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Abolition movements (slavery in America caste oppression in India).

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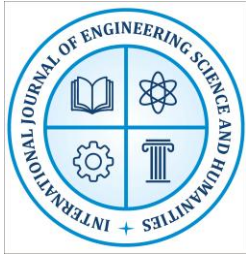
Abstract

The comparative study of abolition movements against slavery in America and caste oppression in India reveals how deeply entrenched systems of human subjugation were challenged through sustained struggles for justice, equality, and dignity. While American slavery was based on race and legitimized through economic and legal structures, the Indian caste system was rooted in religious sanction and hereditary stratification, relegating Dalits to lives of exclusion. Both movements, though shaped by different cultural contexts, were driven by powerful leaders, reformers, and literature that exposed oppression and mobilized resistance. In America, abolitionist activism, narratives of enslaved individuals, and the Civil War led to emancipation, while in India, social reformers and Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's radical vision culminated in constitutional safeguards against untouchability. Yet, legacies of racism and casteism persist, making these struggles relevant even today. This study highlights abolition as an unfinished project, vital for global discourses on equality and human rights.

Keywords: Slavery, Caste Oppression, Abolition Movements, Social Justice, Human Rights

Introduction

The history of human civilization is marked not only by progress and enlightenment but also by deep-rooted structures of exploitation, among which slavery in America and caste oppression in India stand as two of the most dehumanizing systems. Both operated on rigid hierarchies—slavery on the basis of race and caste oppression on the basis of birth—denying millions their dignity, freedom, and equal status. In America, slavery emerged from the transatlantic slave trade and became the backbone of the plantation economy, treating human beings as property, while in India, the caste system sanctioned by religious texts created a hereditary order of privilege and subjugation, reducing Dalits and “untouchables” to lives of exclusion and degradation. Against these oppressive structures arose powerful abolition movements that sought to dismantle the chains of bondage and affirm the universality of human rights. In the United States, abolitionists such as Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman, and William Lloyd Garrison, alongside literature like slave narratives and *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, exposed the horrors of slavery and mobilized moral, political, and social opposition that culminated in the Civil War and the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863. In India, social reformers like Jyotirao and Savitribai Phule laid the foundations of anti-caste struggle through education and awareness, while Dr. B. R. Ambedkar gave it a radical constitutional dimension by demanding the annihilation of caste, securing rights for Dalits, and embedding equality in the Indian Constitution. Although both



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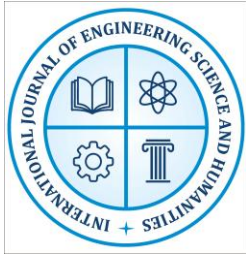
movements unfolded in distinct cultural and historical contexts, they shared the core ideals of liberty, justice, and human dignity, and both faced fierce resistance from entrenched interests that sought to preserve inequality. Importantly, neither slavery's abolition nor caste's legal eradication fully erased the deep scars of centuries-long oppression, as contemporary realities of racial discrimination in America and caste-based violence in India reveal the persistence of structural injustices. Thus, studying these movements comparatively not only illuminates their historical significance but also highlights their continuing relevance in global struggles for equality and social justice, reminding us that abolition is not merely a past achievement but an ongoing process of human emancipation.

Definition of Abolition in Different Contexts (Legal, Social, Moral)

The concept of abolition has been historically understood as the complete eradication of an entrenched system of injustice, yet its meaning expands across legal, social, and moral dimensions. In the legal context, abolition refers to the formal termination of laws and institutions that uphold oppressive practices, such as the Emancipation Proclamation and the 13th Amendment in America that legally ended slavery, or Article 17 of the Indian Constitution which outlawed untouchability and caste-based discrimination. However, legal abolition alone does not ensure the disappearance of deep-rooted prejudices, making the social dimension equally significant. Social abolition involves challenging the customs, traditions, and practices that perpetuate exclusion and inequality, such as racial segregation in America or caste-based restrictions in India, which required reform movements, mass mobilization, and grassroots struggles to dismantle. Beyond legal and social change lies the moral dimension, which emphasizes the ethical imperative of abolition as a recognition of the inherent dignity and humanity of all individuals. Moral abolition entails transforming collective consciousness, redefining values of justice, and cultivating empathy that rejects exploitation in every form. Thus, abolition in its fullest sense is not limited to institutional reforms but represents a holistic transformation of law, society, and morality, seeking not only to remove visible chains of slavery or caste but also to eradicate the invisible chains of prejudice and inequality that linger in collective attitudes. It is this comprehensive understanding that makes abolition both a historical achievement and a continuing moral responsibility.

