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Comparison of Dalit movements in India with civil rights struggles in the USA

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Abstract

The Dalit movements in India and the Civil Rights struggles in the USA represent two powerful histories of resistance against systemic oppression, rooted respectively in caste and race. Both emerged from centuries of exclusion—Dalits facing untouchability, social ostracism, and denial of education, while African Americans endured slavery, segregation, and disenfranchisement. Leaders such as B.R. Ambedkar and Martin Luther King Jr. provided ideological foundations, emphasizing law, education, and collective mobilization as tools for social transformation. While Ambedkar advocated the annihilation of caste and conversion to Buddhism, King championed non-violent protest and constitutional rights, with figures like Malcolm X and the Dalit Panthers adding radical dimensions. Literature, culture, and women's voices were central in shaping identity and resistance, from Dalit autobiographies to African American writings. Though caste and race differ as axes of inequality, both struggles converge in their pursuit of dignity, equality, and justice, offering enduring lessons for contemporary human rights movements.

Keywords: Dalit Movements, Civil Rights Struggles, Caste and Race, Social Justice, Resistance and Identity

Introduction

The comparison between Dalit movements in India and the Civil Rights struggles in the USA reveals striking parallels in their historical roots, ideological frameworks, and modes of resistance against entrenched systems of inequality. In India, Dalit movements emerged as a response to centuries of caste-based oppression, untouchability, and social exclusion institutionalized through the rigid hierarchy of the varna system. Leaders like Jyotirao Phule and B.R. Ambedkar provided intellectual and political foundations for Dalit assertion, while post-independence mobilizations such as the Dalit Panthers and the rise of the Bahujan Samaj Party sought political representation, cultural identity, and social justice. Similarly, the African American struggle for civil rights was deeply rooted in the legacy of slavery, racial segregation under Jim Crow laws, and systemic disenfranchisement. Spearheaded by leaders like Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, Rosa Parks, and organizations such as the NAACP, the movement combined non-violent civil disobedience, grassroots activism, and legal battles to challenge racial discrimination and demand equal rights. Both movements foregrounded education, law, and collective mobilization as vehicles for liberation while simultaneously producing powerful cultural and literary expressions—Dalit autobiographies and protest poetry in India, and African American literature, speeches, and music in the United States—that articulated the pain of



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oppression and the hope for dignity. Importantly, women played a critical role in both contexts, with Dalit women writers like Bama, Baby Kamble, and Urmila Pawar challenging the double burden of caste and gender, while figures such as Rosa Parks, Angela Davis, and Maya Angelou confronted racialized patriarchy in America. Despite differences—caste being a uniquely South Asian social stratification and race being historically tied to colonial slavery in the West—the two struggles converge in their fight for equality, justice, and recognition of marginalized identities. Their legacies remain alive in contemporary debates: in India through continuing struggles against caste violence and in the USA through movements like Black Lives Matter. Theoretical frameworks such as Ambedkarite thought, Subaltern Studies, Critical Race Theory, and Intersectionality further enrich this comparative analysis by exposing how systems of domination operate across societies. Thus, studying these two emancipatory struggles together not only highlights shared experiences of oppression and resistance but also contributes to a deeper global understanding of human rights, dignity, and the continuing quest for social transformation.

Dalit Movements in India

The Dalit movements in India represent one of the most significant struggles for social justice and equality in modern history, rooted in centuries of oppression under the caste system that relegated Dalits to the lowest rung of the varna hierarchy, branding them as “untouchables” and excluding them from temples, education, land ownership, and social interaction. The historical roots of these movements lie in the deep-seated practices of untouchability and social exclusion that denied Dalits basic human dignity and equal rights. Early forms of resistance can be traced back to the Bhakti movement, where saint-poets like Ravidas, Kabir, and Chokhamela challenged caste hierarchies through devotional songs and egalitarian spiritual messages that emphasized human equality before God. However, systematic and organized movements began with Jyotirao Phule in the 19th century, who, along with his wife Savitribai Phule, fought for education of Dalits and women while critiquing Brahmanical dominance. This resistance gained momentum in the 20th century through the towering leadership of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, who not only framed the Indian Constitution with provisions for equality and social justice but also led mass mobilizations such as the Mahad Satyagraha and the Kalaram Temple Entry Movement, and finally inspired Dalits to embrace Buddhism as a path of liberation from caste oppression. Post-independence, the struggle continued with new dimensions; Kanshi Ram mobilized Bahujan communities and founded the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), giving Dalits a strong political platform to assert their rights and influence mainstream politics. The 1970s witnessed the rise of the Dalit Panthers, a radical youth movement inspired by the Black Panthers in the USA, which used literature, art, and street-level activism to protest caste violence and demand dignity. Through these phases, Dalit assertion expanded beyond political demands to cultural and



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literary expressions, as seen in autobiographies and protest writings that documented the lived realities of caste discrimination. Today, while the Indian state has introduced affirmative action and legal safeguards, caste atrocities and discrimination persist, making Dalit movements an ongoing struggle for dignity, equality, and justice. The trajectory from Bhakti saints to Ambedkar, Kanshi Ram, and the Dalit Panthers thus reflects a continuous legacy of resistance against oppression and a determined effort to transform Indian society into one based on equality and human rights.

