	Description
Self-respect Movement	- The movement was initiated by E.V. Ramaswamy Naicker in the mid-1920s. • Objectives: It aimed to achieve several transformative goals such as: ◦ To reject Brahmanical Religion and Culture: ■ This caste movement questioned the authority and practices of Brahmin priests, considering them as perpetrators of oppression. ■ It aimed to challenge the dominant position of the Brahmins and dismantle the cultural hierarchy based on birth. ◦ To empower lower castes: This caste movement focused on empowering the lower castes and combating their socio-economic marginalisation. ■ It aimed to uplift and provide opportunities for education and social mobility to individuals from these marginalised communities. ◦ Promote Equality and Social Justice: The Self-Respect Movement aimed to establish a society based on principles of equality and social justice, where caste discrimination would be eradicated, and individuals would be valued based on their merit and character rather than their birth or caste identity. ◦ Formalise weddings without Brahmin priests: ■ Naicker advocated for alternative wedding ceremonies that did not involve Brahmin priests, thereby challenging their exclusive authority over marriage rituals. ■ This practice aimed to promote egalitarianism and reduce dependence on Brahminical influence in social and religious matters. • Impact of the movement: ◦ This caste movement had a profound impact on Tamil society and the broader Dravidian movement. ◦ It challenged the entrenched caste hierarchy and brought awareness to the exploitation faced by the lower castes. ◦ By questioning the authority of Brahmin priests and advocating for alternative wedding ceremonies, the movement encouraged social reform and pushed for greater inclusivity.

Temple Entry Movement	- Significant work in this direction had already been done by reformers and intellectuals like Sree Narayana Guru and N. Kumaran Asan. • Agitation in Vaikom: Vaikom, located in the northern part of Travancore, emerged as a centre of agitation for temple entry. • Launch of Vaikom Satyagraha: In 1924, the Vaikom Satyagraha, led by K.P. Kesava, was launched in Kerala, demanding the opening of Hindu temples and roads to the untouchables. • Reinforcement from jathas and Gandhi's support: The <i>satyagraha</i> received reinforcement from jathas (processions) from Punjab and Madurai. In support of this caste movement, Mahatma Gandhi undertook a tour of Kerala. • Temple entry movement during the Civil Disobedience Movement: Again, in 1931, when the Civil Disobedience Movement was suspended, the temple entry movement was organised in Kerala. • Leadership of Subramaniam Tirumambu: Inspired by K. Kelappan, the poet Subramaniam Tirumambu (known as the 'singing sword of Kerala') led a group of sixteen volunteers to Guruvayur. • Prominent leaders: Satyagrahis like P. Krishna Pillai and A.K. Gopalan were among the leaders of the movement. • Proclamation for temple entry: Finally, on November 12, 1936, the Maharaja of Travancore issued a proclamation opening all government-controlled temples to all Hindus. • Spread: A similar step was taken by the C.Rajagopalachari administration in Madras in 1938.
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Satya Shodhak Samaj	- Jyotiba Phule (1827-1890), born in Satara, Maharashtra, belonged to the mali (gardener) community and organised a powerful movement against upper caste domination and Brahminical supremacy. • Formation of Satyashodhak Samaj: In 1873, Phule founded the Satyashodhak Samaj (Truth Seekers' Society), with leadership from the backward classes such as Malis, Telis, Kunbis, Saris, and Dhangars. • Aims of the movement: The main aims of the movement were social service and the spread of education among women and lower caste people. • Inspirational works: Phule's works, Sarvajanik Satyadharma and Gulamgiri, became sources of inspiration for the common masses. • Symbolic alternative: He used the symbol of Rajah Bali as an alternative to the Brahmins' symbol of Rama. • Advocating for abolition: Phule advocated for the complete abolition of the caste system and socio-economic inequalities. He strongly opposed Sanskritic Hinduism. • Unifying marginalised communities: This caste movement provided a sense of identity to the marginalised communities, uniting them against the Brahmins who exploited the masses through religion and blind faith for personal gain. • Promoting women's education: As a firm believer in gender equality, Phule was a pioneer in women's education. Alongside his wife, Savitribai, he opened a girls' school in Poona. • Widow remarriage movement: He also spearheaded the widow remarriage movement in Maharashtra and established a home for widows in 1854.
