

Socio-Religious Reform Movements from Below: A Study of United Provinces (1900–1950)

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.36347/sjahss.2026.v14i04.002>

| Received: 27.02.2026 | Accepted: 11.04.2026 | Published: 17.04.2026

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Abstract

Review Article

This paper examines the socio-religious reform movements that took shape among Dalit communities in the United Provinces, present-day Uttar Pradesh, between 1900 and 1950. The analysis is grounded in a subaltern historical perspective. It incorporates perspectives from the insider which hinges on lived experiences, intellectual traditions, and organizational creativity of the oppressed communities predominantly belongs to Dalit background. The paper explores the way Dalit communities challenged the caste hierarchy on religious, social, political, and economic fronts, and how their collective actions contributed to the broader struggle for Indian independence and social emancipation. It proceeds in three stages: first, a review of the broader trends of socio-religious reform; second, a thematic analysis of the major reform campaigns in the United Provinces; and third, a survey of the caste associations and federations through which Dalit communities organized themselves. The central argument is that socio-religious reform adopted by Dalits distinctly different from the reform process undertaken by non-Dalit and upper caste communities.

Keywords: Dalit movements, United Provinces, socio-religious reform, untouchability, Adi-Hindu movement, Ambedkar, subaltern agency, colonial India, caste associations.

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INTRODUCTION

Every human being carries an inherent urge for full humanhood which encompasses dignity and existence with comfort. This urge could be extended to domains of equal in social intercourse access to the land and water that sustain life, being free to worship as one chooses, and being addressed with a name that carries respect rather than shame. In the India, as forcefully pointed by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, these elemental needs were denied to millions of people for centuries not by accident, not through occasional injustice, but through a deliberately constructed social system that assigned entire communities to permanent and unshakable inferiority on the basis of birth alone.

The communities referred to collectively in modern scholarship as Dalits occupied the lowest tier of caste system. The exclusion of Dalits prescribed by religious texts and its manifestation to be seen in social practices in everyday life such as forbidden from using common wells, temples tanks, assigning physically gruelling and socially stigmatized occupations, and then stigmatized further for performing those very

occupations. How did these communities respond to situation? The paper argues that the response of Dalit communities was not passive, not confined to individual suffering, and not dependent on the benevolence of those above them in the social hierarchy. Rather, Dalits in the United Provinces between 1900 and 1950 built their own intellectual traditions, reform organizations, political platforms, and visions of a just social order. They did so in dialogue with and often in sharp opposition to the mainstream Indian nationalist movement, the colonial state, and the various upper-caste reform bodies that claimed to speak on their behalf.

The paper is organized into three sections. The first section maps out the broad trends in the domain of socio-religious reform movement from Dalit point of view. The second section reconstructs the major reform movements in the United Provinces with a focus on identity, equality, religion, political mobilization, and economic demands. The third section traces the history of the caste associations and political federations through which Dalit communities gave organizational substance to their aspirations.

From methodological point of view, the study draws on colonial archives, caste association records, newspaper sources, and the writings of reformers such as B.R. Ambedkar and Swami Achhutanand, alongside established secondary scholarship. It positions itself within the tradition of subaltern historiography the scholarly movement that insists that history be written from the bottom up, with the experiences of the marginalized at the centre rather than the periphery.

I. The Historiography of Socio-Religious Reform in India

The nineteenth century was a period of deep intellectual unrest in British India. Across the subcontinent, educated individuals and newly formed organizations began to question the inherited religious and social norms of their communities. This questioning was driven by a combination of factors: exposure to Western liberal thought through colonial education, the challenge posed by Christian missionary critiques of Hindu social practice, and a genuine internal desire to understand and reform what was seen as a degraded present in comparison with an idealized past. Historians have grouped these developments under the broad conceptual category of the Indian Renaissance which is an analogue to the term Renaissance in European context which signifies a rebirth of critical thought.

The concept of the Indian Renaissance was itself the product of reflection and debate. Abanindranath Tagore drew explicitly on both the European and Irish Renaissance traditions when he described the Indian awakening as a spirit of intellectual regeneration that linked cultural recovery with social critique (Chatterjee, 1992). The earliest and most celebrated figure of this Indian awakening was Raja Ram Mohan Roy, who mounted a systematic assault on what he described as the twin pillars of India's backwardness i.e., social obscurantism and religious superstition (Upadhyaya, 1990). Roy's campaigns against child marriage, the sati system, and polytheistic idol worship gave the reform tradition its initial shape and established a template that subsequent reformers would both build upon and contest. This trend signifies an attempt to refashion Indian tradition in the mould of European socio-spiritual traditions.

