

Dalit and Adivasi Movements as Expressions of Civil Society- A Study

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Introduction

Indian society has historically been characterised by deep-rooted social stratification based on caste, tribe, class, and ethnicity. Among the most marginalised within this structure are Dalits and Adivasis, who have faced centuries of exclusion, discrimination, and dispossession. Their social location has systematically denied them access to land, education, political power, and cultural dignity. In response to this structural injustice, Dalit and Adivasi communities have organised themselves into collective movements that challenge oppression and assert rights, identity, and equality. These movements represent not merely protests against deprivation but also powerful expressions of civil society in India.

Civil society refers to the sphere of organised social life that is voluntary, autonomous from the state, and oriented towards collective interests and values. It includes social movements, associations, advocacy groups, and community organisations that mediate between the individual and the state. In the Indian context, civil society has played a crucial role in democratising power relations by amplifying marginalised voices and holding state institutions accountable. Dalit and Adivasi movements emerge within this space as grassroots-based, community-driven efforts aimed at transforming unequal social structures rather than merely seeking welfare benefits.

Dalit movements originate from the struggle against caste oppression entrenched in the Hindu social order. From early social reform movements to the radical politics inspired by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, Dalit mobilisation has centred on demands for dignity, social justice, and political representation. These movements have utilised education, constitutional rights, literature, and mass mobilisation as tools of resistance. Similarly, Adivasi movements have emerged from struggles over land alienation, forest displacement, cultural erosion, and exploitation under colonial and post-colonial development models. Adivasi resistance is deeply rooted in the defence of jal, jungle, jameen (water, forest, and land), making their movements intrinsically linked to ecological justice and indigenous autonomy.

Viewing Dalit and Adivasi movements through the lens of civil society offers important analytical insights. First, it highlights how marginalised communities are not passive recipients of state policies but active agents of social change. Second, it underscores the role of collective action in expanding democratic participation beyond electoral politics. Third, it reveals how these movements create alternative public spheres where suppressed histories, identities, and knowledges are articulated and legitimised. Through protests, cultural expression, legal advocacy, and grassroots organising, Dalit and Adivasi movements challenge dominant narratives of nationalism and development.

In contemporary India, these movements have acquired renewed significance due to the intensification of neoliberal economic policies, shrinking democratic spaces, and rising social inequalities. Increased displacement due to mining, industrialisation, and infrastructure projects has disproportionately affected Adivasi communities, while Dalits continue to face caste-based violence and exclusion despite constitutional safeguards. In this context, civil society activism

led by Dalit and Adivasi organisations becomes crucial for defending constitutional values such as equality, justice, and human dignity.

This study seeks to examine Dalit and Adivasi movements as dynamic expressions of civil society that contribute to the deepening of democracy in India. By analysing their historical evolution, ideological foundations, and modes of mobilisation, the paper argues that these movements play a transformative role in redefining citizenship, social justice, and participatory governance. Understanding these movements is essential not only for appreciating India's social diversity but also for evaluating the health and inclusiveness of its democratic framework.

Research Objectives

The present study aims to analyse Dalit and Adivasi movements as significant expressions of civil society in India. These movements are examined not merely as protest actions but as organised, conscious, and sustained efforts that contribute to democratic deepening and social transformation. The specific objectives of the study are as follows:

1. **To conceptualise civil society** and examine its relevance in understanding social movements led by marginalised communities in India.
2. **To trace the historical evolution of Dalit and Adivasi movements**, highlighting their origins, ideological foundations, and phases of development.
3. **To analyse Dalit movements** as collective assertions against caste-based discrimination, focusing on their role in promoting social justice, dignity, and political empowerment.
4. **To examine Adivasi movements** in the context of land, forest, and resource rights, and to understand their resistance to displacement, exploitation, and cultural marginalisation.
5. **To explore the role of civil society organisations, grassroots networks, and community leadership** in strengthening Dalit and Adivasi mobilisations.
6. **To assess how these movements expand democratic participation** by creating alternative public spheres and challenging dominant power structures.
7. **To identify the challenges faced by Dalit and Adivasi movements**, including state repression, socio-economic constraints, and internal limitations.
8. **To evaluate the contemporary relevance of Dalit and Adivasi movements** in the context of neoliberal development, constitutional values, and human rights discourse.

Through these objectives, the study seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of how marginalised social movements function as vital components of civil society and as agents of inclusive democracy in India.

Conceptual Framework: Civil Society and Marginalized Mobilization

Civil society encompasses **collective action, association, and activism** that challenge inequalities and construct alternate spaces of sociality beyond the state and market. Dalit and Adivasi movements, grounded in lived experience of discrimination, constitute essential nodes of civil society that reclaim voice, agency and political legitimacy for marginalised groups.

