DALIT MOVEMENTS

Introduction
Dalits, the group of people who constitute the last category of castes in the Varnasrama Theory. This is the traditional definition of the term Dalit as is given by different scholars. According to the Indian Constitution the Dalits are the people coming under the category Scheduled castes. With slight changes, however, the term Dalit ‘would mean not only one category of caste, it means the human who is exploited economically, socially, politically and from all the spheres of life, by the traditions of the country. The Dalits, called by different names like Dasyu, Dasa, Atisudra, Panchama, Tirukulattar, Adikarnataka, Adi Dravida, are actually the —Depressed Classesl of Indian society.

- The scheduled Castes (SCs) are known as Harijans (children of God). This term was coined by Mahatma Gandhi in 1933.
- They occupy the lowest rank in the social hierarchy.
- They are also called as perial, panchama, atishudra, antraya or namashudra.
- It is believed that the touch, the shadows, and the voices of SCs pollute caste-Hindus.
- Though legally they are no longer untouchables, but many of them still bear the stigma.

Major Causes of the Dalit Movement
- The Dalit Movement is the result of the constant hatred being generated from centuries in their heart from the barbaric activities of the upper castes of India.
- Since Dalits were assigned the duties of serving the other three Varnas, that is all the non-Dalit, they were deprived of higher training of mind and were denied social-economic and political status. The division of labour led to the division of the labourers, based on inequality and exploitation.
- The caste system degenerated Dalit lifes into pathogenic condition where occupations changed into castes.
- The higher castes of the society looked down upon the Shudras. It was a general belief that the Dalits are part of the lowest of low Varnas. Thus for centuries Dalits have been positioned at the bottom of the rigid Indian caste society. People from other castes, who considered themselves to be higher, believe that Dalits are impure by birth and that their touch or sheer presence could be polluting. Hence, they are assumed to be untouchable.
- For centuries, Dalits were excluded from the mainstream society and were only allowed to pursue menial occupations like cleaning dry latrines, sweeping, tanning or working as landless labour for meager daily wages. They were the people who cultivated the land and worked as bonded labour, did the work of scavenging and did all types of manual works. The most inhuman practice is that of untouchability, which made the Dalits to live in extreme inhuman situations. In other words, they lived a barbaric life. Starving for food in their own land where they themselves are the owner of the land, enraged the Dalits. This has made the Dalits to rise and protest, against the inhuman practices of Brahmanism.
- Dalits were discriminated in every sense. They lived in the Hindu villages hence did not have advantage of geographical isolation like tribes. They were pushed to the jungles whereas, the mainland was occupied by the Brahmins. They were to serve all classes of people around and had to do all the dirty jobs. They were barred from entering into those mainland areas in every sense, they were prohibited to wear decent dress and ornaments besides being untouchable. Many of the atrocities were committed in the name of religion. Besides, the system of Devadasi they poured molten lead into the ears of a Dalit, who happened to listen to some mantra. To retain the stronghold on people, education was monopolized.
Pre-independence phase:

- Neo-Vedantik movements:
  a. were initiated by Hindu religious and social reforms.
  b. these movements attempted to remove untouchability.
  c. according to the pioneers of these movement, untouchability was not an essential part of Hinduism and for that matter, of the caste system.
- Dayanand Saraswati, the founder of the Arya Samaj believed that the caste system was a political institution created by the rulers ‘for the common good of society, and not a natural or religious distinction’.
- Ghasidas, the founder of the Satnami Panth rejected the discriminatory caste social order
- Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam (SNDP) launched activities for Sanskritising the norms and customs of the Iravas. They launched a satyagraha for temple entry in the 1920s
- During the 1920s, the Mahars launched unsuccessful satyagrahas against untouchability in Maharashtra.
- The dalits demanded a separate electorate in the 1930s which led to a conflict between Ambedkar and Gandhi. This conflict was finally resulted in the signing of the Poona Pact on 24 September 1932 at Yerwada Central Jail in Pune between Dr. B. R. Ambedkar and Congress leaders on reservation of seats for SCs in elections.
- Dalits also launched large-scale satyagrahas in 1946 for separate electorates before the state assemblies in Poona and Nagpur, and Lucknow and Kanpur.
- In the early 1930’s Ambedkar concluded that the only way of improving the status of the untouchable was to renounce the Hindu religion. He appealed to his caste brothers, ‘you have nothing to lose, except your religion’.