It is important, however, not to mistake the Indian Renaissance for a comprehensive emancipation of the oppressed. The primary beneficiaries of Roy's reformism, and of the broader nineteenth-century reform tradition, were the educated middle and upper castes. The practice of untouchability, a manifestation of wicked dimension of caste-based exclusion of millions from the basic conditions of social life remained largely invisible within mainstream reform discourse until figures like Jyotiba Phule in Maharashtra and, later, B.R. Ambedkar gave it the political and intellectual centrality it deserved.

Scholarly interpretations of socio-religious reform have followed several distinct traditions, each shaped by the social position and intellectual commitments of its proponents. The first tradition is conservative reformist trend which focuses on revitalization of Hinduism, particularly in its classical Vedic form. Scholars working in this vein focused on Arya Samaj-style projects of Vedic purification and the process of Sanskritisation, through which lower-caste communities sought upward mobility by mimicking the cultural practices of the dominant castes (Srinivas, 1956). Swami Vivekananda gave this position its most articulate expression when he argued that genuine reform meant working through the existing structures of the Hindu tradition, addressing its internal contradictions from within rather than abandoning it (Sen, 2003).

A second and far more radical tradition, associated above all with the Tamil Social thinker E.V. Ramaswamy Periyar, rejected this position entirely. For Periyar, no religion as currently constituted and certainly not Brahminical Hinduism could provide adequate tools for the liberation of the oppressed. The social order was not a deviation from religious ideals; it was an expression of them. The only path to genuine emancipation was a wholesale transformation of both doctrine and social structure, and this required the subordinated communities to organize themselves and act on their own behalf, rather than waiting for reform from above (Omvedt, 1979).

A third tradition, associated with colonial administrators and some liberal scholars such as O'Malley, defined reform from below primarily in terms of external assistance the uplift of untouchable communities by well-intentioned reformers and government officials (O'Malley, 1968). While this perspective captures something real about the landscape of intervention in colonial India, it has a serious limitation: it treats Dalits as objects of charitable attention rather than as political subjects capable of generating their own ideas and organizations.

The fourth tradition, exemplified in the work of Gail Omvedt, Eleanor Zelliot, and Christophe Jaffrelot, corrects this imbalance decisively. Omvedt situates Dalit reform movements within the broader democratic politics of colonial India, arguing that the struggle of untouchable communities was fundamentally about rights such as right to political representation, education, land and water, and not merely about social welfare (Omvedt, 1994). Zelliot demonstrates, through close historical research, that Dalit communities pursued their aspirations through multiple simultaneous channels: organized protest, cultural assertion, institutional negotiation, and direct confrontation (Zelliot, 2005). Jaffrelot's analysis frames the cumulative effect of these efforts as nothing less than a quiet revolution, a fundamental restructuring of the social order

accomplished not through dramatic upheaval but through persistent, determined, and strategically intelligent collective action (Jaffrelet, 2003).

This paper stands in the tradition represented by Omvedt, Zelliott, and Jaffrelet. It treats Dalit-led and Dalit-supportive movements not as supplements to the mainstream history of Indian reform but as the constitutive centre of that history, at least as it applies to the United Provinces between 1900 and 1950.

II. Reform from Below: Themes and Trajectories in the United Provinces

The United Provinces was a demographic terrain of layered social contradictions. It was a region of immense cultural and spiritual wealth the birthplace of saints, the site of ancient pilgrimage routes, the heartland of multiple literary traditions and simultaneously a region in which millions of people were denied access to the most basic conditions of a dignified life. The reform movements that emerged in this region were shaped by this contradiction. They did not emerge from a vacuum; they grew out of the particular historical experience of Dalit communities in northern India, drawing on the spiritual resources of the Bhakti tradition, the organizational energy generated by modern political dynamism created by the modernity driven by the British colonial rule.

The Struggle for a Dignified Identity

The most foundational dimension of Dalit reform was the reclamation of identity. For centuries, the communities placed at the base of the caste hierarchy had been known by a succession of names that were not merely descriptive but actively demeaning terms like chandal, avarna, pariah, and depressed class that embedded the assumption of inherent inferiority into the very act of naming (Kumar, 2003). Each name was a small act of violence, a daily reminder of the social position that had been assigned to an entire community at birth.