Comparative Lens: Race-Based Slavery in America vs. Caste-Based Oppression in India

Slavery in America and caste-based oppression in India, though arising in different cultural, geographical, and historical contexts, represent two of the most systematic forms of human exploitation, bound together by their reliance on hereditary, inescapable hierarchies that defined the social worth of individuals. American slavery emerged as a direct consequence of the transatlantic slave trade, where millions of Africans were forcibly transported, commodified, and reduced to property to sustain the plantation economy. Race became the essential marker of



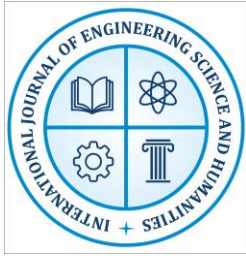
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subjugation: skin color determined status, with Black people permanently excluded from citizenship, education, and autonomy, regardless of personal merit or effort. In India, caste stratification, codified in texts like Manusmriti, created a rigid system of social ordering where Dalits and “untouchables” were relegated to the lowest status, condemned to hereditary occupations considered impure, and socially ostracized through practices of untouchability. While slavery was primarily an economic institution justified through racist ideology, caste was a religiously sanctioned order that penetrated every sphere of life—from food, marriage, and education to social interactions. Yet both shared a common feature: dehumanization and systemic denial of equality. In America, abolitionists such as Frederick Douglass and Harriet Tubman, alongside movements like the Underground Railroad, challenged slavery by exposing its moral contradictions, while in India, reformers like Jyotirao and Savitribai Phule and later Dr. B. R. Ambedkar attacked caste oppression through education, social reform, and constitutional measures. A comparative lens reveals striking similarities in resistance too, as both systems were dismantled not only by law but also through cultural revolutions and the assertion of identity by oppressed communities—slave narratives in America and Dalit autobiographies in India both became powerful testimonies of resilience. However, the aftermath of abolition highlights a shared reality: neither the 13th Amendment in the United States nor Article 17 of the Indian Constitution fully eradicated the social and psychological chains of subjugation, as racial discrimination and caste violence persist even today. Thus, while slavery and caste appear distinct, their legacies converge in demonstrating how entrenched hierarchies resist transformation, requiring continuous struggles for dignity, equality, and justice.

Structural Inequalities as Systems of Exploitation

At the core of both slavery in America and caste oppression in India lies the architecture of structural inequalities that operated through property, labor, notions of purity and pollution, and segregation, which together functioned as systems of exploitation designed to perpetuate dominance and dependence. Property was the foundation of American slavery, where enslaved Africans were not only denied ownership but were themselves legally commodified as property, bought and sold to enrich slaveholders. In contrast, in India, caste-based restrictions denied Dalits access to landownership and resources, keeping them economically dependent on upper castes and perpetuating generational poverty. Labor was another shared axis of exploitation: enslaved people in America worked under coercion on plantations, producing wealth they could never claim, while Dalits in India were forced into hereditary occupations such as manual scavenging, bonded agricultural work, and menial labor that reinforced their subjugated status. Purity and pollution functioned as ideological justifications—American slavery was legitimized through pseudo-scientific racism that declared Black people inherently inferior, while Indian caste ideology classified Dalits as “untouchable” and polluted, excluding them from temples,



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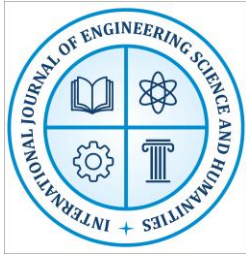
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schools, and wells. Segregation institutionalized these inequalities further: in America, it took the form of physical and legal segregation, from slave quarters to Jim Crow laws, ensuring racial hierarchies even after emancipation; in India, untouchability practices, separate settlements, and caste-based prohibitions institutionalized exclusion in every aspect of daily life. These interlocking structures made oppression systemic, not incidental, ensuring that inequality was reproduced generation after generation. Yet resistance emerged precisely by challenging these structures: abolitionists in America fought for the recognition of Black humanity and rights to land, labor, and freedom, while in India, reformers and Dalit leaders demanded land redistribution, access to education, and the annihilation of caste as a religiously sanctioned system. The parallels demonstrate how structural inequalities, though contextually different, operate through common mechanisms of denying access to property, controlling labor, legitimizing subordination through ideology, and enforcing segregation. Importantly, they reveal that true abolition is not simply the removal of oppressive laws but the dismantling of the very structures that sustain inequality, making the struggle for justice an ongoing process of reconstructing society on principles of equality and dignity.