Post-independence phase:

- Though the movement is primarily rooted in Maharashtra, it has spread to different parts of the country and acquired an all-India character.
- Ambedkar organised the Independent Labour Party (ILP) on secular lines for protecting the interests of the labouring classes.
- Later Ambedkar formed the Scheduled Castes Federation (SCF) in 1954, to fight elections and look after the interests of the SCs.
- The SCF was later converted into the Republican Party in 1956, with the intention of broadening its base by in including in its fold the Scheduled castes, Scheduled Tribes and backward castes.
- Ambedkar along with his followers converted to Buddhism in 1956. He founded the Navayana sect of Buddhism. He preferred Buddhism primarily because it was an indigenous Indian religion of equality; a religion which was anti caste and anti-Brahman. Some of them have also been converted to Christianity and Islam.
- However, the movement for conversion to Buddhism has spread dalit consciousness irrespective of whether dalits became Buddhist or not.
- In the 1990’s: with the increased political participation in elections and the political success of the Bahujan Samaj Party in Uttar Pradesh, ‘new political movement’ of the dalits started.
- Dalits constitute 16 percent of India’s population.
- In spite of the Abolition of the Manual Scavenging Act many of them are still engaged with this traditional occupation.
- Untouchability is still practised in many parts of rural India.
- Though the atrocities committed on the dalits have decreased yet such instances of violence appear now and then in the leading newspapers.
• Many dalits silently face the discrimination and atrocities committed on them by the upper castes in rural areas and such instances are hardly such instances are reported to the police.

**Dalit Movements**

**Name:** Satnami Movement of the Chamars  
**Place:** Chattisgarh plains in eastern MP  
**Year:** 1820s  
**Against whom:** Upper castes  
**Leaders:** Ghasi Das  
**Causes:** Was against the Oppressive caste system.  
**Mode of protest:** Adopted signs of ritual purity  
**Result:** Ghasi Das preached a new religious doctrine and advised his followers to abandon idol worship and all that it entailed. He believed that all men in the world are equal. He also urged his followers to restructure their dietary practices and to avoid taking meat, liquor and anything that resembled flesh or blood. Ghasi Das brought his untouchable disciples in compliance with the upper-caste customs. The movement persisted as an untouchable form of Hinduism and its area of impact was mainly limited to Chhattisgarh plain.

**Name:** Viduthalai Chiruthaigal Katchi / Liberation panthers  
**Place:** Chennai  
**Year:** 1972  
**Against whom:** Caste system  
**Leaders:** Thol. Thirumavalavan  
**Causes:** The movement was intended to be a radical alternative to the existing dalit groups  
**Mode of protest:** Campaigns, Rejection of the caste hierarchy  
**Result:** Liberation Panthers movement has successfully transformed from the largest Dalit movement in Tamil Nadu into a recognised political organisation.

**Name:** Dalit Panther Movement  
**Place:** Maharashtra  
**Year:** 1972  
**Against whom:** Upper castes  
**Leaders:** Namdeo Dhasa, J V Pawar, Raja Dhale, Arun Kamble  
**Causes:** The atrocity committed against Dalits across the country was the root cause of the movements. The repression and terror among the oppressed Dalits continued to live in the rural area.  
**Mode of protest:** Rebellion  
**Result:** The leaders advocated and practiced radical politics. The manifesto issued by them in 1973 combines the Ambedkarite spirit with a broader Marxist framework and it heralds the rise of autonomous Dalit perspective in post-Independence India.

**Name:** Adi Dharma Movement in Punjab  
**Place:** Jallandhar  
**Year:** 1925  
**Against whom:** Religious system  
**Leaders:** Master Gurbanta Singh  
**Causes:** The movement was against the practise of Untouchability, were the upper castes who disgracefully called the lower castes as “Sudras” or untouchable. The aim was to unite untouchables of Punjab to form a separate religion than Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims  
**Mode of protest:** Revolution
Result: The movement made its mark by the 1930’s. It helped the Dalits to seek social recognition through the process of cultural transformation on the one hand and spiritual regeneration on the other hand.