Common Struggles and Ideologies

The Dalit movements in India and the Civil Rights struggles in the United States, though shaped by different historical and cultural contexts, converge in their experiences of oppression, resistance, and the pursuit of justice. At the core lies oppression based on rigid social hierarchies—caste in India and race in the USA—both functioning as systemic mechanisms to deny marginalized communities' access to equality and dignity. For Dalits, untouchability and caste stratification perpetuated exclusion from temples, wells, land, and social participation, while African Americans endured slavery, segregation, and systemic racism that relegated them to second-class citizenship. Despite these different axes of discrimination, both communities shared common struggles for human dignity, equal rights, and freedom from institutionalized injustice. Everyday life became a site of visible discrimination: Dalits were denied entry into temples, schools, and public spaces, while African Americans faced “separate but equal” segregation in schools, transport, restaurants, and neighborhoods, all reinforcing social exclusion. Education and self-respect emerged as crucial ideological tools of resistance in both contexts—Ambedkar’s call to “educate, agitate, and organize” emphasized knowledge as the pathway to emancipation, just as leaders in the Civil Rights Movement demanded equal schooling and desegregation as preconditions for racial justice. The struggles were also deeply rooted in the assertion of self-respect, with Dalit leaders urging their communities to reject caste-based humiliation and embrace new identities, while African Americans emphasized racial pride, cultural affirmation, and self-determination. Both movements shared the vision of equality and justice through legal reforms, mass mobilization, and cultural assertion, making them interconnected struggles against systemic oppression. In essence, the common ideologies of resistance reflected a universal quest for human dignity, underscoring the shared experiences of marginalized groups across continents.

Leadership and Mobilization

The leadership and mobilization strategies of the Dalit movements in India and the Civil Rights struggles in the USA reveal striking parallels as well as crucial differences shaped by context. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and Martin Luther King Jr. stand as towering figures, both advocating constitutional reform, non-violent means of protest, and the moral urgency of social



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transformation. Ambedkar emphasized education, legal safeguards, and the annihilation of caste through structural change, even urging Dalits to reject Hindu orthodoxy by embracing Buddhism as a path of dignity and equality. King, influenced by Christian ethics and Gandhian non-violence, mobilized African Americans through marches, sit-ins, and civil disobedience, making moral appeals to the conscience of the nation. Yet, ideological differences were clear: Ambedkar distrusted upper-caste reformers and rejected compromise, while King sought interracial alliances to achieve racial harmony. Alongside these moderate visions, radical approaches emerged in both contexts—the Dalit Panthers in 1970s India, inspired directly by the Black Panthers in the USA, adopted militant rhetoric, cultural assertion, and street activism to confront caste violence, while the Black Power movement emphasized self-defense, Black pride, and autonomy against white supremacy. Both radical wings criticized the limitations of moderate leadership and galvanized youth into more assertive forms of resistance. Importantly, women's contributions in both movements played a transformative role but often remained under-acknowledged. In India, Savitribai Phule pioneered education for Dalit girls, while Dalit feminists such as Bama, Baby Kamble, and Urmila Pawar gave voice to the intersection of caste and gender oppression. In the USA, Rosa Parks' refusal to give up her bus seat in Montgomery sparked one of the most significant mobilizations of the movement, while leaders like Fannie Lou Hamer boldly challenged voter suppression and highlighted the struggles of poor Black women in the South. Together, these leaders and activists demonstrated that liberation required not only charismatic figures but also grassroots participation across gender and class lines. The interplay of non-violent advocacy, radical militancy, and women's voices thus shaped the dynamic character of both struggles, ensuring that they were not just political movements but transformative social revolutions.

Conclusion

The comparison of Dalit movements in India and the Civil Rights struggles in the USA highlights the universality of human resistance against systemic oppression while also underscoring the specificities of caste and race as structures of inequality. Both movements arose from centuries of exploitation, exclusion, and humiliation, yet transformed these histories of suffering into powerful struggles for dignity, justice, and equality. In India, Dalit assertion evolved from the spiritual resistance of Bhakti saints to the radical reforms of Jyotirao Phule, the constitutional vision of B.R. Ambedkar, the political mobilization of Kanshi Ram, and the cultural militancy of the Dalit Panthers. In the United States, the fight against slavery and segregation found its modern expression in the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s, led by Martin Luther King Jr.'s non-violent vision, complemented by Malcolm X's radical nationalism, the grassroots courage of Rosa Parks, and the organizational power of the NAACP. Both contexts witnessed parallel developments in radical approaches—Dalit Panthers in India



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and the Black Power movement in the USA—that energized marginalized youth and articulated identity with pride and defiance. Women, too, played crucial roles, from Savitribai Phule and Dalit feminists to Rosa Parks and Fannie Lou Hamer, challenging the dual oppressions of gender and hierarchy. Common ideologies such as the fight against social segregation, the centrality of education, the assertion of self-respect, and the demand for equal participation reveal shared strategies of resistance. At the same time, differences remain: caste, a deeply religiously sanctioned hierarchy in India, differs structurally from race, which is historically linked to colonial slavery and segregation in the USA. Yet, both struggles have left enduring legacies, shaping affirmative action, political consciousness, and ongoing movements like Dalit rights activism and Black Lives Matter. In essence, these struggles demonstrate that the quest for justice transcends borders, offering valuable insights into global human rights discourses and the unfinished journey toward equality and social transformation.

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