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## **Dalit Women in History: Socio-Political Struggles, Resistance, and Assertion of Identity**

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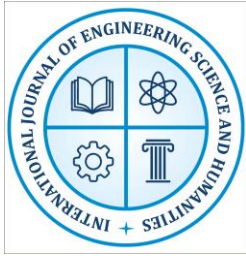
### **Abstract**

Dalit women's history in India reflects the intersection of caste, class, and gender oppression, making their struggles distinct within the broader narratives of both women's and Dalit movements. Historically relegated to the margins, Dalit women faced untouchability, sexual violence, and economic exploitation while being denied education and dignity. Reformers such as Jyotirao and Savitribai Phule, along with Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, initiated movements that recognized their plight and emphasized education, self-respect, and socio-political participation. In the post-independence era, Dalit women became active in grassroots struggles for land, wages, and social justice, while also entering political leadership, symbolized by figures like Mayawati. Their voices, often neglected in mainstream feminist discourse, gave rise to Dalit feminism, which foregrounds caste as central to women's oppression. Through literature, activism, and community leadership, Dalit women continue to resist discrimination, assert identity, and reshape narratives of social transformation in India.

**Keywords:** Dalit Women, Caste and Gender Oppression, Socio-Political Struggles, Dalit Feminism, Empowerment and Resistance.

### **Introduction**

The history of Dalit women in India is a history of multiple marginalizations, where caste, class, and gender intersect to create one of the most oppressed identities in the subcontinent. From ancient times, Dalit women were relegated to the lowest rungs of the social order, subjected to untouchability, social exclusion, sexual exploitation, and economic deprivation, while simultaneously denied dignity and voice. Unlike upper-caste women, who were bound by patriarchal restrictions yet enjoyed relative caste privilege, Dalit women endured the dual oppression of caste-based discrimination and gender subjugation, making their struggles uniquely challenging and historically under-documented. During the colonial period, Dalit women began to find spaces for resistance through the efforts of social reformers like Jyotirao Phule and Savitribai Phule, who opened schools for marginalized girls, challenging both Brahmanical patriarchy and caste hegemony. Missionary education and early reform movements further created avenues for Dalit women to question their subjugation and assert their agency. The emergence of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar in the early 20th century marked a turning point, as he not only championed women's rights but also mobilized Dalit women in political and social



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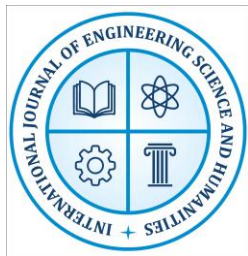
struggles such as the Mahad Satyagraha and the fight for temple entry, while emphasizing education as a tool of liberation. In the post-independence period, Dalit women played vital roles in grassroots struggles for land rights, fair wages, and dignity, while also emerging as leaders in political spaces, exemplified by figures like Mayawati who redefined the possibilities of Dalit women's political participation. At the same time, Dalit women have continuously challenged the limitations of mainstream feminist movements, which often overlooked caste realities, thereby giving rise to Dalit feminism as a distinct and necessary discourse that foregrounds the voices of the most marginalized. Today, through literature, autobiographies, activism, and participation in movements for social justice, Dalit women articulate their lived experiences of oppression and resistance, asserting their identity and reclaiming their historical agency. Their struggles highlight not only the resilience of marginalized women but also the urgent need to re-examine Indian history and society from the perspective of those who have been most silenced.

## Definition of Dalit Identity and Historical Marginalization

The term *Dalit*, derived from the Sanskrit word meaning “broken” or “oppressed,” signifies not merely a caste category but a lived reality of exclusion, humiliation, and systemic oppression rooted in India's caste hierarchy. Historically, Dalits were placed outside the fourfold Varna system and branded as “untouchables,” condemned to degrading occupations such as manual scavenging, leatherwork, and agricultural bondage, thereby sustaining their economic exploitation and social invisibility. They were denied entry into temples, schools, and public spaces, forced to live on the margins of villages, and subjected to social ostracism and violence that reinforced caste-based hierarchies. Dalit women, in particular, bore the double burden of caste and gender oppression, becoming the most vulnerable victims of exploitation. However, the Dalit identity is not limited to marginalization alone; it is also a collective assertion of dignity, rights, and self-respect. Reformers like Jyotirao Phule, Savitribai Phule, and most significantly Dr. B.R. Ambedkar redefined the meaning of Dalit by linking it with resistance and emancipation, emphasizing education, equality, and socio-political participation as tools of liberation. Ambedkar's struggles against untouchability, demand for temple entry, and advocacy for constitutional safeguards for Scheduled Castes transformed Dalit identity into a political category of empowerment. Over time, the Dalit identity evolved as a counter-hegemonic narrative, shaping social movements, literature, and activism that challenge Brahmanical dominance and demand justice. Thus, Dalit identity, born out of historical marginalization, symbolizes both the scars of oppression and the spirit of resilience, continuing to redefine Indian democracy and the quest for social equality.

