

Negotiating Equality: Dalit Life and Social Transformation in Post-Independence India

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Abstract

Whether Dalit life in India has genuinely improved since independence isn't a question with a tidy answer. It has—and it hasn't, not nearly enough—and those two things can't be pulled apart. This paper looks at five areas: law and constitutional reform, economic life, education, political participation, and cultural production. Across each, it tries to trace what changed, what didn't, and why the distance between the two has refused to close. Ambedkar's constitutional framework was genuinely ambitious—untouchability outlawed, reservations put in place, legal equality guaranteed. None of that amounted to nothing. But a document, even a radical one, doesn't transform a society by existing. What followed 1947 was long, uneven, and frankly messy—a slow-moving negotiation between constitutional promise and a social order that had been doing things a particular way for centuries. It hasn't resolved.

Keywords: Dalit, post-independence India, caste, social transformation, constitutional reform, Ambedkar

Introduction

Whatever else one says about the 1947 Constitution, it was a document that took seriously things that hadn't been taken seriously before. Ambedkar—who had more personal experience of caste discrimination than almost any other figure involved in its drafting—helped write a text that abolished untouchability, guaranteed equality before the law, and built in a reservation system across education, public employment, and political representation (Zelliot 3–15). These weren't gestures. They were deliberate structural interventions, put there by someone who understood exactly what access to opportunity had been denied and to whom. Ambedkar was also, notoriously, unsentimental about what the document could and couldn't accomplish on its own. His warning that political democracy sitting on top of social inequality was inherently unstable wasn't rhetoric—it was, in hindsight, a fairly exact description of what was about to happen (Ambedkar 301).

The gap between constitutional text and social reality showed up quickly, particularly in rural areas where the majority of Dalits lived and where caste was most visibly and most brutally enforced. The same landlords held their land. The same unspoken rules determined who could use which well, which road, which part of the village without trouble. What made this so persistent wasn't just resistance from above—it was that the people tasked with implementing the new legal protections were often the same people with a stake in the old arrangements (Omvedt 211–214). A Dalit person walking into a police station to report being denied access to a public well was frequently talking to someone who simply didn't think this was a problem worth addressing. Both

the Protection of Civil Rights Act of 1955 and the SC/ST Prevention of Atrocities Act of 1989 were, in practice, acknowledgments that the legislation before them had failed. Whether those Acts did better is doubtful, mostly (Human Rights Watch 1–12).

Kilvenmani, December 1968. Forty-four Dalit agricultural workers—mostly women and children—were locked in a hut and burned alive in Tamil Nadu. The landlords had organized it as retaliation for a wage strike. The men eventually charged with the killings were acquitted by the Madras High Court. What lodged this event in Dalit political consciousness wasn't its uniqueness but the opposite—its representativeness. It happened in exactly the way things like this happened: economic assertion by Dalit workers, violent response from landowners, and then the legal system doing very little about it (Viswanath 87–92). All of this twenty-one years after independence. The gap between those two facts is where a lot of this history actually lives.

Six weeks before his death in 1956, Ambedkar converted to Buddhism and led roughly half a million people in doing the same at a ceremony in Nagpur. He'd concluded, over a very long time, that the Hindu social order wasn't going to reform itself from inside—not in the ways that mattered to people at the bottom of it. For those who converted with him, it wasn't primarily a religious event. It was a refusal—of an assigned identity, of a system that had determined their worth before they were born (Zelliot 200–215). Whether conversion delivered the social transformation it reached for is its own complicated question. But it made something visible: Dalit communities weren't waiting around for upper-caste society to arrive at generosity. They were constructing alternatives.

Economic Life and Structural Limits

The economic story is genuinely mixed, and in a way that makes both optimists and pessimists selectively correct. Urbanization opened things up—or opened some things. Cities offered distance from the caste hierarchies of the village, more varied employment, a degree of anonymity that was simply unavailable at home. The reserved positions in public-sector employment produced, over time, a Dalit middle class that hadn't existed before. None of this dissolved caste. Inside city offices and urban workplaces, discrimination found subtler channels: who got mentored, who got recommended, which candidates fit the culture (Thorat and Newman 43–47). The language changed. Merit and fit replaced the older vocabulary. But the effect wasn't fundamentally different.