Name: The Mahar Movement in Maharashtra
Place: Maharashtra
Year: 1894
Against whom: Caste system
Leaders: B.R. Ambedkar and Gopal Baba Walangkar
Causes: The mahars occupied a low position in the caste and occupational hierarchy and as such suffered from many religious, economic, educational and political disabilities. The Mahar movement reflects a total rejection of the religion of the caste Hindus, which was identified with hierarchy and inequality.
Mode of protest: The Mahars abandoned Hinduism altogether and embraced Buddhism
Result: Mahars now belong to a religion that stands for egalitarian values and hence they are superior to the caste Hindus.

Name: Dalit Buddhist movement
Place: All over India
Year: 1956
Against whom: Caste system
Leaders: Ambedkar
Causes: To escape from an oppressed caste based society that considered them to be the lowest in the hierarchy
Mode of protest: Conversion to Buddhism
Result: Many people embraced themselves into Buddhism as Ambedkar saw Buddhism as a means to end the caste system in India.

Name: Ambedkar Peoples Movement
Place: Tamilnadu
Year: Late 1970’s and early 80’S
Against whom: The practice of untouchability
Leaders: Ambedkar
Causes: To fight against caste discrimination
Mode of protest: Creating awareness among people
Result: The movement later transformed into a political party.

Name: Self-Respect Movement
Place: Tamil Nadu
Year: 1925
Against whom: Caste hierarchy
Leaders: E.V.Ramaswamy
Causes: Against caste based discrimination, superstitions, meaningless customs and conventions that considered them to be a lower end of the hierarchy
Mode of protest: Creating awareness
Result: The movement was extremely influential not just in Tamil Nadu, but also overseas in countries with large Tamil populations, such as Malaysia and Singapore. The number of inter-caste and inter-religious marriages had increased in the Tamilnadu state as a result of the self-respect movement.
**Name:** Temple Entry Movement  
**Place:** Bombay  
**Year:** 1927  
**Against whom:** Caste discrimination  
**Leaders:** Ambedkar  
**Causes:** The struggle was against visible symbols of casteism, like denial of entry into temples and drawing water from public wells and tanks.  
**Mode of protest:** March  
**Result:** In 1938, after Congress legislatures were elected, temple entry bills were passed in Madras and Bombay.

**Name:** Schedule Caste Liberation Movement (SCALM)  
**Place:** Chennai  
**Year:** 1988  
**Against whom:** Caste based discrimination, Government  
**Leaders:** L. Ilayaperumal, Sakthidasan (RPI), Devakottai Dr. M. Subramaniam, Vai. Palanivelu, Kodikkal Chellappa and Dalit Gnanasekaran  
**Causes:** Against caste disabilities and aimed at social and economic upliftment of the SC’s.  
**Mode of protest:** Rally, Demonstrations, etc  
**Result:** Dalits of Tamil Nadu have come together under a single banner of SCALM and they became a means of Dalit awakening and rise.

**Name:** Adi-Andhras / Adi Hindu movement  
**Place:** Andhra Pradesh  
**Year:** 1917  
**Against whom:** Caste system  
**Leaders:** Bhagya Reddy Verma  
**Causes:** Reddy urged class differences among depressed classes should also be removed. He supported the demand of separate electorate for depressed classes.  
**Mode of protest:** Rally, Conferences, etc  
**Result:** The Adi-Andhra movement was the only movement that denounced scriptural authority, questioned the importance of tradition in Indian history, and developed a counter ideology against the upper caste hegemony by claiming themselves as the first born or original inhabitants. This period witnessed the growth of consciousness among untouchable communities.

**Name:** Prathyaksha Raksha Daiva Sabha  
**Place:** Kerala  
**Year:** 1909  
**Against whom:** Caste discrimination  
**Leaders:** Poikayil Yohannan  
**Causes:** Against the practice of untouchability amongst the members of Dalit communities themselves. Yohannan was deeply pained by this tendency amongst the members of the lower castes.  
**Mode of protest:** By creating awareness  
**Result:** In order to trace the root of this custom in the society, he started reading books on these issues. From books, Johannan realized that the members of Paraiyar, Pulayar and Kuravar communities shared a common lineage in the history of Kerala. Therefore, he decided to bring the members of these communities on one platform by properly educating them about their lineage. To make this happen,
Johannan left the Shankaramangalam Christian family and started to meet the members of his community personally to generate this awareness in their minds.