## Impact of Colonial Legal Reforms and Missionary Interventions on Dalit Women's Lives

The colonial period in India brought significant socio-political transformations that directly and indirectly affected Dalit women, who had historically been the most marginalized due to the



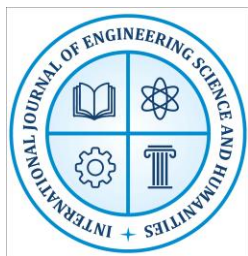
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intersection of caste and gender oppression. British legal reforms, while primarily designed to stabilize governance, introduced changes that began to challenge traditional caste hierarchies, particularly through the outlawing of practices like *sati* and child marriage, as well as the introduction of widow remarriage and limited property rights for women. Although these reforms were not specifically targeted at Dalit women, they created new legal frameworks that subtly opened spaces for questioning patriarchal and caste-based norms. More impactful, however, were the efforts of Christian missionaries who, through their educational and social initiatives, offered Dalit women access to schools, vocational training, and religious conversion, which provided both literacy and a pathway to escape entrenched caste oppression. Missionary schools often admitted girls from “untouchable” communities when upper-caste institutions excluded them, thereby enabling Dalit women to achieve the first steps toward self-assertion through education. Conversion to Christianity also offered some Dalit women a sense of dignity and alternative identity, free from the stigma of untouchability, even though caste discrimination persisted in different forms within converted communities. Furthermore, missionaries campaigned against exploitative practices such as the *devadasi* system, bonded labor, and sexual exploitation, which disproportionately affected Dalit women. The introduction of Western ideals of equality, coupled with the colonial discourse on rights, began to influence reformers like Jyotirao and Savitribai Phule, who established schools for Dalit girls and worked tirelessly for their empowerment. While colonial interventions cannot be romanticized as purely emancipatory—since they also carried the burden of cultural imperialism and religious agendas—they nonetheless created avenues for Dalit women to access education, articulate grievances, and gradually participate in reform movements. Thus, the combined influence of legal reforms and missionary activities planted the seeds of change by breaking the monopoly of caste-patriarchal structures, enabling Dalit women to slowly move from invisibility to visibility in the socio-political sphere and laying the groundwork for their later involvement in Ambedkarite and feminist struggles.

## **Ambedkarite Era and Dalit Women’s Assertion**

The Ambedkarite era marked a turning point in the history of Dalit women’s struggles, as Dr. B.R. Ambedkar not only challenged the oppressive structures of caste but also placed strong emphasis on the liberation of women as an essential condition for social equality and justice. Ambedkar’s advocacy for women’s rights was revolutionary in its scope: he argued for gender equality in education, property rights, and employment, while forcefully criticizing child marriage, caste-endogamy, and patriarchal restrictions that confined women to subordination. His leadership inspired Dalit women to participate in mass movements that redefined their roles in public life. In the Mahad Satyagraha of 1927, which asserted the right of Dalits to access public water sources, Dalit women joined alongside men, challenging not only untouchability but



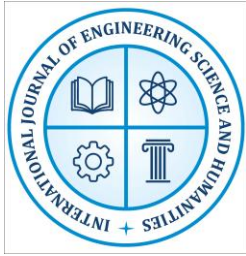
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also the traditional confinement of women to domestic spaces. Similarly, during temple entry movements, women's presence symbolized both religious defiance and gender assertion, as they broke centuries-old prohibitions. Dalit women also participated in labor strikes, particularly in textile mills and agricultural fields, where their struggles highlighted the exploitation of Dalit women workers within both caste and class hierarchies. Ambedkar consistently urged women to pursue education as a tool of emancipation, famously declaring that "educate, agitate, and organize" applied equally to them. This vision encouraged many Dalit women to become teachers, writers, and social activists, breaking generational cycles of illiteracy and dependence. The Ambedkarite movement also emphasized political representation, enabling Dalit women to demand recognition within legislative structures and local governance, thereby challenging both caste patriarchy and male-dominated politics. Ambedkar's drafting of the Hindu Code Bill further reflected his commitment to women's equality, as it sought to secure rights to inheritance, divorce, and property, although its dilution disappointed him deeply. Despite societal resistance, the Ambedkarite era empowered Dalit women to assert themselves not merely as victims of oppression but as active participants in shaping a new socio-political order. This era thus laid the foundation for Dalit feminism, situating Dalit women's struggles at the heart of anti-caste movements and embedding their voices in the broader discourse of equality, justice, and democratic participation in modern India.