What Thorat and colleagues did with the audit study methodology in the early 2000s was give this a number. Identical résumés, indistinguishable except for names that signalled caste identity, went to the same job listings. Upper-caste names got significantly more callbacks. This confirmed what Dalit professionals had been saying for years: that credentials didn't cancel out caste in hiring decisions, and that private-sector employers operated in a space where the accountability mechanisms of public employment—however weak—simply didn't apply (Thorat and Newman 56–71). Industry groups pushed back on the methodology. The pushback itself was illustrative.

The 1991 liberalization reforms shrank public-sector employment—the one domain where reservation protections had real purchase—while expanding the private sector, which had none. The

economy restructured itself in a way that happened to move the work from the domain with anti-discrimination rules to the domain without them (Deshpande 118–122). Manual scavenging is the most extreme case. Prohibited in 1993, prohibited again more comprehensively in 2013, it remained widespread. Sewer deaths kept occurring; families were rarely compensated; contractors and municipalities faced little accountability (Teltumbde 93–101). Land reform was similar: the zamindari abolition laws of the early 1950s mostly transferred formal ownership to intermediate-caste tenants, leaving Dalit agricultural labourers—who had been labourers, not tenants—without much to show for it (Omvedt 241–247). The persistent explanation, across all of this, is the same: enforcement depends on enforcers taking the violation seriously, and caste shapes who does.

Education and Institutional Exclusion

Education was where some of the most meaningful changes happened after independence—and also where some of the most carefully documented exclusions continued. Getting through the door of a school or university was a real achievement for many first-generation Dalit students, and it wasn't nothing. But being inside an institution and being treated as someone who belongs there are different experiences, and Indian higher education has generally been better at the first than the second.

The forms of exclusion that operate inside institutions tend to be informal enough to survive formal policy reform. Where students are seated. How faculty address students from different backgrounds. Which lab partners end up together. What happens in hostels. How exams are marked. None of this appears in admissions policy, and none of it is fixed by changing admissions policy. Researchers who've looked at campus caste dynamics systematically find these patterns documented consistently across institutions and states, reported by Dalit students in terms that are strikingly similar regardless of institution (Thorat and Newman 198–214). These are the conditions under which Dalit students are expected to perform at the same level as peers who aren't managing any of this.

Rohith Vemula's case in 2016 brought this into national view. He was a PhD student at the University of Hyderabad—a writer, someone with a precise understanding of his own situation—and his final letter described the experience of being a Dalit intellectual inside a hostile institution with a clarity that was difficult to dismiss or reframe. The events before his death were not the product of individual malice by any one person: a politically connected student organization filed a complaint, an institutional suspension followed, the fellowship was withdrawn, and the bureaucratic machinery ground on (Guru 2548–2549). Dalit students at other institutions said they recognized the sequence. That recognition was the point. His case raised the question that reservation policy had never really answered: what it means to be admitted somewhere versus what it means to be welcome there.

Dropout rates are the statistical expression of this. Dalit students leave higher education before completing their degrees at rates significantly above their non-Dalit peers. Financial hardship is part of it—scholarship payments have been delayed and sometimes simply not made across multiple

states over multiple decades. Academic preparation is part of it—though that's in turn a product of what primary and secondary schooling looked like for Dalit children, which is itself a product of resource allocation that has chronically underserved these communities. But the environment inside institutions is also part of it. The message that you're there on sufferance, delivered through accumulated small interactions over a degree program, has real effects (Deshpande 89–95).

Political Mobilization

Dalit communities didn't immediately form independent political organizations after independence—partly because the conditions for doing so hadn't matured, and partly because the larger parties were effective at absorbing Dalit voters without making any meaningful commitments in return. The drift toward autonomous political organization was slow and, when it came, driven more by accumulated frustration than by strategic opportunity (Omvedt 278–284).

The Republican Party of India, which Ambedkar founded weeks before his death and which formally launched in 1957, was the first serious attempt at a Dalit-centered political formation. It achieved things—seats won, demonstrations organized, political figures developed—and it fractured, repeatedly, in ways that reflected both genuine disagreements and the difficulty of holding an organization together against sustained institutional pressure and co-optation (Zelliot 230–248). The Dalit Panthers emerged in Maharashtra in 1972, considerably younger and angrier, explicitly modelled in part on the American Black Panthers, and interested in cultural confrontation as much as electoral strategy. Namdeo Dhasal and J.V. Pawar saw caste as something requiring structural opposition, not gradual accommodation (Dangle xxiii–xxx). The Panthers lasted about a decade as an organized force. The influence on Marathi Dalit literature and political imagination lasted considerably longer.