The response to this derogatory naming was meted out by a sustained campaign of counter-naming. Jyotiba Phule was among the first to deploy the term Dalit meaning broken or ground down as a term of solidarity and political assertion: a name that acknowledged suffering without accepting the judgment of inferiority that had been attached to it. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar pushed this critique further by systematically rejecting Gandhi's preferred term Harijan, meaning children of God. For Ambedkar, the name was condescending in a particular way: it located Dalits within a framework of divine charity rather than constitutional rights. To be a child of God was to be an object of benevolence, not a bearer of political agency. The demand for a self-chosen name was therefore inseparable from the demand for political subjecthood.

Closely connected to this struggle over naming was the assertion of historical identity. Intellectuals associated with the Adi-Hindu movement argued that Dalits were not the lowest stratum of the Hindu order but its original inhabitants, belong to the pre-Aryan peoples from whom the land's culture, resources, and sacred traditions had been taken by force by Aryan invaders. This was a claim of considerable moral and political power. It repositioned Dalits not as supplicants seeking inclusion in an existing order but as the rightful heirs of a civilization that had been stolen from them. It gave the demand for equality a depth of historical grievance that purely legislative or religious arguments could not provide.

The Campaign for Social Equality

Throughout the 1930s, Dalit communities across the United Provinces organized themselves to demand equality of treatment in the social, religious, and political spheres (John, 2001). One strategy that many communities pursued was Sanskritisation: the deliberate adoption of the cultural practices, dietary habits, and ritual behaviours associated with upper-caste Hindus, in the hope that this mimicry would translate into upward social mobility (Srinivas, 1956). Community organizations encouraged members to abandon the hereditary occupations that marked them as impure, to adopt vegetarianism, to observe upper-caste marriage customs, and to claim kshatriya lineage.

The limitations of this approach became evident relatively quickly. The process of Sanskritisation worked within the logic of caste rather than against it. It accepted the basic validity of the hierarchy and sought only to improve a given community's position within it. More searching critics most powerfully, B. R. Ambedkar pointed out that even the most successful Sanskritisation left the hierarchy intact, and that as long as the hierarchy remained, the possibility of renewed stigmatization and exclusion also remained. The only genuinely transformative goal, in this view, was not to climb the hierarchy but to dismantle it. This tension between accommodation and transformation was never fully resolved within the Dalit reform movement, and it remains a live question in scholarship about the period.

Religious Reform: The Arya Samaj and the Adi-Hindu Movement

The phenomenon of religion was both a weapon of oppression and a terrain of resistance in the United Provinces. The established Hindu religious order legitimized untouchability through temple exclusion, restricted access to sacred texts, and assigned divine sanction to the hereditary occupations of the lowest castes. Any serious reform of the social order therefore, had to engage with religion either to reform it from within or to challenge its authority from without.

The Arya Samaj, founded by Swami Dayanand Saraswati in 1875, represented the most organizationally powerful engagement with religious reform in northern India. Dayanand argued that idol worship, polytheism, casteism, and untouchability were not authentic features of the Hindu tradition but later corruptions of a purer Vedic religion. On this doctrinal basis, the Arya Samaj undertook a range of practical interventions on behalf of Dalit communities: it established free educational institutions, including Gurukul Kangri and the Kanya Pathashala; it formed the Dalitudhar Sabha in Delhi in 1912 to combat forced labour and advocate for Dalit access to wells; it created the Arya Shiromani Sabha to challenge caste discrimination; and through the Jati-Pati Torak Mandal, established in 1907 by Parmanand, it worked specifically to eradicate untouchability. In the United Provinces, the Arya Pratinidhi Sabha was particularly active in promoting Dalit education and resettlement. These contributions were real but also deeply ambiguous. The shuddhi (purification) ceremony, through which outcaste communities were ritually re-incorporated into the Hindu fold, implicitly reproduced the very logic of pollution it claimed to overcome. And the Arya Samaj's ultimate goal was the renewal of Hinduism, not the liberation of Dalits. Dalit communities were the objects of a reform project whose priorities were not their own.

This dissatisfaction impelled Swami Achutanand toward a more autonomous path. A former Arya Samaj member, Achutanand broke away to found the Adi-Hindu Mahasabha, a platform dedicated exclusively to Dalit political and cultural mobilization. He established branches across India, including the Achut School in Agra and the Akhil Bhartiya Achut Mahasabha in Delhi. He organized mass conferences that brought Dalit communities together to build political awareness and a shared sense of historical identity. In 1928, he submitted a memorandum to the Simon Commission demanding that the untouchable communities be recognized as a distinct political entity a demand that anticipated many of the constitutional debates that would follow in the 1930s.

Caste-Specific Associations

The United Provinces also saw the emergence of numerous organizations that mobilized particular Dalit communities around their specific social situations and occupational identities. These groups were less concerned with broad ideological programmes than with securing concrete improvements for their members and asserting the dignity of their respective communities.