Historical Roots of Dalit Mobilization

The historical roots of Dalit mobilization in India are deeply embedded in the caste-based social order that structured exclusion, hierarchy, and discrimination for centuries. Dalits, formerly referred to as "untouchables," were placed outside the four-fold varna system and subjected to systematic denial of civil, social, and economic rights. Practices such as untouchability, forced occupational segregation, social boycott, and denial of access to public

spaces shaped a collective experience of oppression that eventually gave rise to organised resistance and mobilisation. The earliest forms of Dalit mobilisation can be traced to 19th-century social reform movements, which challenged Brahmanical dominance and ritual hierarchy. Reformers such as Jyotirao Phule in western India played a pioneering role in questioning caste oppression. Through the Satya Shodhak Samaj (1873), Phule sought to expose the ideological foundations of caste, promote education among Shudras and Ati-Shudras, and construct a counter-narrative to Brahmanical hegemony. These early movements laid the ideological groundwork for later Dalit political consciousness by linking education with social emancipation.

The colonial period provided new opportunities and constraints for Dalit mobilisation. British administrative policies, census classifications, missionary education, and limited electoral reforms created spaces for marginalised communities to articulate collective identities. Dalit leaders utilised these openings to organise associations, publish journals, and demand political representation.

The emergence of **Adi movements**—such as the **Adi-Hindu, Adi-Dravida, and Adi-Andhra movements**—reflected efforts to reclaim an indigenous identity and reject the stigma imposed by caste labels. These movements asserted that Dalits were the original inhabitants of India who were later subjugated by upper-caste domination. Such identity-based mobilisation played a crucial role in fostering collective self-respect and historical consciousness among Dalit communities. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and the Transformation of Dalit Mobilization

A decisive turning point in Dalit mobilisation came with the leadership of **Dr. B.R. Ambedkar**, who transformed Dalit struggle from social reform into a **rights-based political movement**. Ambedkar emphasised that caste was not merely a social problem but a system of graded inequality sustained by religious ideology. His critique of Hindu social order, articulated in works such as *Annihilation of Caste*, provided a radical intellectual foundation for Dalit politics.

Ambedkar's mobilisation strategies included mass movements, legal interventions, and institutional engagement. Campaigns such as the **Mahad Satyagraha (1927)** for access to public water and the **Kalaram Temple Entry Movement** symbolised direct challenges to untouchability. His role in securing separate electorates (later modified into reserved seats) and constitutional safeguards ensured political representation and legal protection for Dalits in independent India.

After independence, Dalit mobilisation entered a new phase shaped by constitutional democracy. While affirmative action policies such as reservations in education and employment expanded opportunities, caste discrimination persisted in social and economic life. This contradiction led to renewed activism and the emergence of radical movements.

The **Dalit Panther movement** of the 1970s marked a significant shift towards militant and cultural resistance. Inspired by the Black Panther movement in the United States, Dalit Panthers used literature, street protests, and political action to expose caste violence and state apathy. Dalit literature and autobiographies became powerful tools for narrating lived experiences of oppression and resistance, contributing to the formation of a distinct Dalit public sphere. Historically, Dalit mobilisation has functioned as a critical component of civil society by organising communities outside formal power structures and challenging both societal norms and state practices. From early reformist associations to mass political movements and cultural activism, Dalit mobilisation reflects a continuous struggle for dignity, equality, and democratic

inclusion. These historical roots demonstrate that Dalit movements are not episodic reactions but sustained expressions of collective agency shaped by evolving socio-political contexts.

Similarly, in southern India, movements such as the Self-Respect Movement led by E.V. Ramasamy Periyar attacked caste, patriarchy, and religious orthodoxy. Though not exclusively Dalit movements, they significantly influenced Dalit assertion by delegitimising caste authority and promoting rationalism, self-respect, and social equality.

Dalit Panthers and Contemporary Resistance

The Dalit Panther movement of the 1970s marked a radical phase where culture, literature and protest became political tools to confront caste discrimination. This movement connected Dalit struggles to broader global narratives of resistance and human rights.

Institutional Advocacy: AIDMAM and Gender Intersectionality

Organizations such as the **All India Dalit Mahila Adhikar Manch (AIDMAM)** foreground intersectionality, highlighting how caste, class and gender intersect to compound injustice, particularly for Dalit women. Through networking, training and advocacy, AIDMAM strengthens leadership and collective action at grassroots levels.