The BSP under Kanshi Ram and Mayawati in Uttar Pradesh is a different kind of story—the most developed instance of what Dalit electoral power can look like when it reaches critical mass. The party built a coalition that could actually determine who won state elections rather than just affecting the margins (Pai 89–95). Mayawati's periods as Chief Minister left visible marks: Ambedkar parks and memorials in Lucknow, appointments that reflected a different calculus, public works distributed differently. These things mattered to people. They also didn't touch the underlying structures—land, wages, caste violence—in durable ways. Maharashtra, which has a deeper organizational history of Dalit politics, never produced comparable electoral consolidation. The two states together don't yield a clean lesson about what works; they suggest that local political economy and organizational history shape outcomes in ways that don't reduce to formula (Pai 178–194).

Dalit Literature and Cultural Production

There's something literature can do that policy can't, and it's worth saying what that is precisely rather than gesturing at it. Legal change can alter formal conditions. Economic development can

shift what material options people have. What fiction and memoir and poetry can do—what they're actually built to do—is make an experience available from the inside. Not summarized from a distance but rendered with its specific texture intact (Mukherjee 7–12). Dalit literature did this, and it did it in conditions where the dominant literary culture had either ignored these experiences or, when it did attend to them, described them from the outside and got them wrong.

Bama's *Karukku*, published in Tamil in 1992, is one of the clearest examples of what the form made possible. It's a memoir of growing up Dalit and Christian in Tamil Nadu—Bama had trained for religious life and left after confronting the fact that caste discrimination followed her into the Church, and that the vocation being offered to her required suppressing the anger her experience had produced. The book's form—fragmented, non-linear, in a Tamil that carried the registers of her community's oral life—wasn't accidental. It was chosen to carry content that a tidier structure would have softened (Mukherjee 89–95).

Sharankumar Limbale's *Akkarmashi* (1984), translated as *The Outcaste* in 2003, went somewhere else with the memoir form: a sustained examination of what it meant to be born to a Dalit woman from an upper-caste landowner who acknowledged neither the child nor the relationship. There's no arc toward resolution in the book. The anger is controlled and persistent, and the insistence on making visible what caste required to stay invisible runs throughout (Dangle xix–xxi). That the book ended up on syllabi across Indian universities and in translation programs internationally is its own kind of evidence—of how Dalit literature moved from a position that mainstream literary culture could afford to ignore to one it couldn't. The tradition has real regional variation that tends to get lost in synthesis: Maharashtra produced Bagul and Dhasal working with slum life and caste violence in a register mainstream Indian fiction hadn't attempted; Tamil writing developed in complicated relationship with Dravidian reform politics; Telugu writing worked hard to keep personal testimony and political analysis in the same frame (Mukherjee 34–38).

Caste-Based Violence

There's a temptation, when writing about caste violence, to frame it as something left over—an atavism, an older cruelty surviving into a more enlightened present, fading slowly as education and economic development do their work. The evidence doesn't support that reading. What the data and the case records suggest instead is that violence tracks assertion: it rises, specifically and measurably, in contexts where Dalit people have acquired land, accessed education, entered spaces that were previously closed, or simply declined to behave with the deference that caste hierarchy treats as compulsory (Human Rights Watch 18–25). Ambedkar had a clearer analysis of this than most—he understood the violence not as random hatred but as the enforcement arm of a social order, one that becomes most active precisely when the order feels destabilised (Ambedkar 257–261). Seventy-five years on, that analysis still fits.

Khairlanji is worth dwelling on because the details matter. The Bhotmange family in rural Maharashtra had, by 2006, acquired land, built a proper house, and put their children through school—Priyanka was preparing for college entrance exams. A neighbouring OBC Kunbi

community had a dispute with them over access roads to their fields. In September of that year, members of that community attacked the family. Four people were killed. The women were sexually assaulted before their deaths. The killings didn't appear in national newspapers for weeks; local networks ensured the story stayed local. Dalit activists eventually got it into the open, and what the national coverage revealed wasn't surprising so much as exhaustively documented: the police had received prior complaints about the escalating situation and hadn't moved, the district administration had been aware and inactive, the whole machinery of response that should have intervened had simply not intervened (Teltumbde 14–38). The Sessions Court convicted eleven people. The Bombay High Court then acquitted all of them. What stays with me about this case isn't its horror—horrible cases are not rare—but how completely ordinary the institutional failure was. No one in that chain of non-response was doing anything unusual.