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Sree Narayana Guru Dharma Paripalana (SNDP) Yogam	- The SNDP movement was an example of a regional movement born out of a conflict between the depressed classes and upper castes. • Initiation by Sree Narayana Guru Swamy: Initiated by Sree Narayana Guru Swamy (1856-1928) among the Ezhavas, a backward caste of toddy-tappers in Kerala, who were considered untouchables and denied education and entry into temples. • Ezhavas' significance: The Ezhavas constituted the largest caste group in Kerala, accounting for 26 per cent of the total population. • Symbolic act at Aruvippuram: In 1888, Narayana Guru, himself from the Ezhava caste, installed a stone from the Neyyar river as a Sivalinga at Aruvippuram on Sivaratri. • Impact of the Aruvippuram movement: The act at Aruvippuram sparked a revolution that eradicated numerous discriminations prevalent in Kerala's society. ◦ Renowned poet Kumaran Asan became a disciple of Narayana Guru during this caste movement. • Establishment of Aruvippuram Kshetra Yogam: In 1889, the Aruvippuram Kshetra Yogam was established, aiming to become a substantial organisation to assist the Ezhavas in their material and spiritual progress. • Formation of SNDP Yogam: In 1903, the Aruvippuram Sree Narayana Guru Dharma Paripalana Yogam (SNDP) was registered under the Indian Companies Act. ◦ Narayana Guru served as its permanent chairman, and Kumaran Asan became the general secretary. ◦ Dr. Palpu played a pivotal role in its formation through movements like Ezhava Memorial and Malayali Memorial. • Narayana Guru's advocacy: Sree Narayana Guru advocated for the equality of all religions, denounced animal sacrifice, and spoke out against divisions based on caste, race, or creed. ◦ He inscribed the words "Devoid of dividing walls of caste or race, or hatred of rival faith, we all live here in brotherhood" on the wall of the Aruvippuram temple. ◦ He urged Ezhavas to abandon the toddy-tapping profession and abstain from consuming liquor. • Issues addressed by SNDP Yogam: The SNDP Yogam took up various issues on behalf of the Ezhavas, including the right to admission to public schools, recruitment in government services, access to roads and temples, and political representation. • Impact of the movement: The movement brought about significant structural changes, including upward social mobility, a shift in the traditional distribution of power, and the consolidation of a federation of backward castes into a larger conglomerate.
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Justice Movement	- Founded in the Madras Presidency, it aimed to address the socio-political concerns of the non-brahmin communities. • Leadership: C.N. Mudaliar, T.M. Nair, and P. Tyagaraja • Madras Presidency Association: In 1917, the Madras Presidency Association was formed in response to the grievances of the non-brahmins, who felt marginalised and underrepresented in employment and legislative bodies dominated by the Brahmin community. • Platform for demands: The association served as a platform for non-brahmin leaders and activists to voice their demands and fight for the rights and interests of their communities. • Demand for separate representation: One of the primary objectives of the association was to seek separate representation for the lower castes in the legislature, ensuring their voices were heard and their issues were addressed. • Diverse support: The movement gained momentum and support from various non-brahmin communities, including the intermediate castes, backward classes, and scheduled castes. • Unity and solidarity: It fostered a sense of unity and solidarity among these groups, realising the need to collectively challenge Brahminical dominance and secure better socio-political opportunities. • Crucial role of the Madras Presidency Association: The Association played a crucial role in raising awareness about the disparities faced by non-brahmins and advocating for affirmative action policies. • Reforms and increased opportunities: Their efforts led to significant reforms in the Madras Presidency, improving representation and increasing opportunities for non-brahmins in various spheres of public life.
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