Name: *Puthiya Tamilakam*
Place: Chennai
Year: 1996
Against whom: Caste system
Leaders: Dr. Krishnaswamy
Causes: Due to lack of awareness about their rights, the depressed classes are facing many problems
Mode of protest: Creating awareness
Result: Contesting in elections and advocating for the rights and welfare of Scheduled Castes, particularly Devendrakula Vellalar.

Name: *The Adi-Hindu movement in UP*
Place: Kanpur
Year: 1920’s
Against whom: Caste Hierarchy
Leaders: Swami Achutanand
Causes: Against the Upper Caste Hegemony
Mode of protest: Rejection of the Vedic texts
Result: The movement aimed to formulate the concept that Scheduled castes are the original inhabitants of India.

Name: *The Namashudra movement*
Place: Bengal
Year: 1872-1947
Against whom: Upper Caste Hindus
Leaders: Jogendra Nath Mandal
Causes: Struggles towards social and political recognition
Mode of protest: Revolt, demonstrations, creating awareness
Result: The success of the Namashudra Movement could be easily measured by the autonomous political space which they were able to chalk out for themselves in Bengal politics and in alliance with Muslims had kept the Bengal Congress Party in opposition from the 1920s. At the strength of this political space only they could get Babasaheb elected to the Constituent Assembly.

Name: *Namantar Andolan (Name Change Movement)*
Place: Maharashtra
Year: 1977-1994
Against whom: Government
Leaders: Dalit student groups
Causes: Change the name of the to rename Marathwada University as Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Marathwada University
Mode of protest: Revolt, demonstrations, creating awareness
Result: It achieved a measure of success in 1994 when the compromise name of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Marathwada University was accepted. The movement was notable for the violence against Dalits.

Name: *Talhan Gurdwara conflict*
Place: Punjab
Year: 2003
Against whom: Jatt Sikhs
Leaders: Chanan Ram Pal President of the Talhan Dalit Action Committee
Causes: The Chamars came out in force and confronted the Randhawa and Bains Jatt Sikh Landlords, who refused to give the Chamars a share on the governing committee of a shrine dedicated to Shaheed Baba Nihal Singh. The shrine earned 3–7 Crore Indian Rupees, and the Jatt Sikh Landlords allegedly "gobbled up a substantial portion of the offerings". Though Dalits form more than 60 percent of Talhan’s 5,000-strong population, local ‘traditions’ ensured that they were denied a spot on the committee
Mode of protest: Revolt and boycotts
Result: Chamars fought a four-year court battle with the Jatt Sikh Landlords and their allies including the Punjab Police

PROMINENT DALIT LEADERS
- Narayana Guru (1854-1928)
  Narayana Guru, also known as Sree Narayana Guru
  He was a social reformer of India.
  He was born into an Ezhava family in an era when people from such communities, which were regarded as Avarna, faced much social injustice in the caste-ridden society of Kerala.
  He formed a programme of action known as the “SNDP Yogam”.
  The Yogam took up several issues like
    1. the right of admission to public schools
    2. spiritual and social uplift of the downtrodden
    3. recruitment to government employment
    4. promoted new values of spiritual freedom and social equality
    5. entry into temples and on roads
    6. denounce the superstitions and
    7. political representation.
  The movement aimed at:
    • protest against the hegemony of Brahmanas
    • to elevate the position of the backward castes in the social hierarchy
  The movement was quite successful and had brought about transformative structural changes in the caste hierarchy.

- On 21 August 1967, Narayana Guru was commemorated on an Indian postage stamp of denomination 15 NP. Another commemorative stamp on him was issued by Sri Lanka Post on 4 September 2009.
- Both Sree Narayana Guru Jayanthi and Sree Narayana Guru Samadhi Day are public holidays in Kerala.

SNDP
The Sree Narayana Dharma Paripalana Yogam (SNDP) was founded in 1903 by Sree Narayana Guru.
It is a charitable society working for the spiritual and educational upliftment of the Ezhava community of Kerala for the past 102 years.
The SNDP is a reform movement, among the Ezhavas of Kerala, is an example of conflict between the depressed classes and the upper non-Brahmana castes. They rejected the casteism.
Reasons for the movement:
1. low status
2. discriminations and
3. deprivations
Who are Ezhavas?
The Ezhavas were a caste of toddy-tappers (untouchables) in Kerala, is a largest single caste group constituting 26 per cent of the total population.