More cases are being registered now than twenty years ago—National Crime Records Bureau figures show a consistent rise in atrocity complaints against Scheduled Castes over the past two decades. Some of this reflects genuine increases in violence. Some reflects better reporting, as Dalit activist networks have grown and mobile documentation has made it harder to keep incidents entirely local. What the figures don't show is any corresponding movement in conviction rates, which have remained stubbornly, almost insultingly, low (Human Rights Watch 18–25). You end up with a picture of a state that has, over time, gotten considerably better at counting what happens and considerably less better at doing anything about it. The machinery of registration functions. The machinery of accountability, for the most part, doesn't.

Digital Communication and New Possibilities

What digital communication changed, and for whom, is genuinely hard to assess without getting either too optimistic or too dismissive. For people already inside the educated Dalit professional and activist world, the shift has been real—writing and documentation circulating without having to pass through gatekeepers, organizing across distances that once made coalition nearly impossible, a public presence that didn't depend on mainstream media deciding Dalit voices were worth platforming. Rohith Vemula's death in January 2016 showed what this could mean in a single event. His letter was on social media within hours, in front of audiences his institution could not reach or manage, before any official version of events had been assembled. The discussion that followed—universities and Dalit scholars, the political machinery behind the complaint against him, what fellowship withdrawal actually does to someone—ran partly on the terms he had set. That kind of immediate, unmediated reach simply hadn't existed before.

Dalit Camera, launched in 2011, was doing this work more systematically—video documentation of atrocities, protests, daily encounters with discrimination, built into an archive and pushed through YouTube and social media because the mainstream outlets weren't covering any of it (Teltumbde 178–183). Versions of the same project appeared in Tamil Nadu, Telangana, other states. People ran them on almost no money, dealt with threats and legal harassment, and continued. But there's a real limit to what this amounts to at a population level. Internet access in India follows caste and class with uncomfortable precision—the rural Dalit communities that face the most concentrated forms of

the violence these projects document are also, largely, the communities least able to access or participate in the digital spaces where that documentation circulates (Deshpande 134–137). The tools have created genuine openings for an urban educated Dalit public, and that matters. It hasn't reached the people who arguably need it most. And for those who do have access and visibility, online spaces bring their own version of the old problem: coordinated harassment, caste abuse, threats directed at Dalit journalists and academics and public figures, on platforms whose moderation frameworks weren't built with caste as a relevant category and have shown little urgency about retrofitting it.

Conclusion

Seventy-five years is long enough to resist summary, and I want to be honest about what I think the evidence does and doesn't show. The optimistic version—that progress is built into history, that things tend toward justice given sufficient time—doesn't survive contact with what actually happened. The arc didn't bend on its own. Where it moved, people moved it, under conditions that were often hostile and at costs that were often serious. That said, I can't make the opposite case either, the one that treats the entire post-independence period as an elaborate non-event, the Constitution a document designed to mean nothing. That reading requires ignoring things that actually happened. Education reached communities it had been deliberately kept from. Political representation, however partial and contested, shifted. A literary tradition that had no place in the dominant culture found one and changed that culture in the process. These aren't incidental details (Zelliot 278–282; Ambedkar 315–317).

What I find harder to account for—and what I think any honest account of this history has to sit with—is the persistence of the gap. Not that the Constitution failed entirely, but that formal guarantees, even over seventy-five years, have done so little to close the distance between what they promise and what most Dalit people actually live. Part of the explanation is straightforward: the institutions charged with producing that correction have been, too often, run by people whose interests are served by the existing arrangement, not by its dismantling. Part of it is structural in a deeper sense—the material conditions that centuries of deliberate exclusion created don't dissolve because the law changes, and the law kept finding new ways to be selectively applied anyway. The change that happened came from people deciding not to wait. Pressing on institutions that resisted, building alternatives when they remained closed, finding forms of organization and expression that didn't require permission from the structures they were challenging. I don't have a cleaner framework than that. What moved this history was, in the main, Dalit people deciding to move it—and the fact that this still needs saying, after everything, is itself part of the story.

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