Among the earliest of these was the Tamta Sudharak Sabha, established in 1905 in Almora under the leadership of Krishna Chand Tamta. The All-India Rajak (Dhobi) Association organized the washerman community in Lucknow to assert a kshatriya social identity, pushing back against the absurdity of

untouchable status assigned solely because of contact with other people's laundry. The Valmiki Mahasabha mobilized the sweeper community against the stigma of manual scavenging. The Passi Mahasabha, founded at Allahabad in 1915 by Vishweshwar Das, worked for the social development of the Passi community concentrated in Oudh. The Chamar Mahasabha, formed at Mainpuri in May 1924, focused on community welfare and the assertion of kshatriya lineage. The Kori Mahasabha of Lucknow directed its energies toward education and the elimination of internal community practices that had been used to justify external discrimination (Kumar, 1918). Taken together, these organizations constituted a dense associational ecology across the province a network through which Dalit communities built organizational capacity, articulated their demands, and developed the collective confidence to press those demands in the public arena.

Political Activism and the Constitutional Arena

When the available social and religious strategies proved insufficient to alter the structural conditions of Dalit exclusion, the movement turned increasingly toward formal political channels. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar was the central figure in this turn. He participated in both the First and Second Round Table Conferences in London, accompanied by R. Shrinivasan, as the recognized spokesman for Dalit political interests (Kheer, 1954). His testimony and advocacy were distinguished by their constitutional sophistication: rather than appealing to the moral conscience of the British government, Ambedkar pressed for concrete institutional mechanisms separate electorates, reserved seats, and formal constitutional protections that would give Dalit communities a guaranteed political voice.

At the Second Round Table Conference in 1931, Ambedkar secured the British government's agreement in principle to separate electorates for Dalits a provision that was subsequently granted through the Communal Award of 1932. Gandhi's fierce opposition to this arrangement, expressed through a fast unto death, placed Ambedkar under enormous political pressure. The Poona Pact of 1932, concluded between the two men under these circumstances, replaced separate electorates with reserved constituencies within joint Hindu electorates (Chandra, 1988). Reserved seats guaranteed that a certain number of legislators would be from Dalit communities, but they denied Dalits the autonomous electoral constituency that separate electorates would have provided. Ambedkar regarded this outcome as a defeat, though he accepted it rather than allow Gandhi to die.

The colonial government's institutional engagement with Dalit political demands accelerated after the Poona Pact. The Government of India Act of 1935 replaced the term depressed classes with Scheduled Castes, formalizing a constitutional identity for Dalit

communities. The British administration had already, in 1934, announced an 8.3 percent reservation in administrative appointments for minorities including Scheduled Castes, drawing on the 1931 census figures (Harijan Dept., 1934). In 1936, Ambedkar founded the Indian Labour Party, seeking to build a coalition of Dalit communities, landless peasants, and industrial workers. The party's reach, however, remained largely confined to Maharashtra (Omvedt, 1994). Recognizing this limitation, Ambedkar dissolved the Indian Labour Party in 1942 and reconstituted his political base as the Scheduled Castes Federation. The Federation developed a genuinely national presence, with branches extending across the United Provinces, Madras, Mysore, Punjab, Gujarat, and Karnataka.

The most radical expression of Ambedkar's political vision was not a vote or a conference speech but a conversion. In October 1956, he led hundreds of thousands of his followers into Buddhism a collective, public renunciation of Hinduism and its caste order. This was not a retreat from politics but its most dramatic statement: a declaration that the institutions of Hinduism, as they were actually organized, could not deliver genuine equality to those it had oppressed for centuries. Buddhism offered a religious tradition that had been born in explicit rejection of the caste hierarchy, and Ambedkar embraced it as both a spiritual home and a political symbol.

Water, Land, and Economic Justice

The struggle for social dignity was inseparable from the struggle for material resources. Water, among the most basic of human necessities functioned in the United Provinces as a medium of caste distinction and exclusion. Dalit communities, including Chamars, Dhobis, Passis, Koris, and Daxis, were routinely denied access to the wells and water sources used by upper-caste communities, on the grounds that their physical contact with shared water would contaminate it for others (Swaroop, 2022). The logic was circular and cruel: Dalits were deemed impure because of their proximity to pollution, and then excluded from the water sources whose absence kept them literally and symbolically unclean.