- **Jyotirao Govindrao Phule (1827 –1890)**
  He was a social reformer of Maharashtra in the nineteenth century. He is regarded as the father of the Indian social revolution.
  Phule and his wife, Savitribai Phule were pioneers of women’s education in India. After educating his wife, he opened the first school for girls in India in August 1848.
  He supported widow remarriage and started a home for upper caste widows in 1854. In 1854, he also started a home for new-born infants to prevent female infanticide.
  Some of the notable published works of Jyotirao Phule are:
    a. Tritiya Ratna
    b. Brahmananche Kasab
    c. Gulamgiri, Ishara
    d. Gramjoshya sambhandi jahir kabhar
    e. Akhandadi Kavyarachana etc.

  He was founder of many movements like:
    a. Movement against blind faith and idolatry
    b. Movement for womens education
    c. Peasants/agriculture movement,
    d. Movement against caste system
    e. Movement for women and widow upliftment
    f. Movement against discrimination
    g. Movement of Dalit/removal of untouchability

**Satyashodhak Samaj**
In September 1873, Phule formed the Satyashodhak Samaj (Society of Seekers of Truth) to attain equal rights for peasants and people from lower castes.
The main aim was to liberate the social shudra and untouchable castes from exploitation and oppression.
Satyashodhak Samaj campaigned for the spread of rational thinking and rejected the need for priests/privileged status of priests.
Phule openly condemned the inequality in the religious books, orthodox nature of religion, exploitation of masses by the means of it, blind and misleading rituals, and hypocrisy in the prevalent religion
Shahu Maharaj, the ruler of Kolhapur lent moral support to Satyashodhak Samaj.
After Phule’s death in 1890 his followers continued the Samaj campaign in the remote parts of Maharashtra.

- **Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar (1891 –1956)**
  Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, popularly known as Babasaheb,
  He was an Indian jurist, economist, politician and social reformer
  He campaigned against social discrimination and against untouchables.
  He fought for the educational, legal and political rights of the Dalits. He encouraged them to throw off the traditional caste duties imposed on them.
  He burnt Manusmriti in protest of caste system/hierarchy.
  Ambedkar founded the Depressed Classes Institute (Bahishkrit Hitkarini Sabha) in Bombay in 1924.
  A Marathi fortnightly, Bahishkrit Bharat, was started by him in 1927.
In 1927 he established the Samaj Samta Sangh.
He established the Independent Labour Party in 1927.
He organised the Mahad satyagraha in 1927.
He demanded separate electorates for the untouchables. He was nominated as a delegate of the three Round Table Conferences in London (1930-32).
In 1932 The Communal Award was announced by the British Prime-Minister which provided for separate electorates for the depressed classes.
The award was severely condemned by Gandhi. Which eventually led to the signing of the Poona Pact in 1932 between Gandhiji and Ambedkar, which provided for reservation of seats for the depressed classes in the general constituencies.

- **Periyar EV Ramaswamy (1879 – 1973)**
  Erode Venkata Ramasamy, he was affectionately called as Periyar.
  He was also known as Socrates of South East Asia.
  He was a radical social reformer of Tamil Nadu.
  He founded the Self-Respect Movement or the Dravidar Kazhagam.
  He was also the founder of the Dravidar Kazhagam political party.
  He was involved in securing rights to entry into temples and access to temple roads for people of all castes in Vaikom in Kerala.
  He advocated for an independent Dravida Nadu (Dravidistan).

**Self Respect Movement**
E.V. Ramaswami Naicker founded the Suyamariyati iyakkam otherwise known as the Self-Respect Movement.
It was founded in the year 1925.
The Tamil language weekly Kudi Arasu (People's Government) was founded in May 1924 became the organ of the Self-Respect Movement.
Self respect movement was a reform movement dedicated to the goal of giving non-Brahmins a sense of pride based on their Dravidianist past.
The movement aimed at a society where backward castes have equal human rights and to inculcation and dissemination the knowledge of political education among the masses.
The movement denied the superiority of the Brahmins.
The main aim of the movement was to:
- lead life with dignity and self-respect
- to do away with the exploitative system based on superstitions and beliefs.
- abolition of the evil social practices
- protection of women rights
- establishment and maintenance of homes for orphans and widow

- **Arige Ramaswamy** - Notable Dalit Leader of Secunderabad. Ex-minister of Andrapradesh.