## **Role in Reform Movements**

Dalit women have played a crucial role in reform movements that sought to dismantle caste oppression and patriarchal control, asserting their agency within both social and political struggles. Their contributions can be traced to the pioneering efforts of reformers like Jyotirao and Savitribai Phule, who emphasized the education of Dalit girls as a revolutionary step toward emancipation. Savitribai's schools became important spaces where Dalit women could break the cycle of illiteracy and dependence, while Jyotirao's anti-caste activism directly challenged Brahmanical hegemony, encouraging Dalit women to step into public life. The influence of B.R. Ambedkar further galvanized their participation; his philosophy of "educate, agitate, organize" resonated deeply with Dalit women, who joined movements such as the Mahad Satyagraha and temple entry struggles, where their presence symbolized both defiance of untouchability and resistance against gendered exclusion. Dalit women also found ideological support in Periyar's Self-Respect Movement in South India, which not only critiqued caste hierarchy but also encouraged women to reject oppressive religious customs, promote inter-caste marriages, and assert equality in family and social relations. Within these reform movements, Dalit women's involvement extended beyond symbolic participation to active leadership in organizing protests, strikes, and campaigns that addressed issues of labor exploitation, sexual violence, and social exclusion. Women's organizations during this period increasingly incorporated Dalit women's



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concerns, giving them a platform to articulate their struggles, though often their voices had to fight against erasure within broader feminist or reformist narratives. Nevertheless, Dalit women redefined the scope of reform movements by linking anti-caste struggles with gender justice, thereby challenging the dual oppressions they faced. Their participation in temple entry agitations, self-respect marriages, and educational reforms symbolized a broader challenge to both caste and patriarchal dominance, while their leadership within grassroots movements ensured that reform was not limited to rhetoric but translated into tangible changes in everyday life. Thus, Dalit women's role in reform movements highlights their agency as catalysts of social change, situating them not as passive recipients of reform but as active participants and leaders whose struggles were central to the transformation of Indian society.

## **Post-Independence Scenario**

The post-independence period marked a new phase in Dalit women's struggles, as they moved beyond the frameworks of colonial reform and Ambedkarite mobilization to carve independent spaces of assertion in politics, literature, and grassroots activism. The rise of the Dalit Panthers movement in the 1970s was particularly significant, as Dalit women participated in its radical campaigns against caste atrocities and systemic exclusion, linking their struggles to broader movements for social justice and equality. Their involvement was not only in support roles but also in shaping the ideological direction of the movement, highlighting the specific ways caste and gender intersected in their oppression. Parallel to these radical assertions, Dalit women began to emerge as prominent political leaders who challenged the entrenched dominance of both caste elites and male-centered politics. Figures such as Mayawati symbolized the political potential of Dalit women, rising from a marginalized background to become the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh and demonstrating that Dalit women could command authority in India's most patriarchal and caste-bound political spaces. Similarly, Shantabai Kamble, through her writings and activism, gave voice to the lived experiences of Dalit women, bridging politics and literature. Beyond electoral politics, Dalit women also engaged in powerful grassroots struggles centered on land rights, agricultural wages, and dignity, confronting both caste landlords and patriarchal structures that exploited them as cheap labor. They organized protests against bonded labor, fought for access to water and common lands, and raised their voices against caste-based sexual violence, making the demand for dignity central to their activism. These struggles reflected a new phase of agency, where Dalit women were not merely participants in broader Dalit movements but leaders who foregrounded their own concerns within them. Thus, in the post-independence scenario, Dalit women asserted themselves as political leaders, cultural voices, and grassroots activists, ensuring that their struggles for land, wages, dignity, and justice became inseparable from the larger discourse of democracy and equality in India.



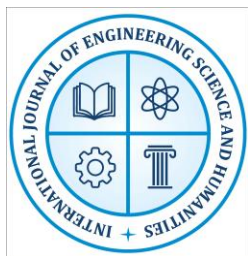


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## Conclusion

The historical journey of Dalit women reflects an enduring struggle against the intertwined forces of caste, class, and patriarchy, which relegated them to the margins of Indian society for centuries. From the denial of education, property, and dignity in ancient and medieval times, to the slow openings created during colonial rule through legal reforms, missionary interventions, and reformist initiatives by visionaries like Jyotirao and Savitribai Phule, Dalit women gradually carved spaces of resistance and assertion. The Ambedkarite era marked a watershed moment, as Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's vision of social democracy and his insistence on women's equality empowered Dalit women to participate in satyagrahas, temple entry movements, labor struggles, and educational initiatives that redefined their role in public life. Post-independence, their struggles extended into grassroots movements for land, wages, and dignity, as well as political leadership, exemplified by figures like Mayawati who challenged both caste hierarchies and male dominance in governance. At the same time, Dalit women writers and activists emerged as powerful voices, documenting lived experiences of caste and gender violence, while also articulating new frameworks of resistance that questioned the limitations of mainstream feminism and gave rise to Dalit feminism as a distinct ideological discourse. Their assertion through literature, politics, and activism continues to highlight the resilience of marginalized women and their central role in India's democratic struggles. Thus, the history of Dalit women is not merely one of victimhood but of agency, transformation, and empowerment, revealing how oppressed women have continually redefined identity, challenged structures of inequality, and contributed to broader movements for social justice. Their socio-political struggles, past and present, remind us that the pursuit of equality in India cannot be complete without recognizing and foregrounding the voices of Dalit women who stand at the heart of resistance against caste oppression.



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