Rise of Abolitionist Movements

In America

The rise of the abolitionist movement in America was deeply intertwined with religious, moral, and intellectual currents that sought to dismantle slavery and affirm the universality of human freedom. Among the earliest voices were religious groups, particularly the Quakers, who denounced slavery as incompatible with Christian teachings of equality and brotherhood, and Evangelicals who infused the movement with a moral urgency that slavery was not only an economic injustice but a grave sin against God and humanity. This moral foundation provided the backdrop for the emergence of powerful abolitionist leaders who gave the movement a voice and direction. Frederick Douglass, himself an escaped slave, became one of the most articulate spokesmen of abolition, using his oratory and autobiography to expose the brutality of bondage and to assert the intellectual and moral capacity of Black people. Harriet Tubman, another escaped slave, embodied resistance through action by organizing the Underground Railroad, leading hundreds of enslaved people to freedom despite immense personal risks. William Lloyd Garrison, through his influential newspaper *The Liberator*, called for the immediate emancipation of slaves and uncompromisingly condemned the institution as morally indefensible. Alongside these leaders, literature played a transformative role in shaping public opinion. Slave narratives, such as Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, brought firsthand testimonies of cruelty and resilience, while Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* dramatized the horrors of slavery in a way that resonated with the conscience of ordinary readers, igniting both sympathy and outrage. Collectively, religious conviction,



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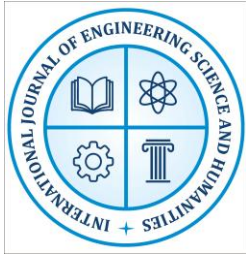
charismatic leadership, and the power of the written word converged to make the American abolitionist movement a formidable moral and political force, ultimately contributing to the Civil War and the eventual legal end of slavery.

In India

In the Indian context, the rise of anti-caste abolitionist movements was equally powerful though shaped by religiously sanctioned social hierarchies rather than race-based slavery. The earliest seeds were sown by reformers such as Jyotirao Phule and his wife Savitribai Phule in the nineteenth century. Phule vehemently criticized the Brahminical order that justified caste inequalities and worked toward educating the oppressed classes, establishing schools for Dalits and women to break the chains of ignorance and subordination. Savitribai Phule, recognized as India's first female teacher, challenged patriarchal and casteist restrictions simultaneously by promoting literacy and dignity for marginalized communities. Their reformist activism laid the groundwork for a more radical articulation of abolition under the leadership of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, the most significant figure in the struggle against caste oppression. Ambedkar exposed the religious and structural foundations of untouchability, famously declaring that political reforms would be hollow without social and religious reform, and that true freedom required the "annihilation of caste." His leadership translated into both intellectual critique and institutional change, culminating in the drafting of the Indian Constitution which legally abolished untouchability (Article 17) and guaranteed equality. Parallel to these political and social interventions, Dalit literature emerged as a profound voice of resistance. Autobiographies, poems, and novels written by Dalit writers narrated lived experiences of humiliation, poverty, and exclusion, not as passive victimhood but as powerful assertions of identity and dignity. Like slave narratives in America, Dalit literature became a weapon of protest and consciousness-raising, ensuring that the anti-caste movement was not confined to legal measures but was also cultural and psychological. Together, these forces created a transformative anti-caste abolitionist tradition that continues to inspire movements for social justice in contemporary India.

Conclusion

The abolition movements against slavery in America and caste oppression in India, though emerging from vastly different cultural and historical contexts, reveal strikingly similar trajectories of struggle, resistance, and aspiration for human dignity. Both systems—slavery based on race and caste oppression based on birth—were deeply entrenched, legitimized by economic, legal, or religious structures, and enforced through generations of exploitation. Yet, the resilience of the oppressed and the determination of reformers, leaders, and writers created powerful currents of resistance that could not be silenced. In America, abolitionists drew on religious faith, moral conviction, and the courage of leaders such as Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman, and William Lloyd Garrison, supported by the transformative role of literature in



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stirring public conscience, to ultimately bring about emancipation. In India, reformers like Jyotirao and Savitribai Phule planted the seeds of anti-caste struggle through education, while Dr. B. R. Ambedkar gave it radical political direction by demanding the annihilation of caste and embedding equality in the Constitution, with Dalit literature amplifying the voices of the marginalized. Despite these legal victories, however, the legacies of slavery and caste persist, evident in racial discrimination in the United States and caste-based violence and exclusion in India, reminding us that legal abolition does not automatically erase social and psychological chains of prejudice. A comparative understanding of these movements demonstrates that abolition is not a singular historical event but an ongoing process of challenging inequality, reconstructing social values, and fostering human rights. By revisiting these struggles, we recognize both their historical triumphs and their unfinished agendas, emphasizing that the fight for justice continues in the present, demanding vigilance, solidarity, and collective moral responsibility to ensure a truly equitable society.

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