Adivasi Struggles and Civil Society Expression

Adivasi movements often revolve around **land, forest and ecological rights** encapsulated in indigenous expressions like "*Jal, Jungle, Jameen*" (water, forest and land). These movements exemplify grassroots civil society activism aimed at preserving traditional lifestyles and resisting state and corporate encroachments on their ecological and customary rights.

The Pathalgadi Movement

The **Pathalgadi movement** in Jharkhand emerged as a powerful assertion of customary land rights and local autonomy. It challenged proposed amendments that threatened traditional tribal land protections under the Chotanagpur and Santhal Pargana Tenancy Acts, enacting village insurrections and communal decisions to safeguard territory and cultural norms.

Adivasi Organisations and Land Rights Advocacy

Groups such as the **Adivasi Gotra Maha Sabha** in Kerala have mobilised tribal communities to demand formal recognition and enforcement of tribal land rights and implementation of progressive laws like the Forest Rights Act and PESA (Panchayat Extension to Scheduled Areas Act).

Collective Identity and Transnational Dimensions

Both Dalit and Adivasi movements have developed distinct collective identities that defy simple assimilation into mainstream politics. Dalits in particular have mobilised transnationally, connecting with global discourses on caste, race and human rights. Younger activists utilise digital platforms to expand reach, unify disparate struggles, and articulate solidarity networks that transcend regional boundaries.

Art, Culture and Resistance

Beyond protests and legal campaigns, Dalit and Adivasi movements embrace culture as a form of resistance. Artistic production — from visual arts and music to performance and literature — has been used to reshape narratives and assert political identities that counter dominant cultural paradigms.

Challenges and Future Trajectories

Despite gains in awareness and legal reforms, Dalit and Adivasi movements face persistent obstacles:

- **State repression and violence** against mobilised communities remain significant barriers.
- **Economic inequality** and limited access to resources continue to constrain long-term empowerment.
- Persistent discrimination undermines full participation in civic life.

These challenges necessitate sustained civil society efforts, intersectional alliances, and structural reforms to ensure substantive equality.

Conclusion

Dalit and Adivasi movements in India represent some of the most powerful and enduring expressions of civil society, rooted in the lived experiences of historically marginalised communities. These movements have emerged not merely as reactions to oppression but as conscious, organised, and transformative struggles that challenge entrenched structures of caste hierarchy, economic exploitation, and political exclusion. By operating largely outside formal state institutions, they embody the essence of civil society—collective action aimed at social justice, dignity, and democratic accountability.

The study highlights that Dalit movements have played a crucial role in questioning the moral and social legitimacy of the caste system. Inspired significantly by the ideas and leadership of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, Dalit mobilisations have shifted the discourse from social reform to rights-based politics. Through constitutional advocacy, political participation, cultural assertion, and literary movements, Dalits have redefined citizenship by demanding equality, representation, and self-respect. These movements have expanded democratic spaces by bringing caste discrimination into the public sphere and compelling the state to respond through legal safeguards, affirmative action, and institutional reforms.

Similarly, Adivasi movements have articulated an alternative vision of development rooted in ecological sustainability, community autonomy, and cultural preservation. Their struggles over land alienation, forest rights, and displacement challenge dominant development paradigms that prioritise economic growth over social and environmental justice. Adivasi mobilisations demonstrate how civil society can act as a counterforce to state and corporate power by asserting customary rights and indigenous knowledge systems. Movements centred on jal, jungle, jameen underscore the inseparable relationship between social justice and environmental protection.

Viewed together, Dalit and Adivasi movements enrich the concept of civil society by foregrounding voices traditionally excluded from public discourse. They reveal that civil society is not a homogenous or elite-driven space but a contested arena shaped by power relations, resistance, and negotiation. These movements create alternative public spheres where marginalised communities articulate their histories, identities, and aspirations, thereby redefining the meaning of democracy beyond electoral participation.

However, the study also recognises that Dalit and Adivasi movements continue to face significant challenges. Persistent caste violence, state repression, criminalisation of dissent, internal fragmentation, and co-optation by mainstream political forces limit their transformative potential. Additionally, neoliberal economic policies and shrinking civic spaces pose new threats to grassroots mobilisation and community autonomy. These challenges underline the need for stronger solidarities, intersectional approaches, and institutional safeguards to protect civil society activism.

In conclusion, Dalit and Adivasi movements are indispensable to the project of inclusive democracy in India. They serve as moral and political critiques of inequality while simultaneously offering alternative visions of justice, development, and citizenship. Recognising and strengthening these movements is essential not only for addressing historical injustices but also for ensuring that India's democratic framework remains participatory, pluralistic, and socially responsive. As expressions of civil society, Dalit and Adivasi movements remind us that democracy is not a finished product but an ongoing struggle shaped by those who resist exclusion and assert their right to equality and dignity..

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