Local Dalit leaders and organizations responded by petitioning the colonial government for the construction of separate water reservoirs for Dalit communities and for concessions in irrigation levies recognizing that the financial cost of accessing water was itself a mechanism of economic subordination (Mathur, 1975). The resonance of the Mahad Satyagraha the 1927 campaign led by Ambedkar in Maharashtra in which Dalits publicly asserted their right to draw water from the Chowdar tank was felt in northern India, inspiring similar local struggles throughout the United Provinces (Kumar, 2016).

Land was equally central to the Dalit condition. Dalits in the United Provinces worked overwhelmingly as landless labourers on the fields of upper-caste landlords, excluded from both ownership and the higher-wage employment available in emerging industrial centres (Gooptu, 2006). The 1921 strike at Madras Mill, in which Dalit caste workers came into violent conflict with the Justice Party, illustrated the militancy of Dalit labour and the ferocity of upper-caste resistance to Dalit economic advancement (Joshi, 1986). In 1942, the Scheduled Castes Federation passed a resolution calling for Separate Village Settlements designated areas exclusively for Dalit communities in which they could farm, live, and govern themselves free from upper-caste domination. This was a territorial expression of the demand for political autonomy and while it was never implemented, it reflected the depth of Dalit disillusionment with the possibility of genuine inclusion in the existing village social order (Kumar & Malliah, 2017).

Ambedkar's Theory of State Socialism

The most intellectually ambitious Dalit prescription for economic justice was contained in Ambedkar's 1946 document States and Minorities, submitted to the Constituent Assembly on behalf of the Scheduled Castes Federation. This document presented what Ambedkar called a theory of State Socialism: the proposal that land and industrial capital should be nationalized by the state and managed collectively, as the only means by which the landless poor and Dalits in particular could achieve genuine economic security (Sarkar, 2013).

Ambedkar's reasoning was clear and unsparing. Land reform legislation and tenancy protections could benefit only those who already had some relationship to the land. They could do nothing for the sixty million untouchables who owned no land at all. Only the collective organization of agriculture under state ownership with land leased equitably to all villagers without distinction of caste or creed, and in such a manner that there would be no landlords, no tenants, and no landless labourers could address the material root of Dalit poverty (Sarkar, 2013). This was an extraordinary proposal: a synthesis of socialist economics and Dalit rights politics, articulated at the very moment that India was designing its constitutional foundations. The Constituent Assembly did not adopt Ambedkar's State Socialism proposal. But its articulation was historically significant regardless of its immediate fate. It marked the moment at which the Dalit movement's most powerful intellectual voice moved from protest to programme from the critique of injustice to the design of an alternative.

III. Dalit Associations in the United Provinces

The United Provinces, by the early twentieth century, was the most populous region in northern India.

The 1901 census of the United Provinces of Agra and Awadh recorded a total population of approximately 48.5 million, of whom roughly 70 percent were Hindu. Within this Hindu population, Dalit communities accounted for between 20 and 25 percent, encompassing the Chamar (the largest group, at approximately 56 percent of Dalits), Passi, Dhobi, Kori, Shilpkar, Valmiki, Khatik, Dhanuk, and Korwa communities (Crooke, 1896).

The United Provinces also carried a particular spiritual significance for Dalit communities. It was the birthplace of Saint Kabir and Saint Ravidas, two of the most celebrated poet-saints of the Bhakti tradition, whose teachings had rejected the caste order with unambiguous clarity and proclaimed the spiritual equality of all human beings. The memory of these figures provided Dalit communities with an indigenous tradition of resistance and a symbolic resource for their contemporary demands. By the early twentieth century, the revival of Bhakti saint worship including the renovation of temples and the proliferation of satsang (devotional gathering) events had become an important medium for building collective consciousness among Dalit communities (Gooptu, 2006). Contemporary observers noted the construction of new temples dedicated to Kabir and Ravidas across the urban areas of the province (Singh, 2009-100). These devotional assemblies provided a structured context for asserting social equality, repudiating the stigma of untouchability, and claiming that Dalits were not marginal figures in Indian civilization but among its most authentic inheritors (Webster, 1996).

Tamta Sudharak Sabha (est. 1905, Almora)

The Tamta Sudharak Sabha was founded in 1905 in the hill district of Almora, making it one of the earliest formal Dalit caste associations in the United Provinces. Established by Krishna Chand Tamta, with Hari Prasad Tamta serving as secretary, it directed its initial energies toward social reform within the Tamta (coppersmith) community and toward asserting the community's rights within the regional social order (Viyogi & Ansari, 2006). The organization exemplified a pattern that would recur across the province: the use of caste solidarity as the immediate organizational basis for a broader claim to social equality and human dignity.

Kori Mahasabha (est. 1910 / reconstituted 1940)

The Bharat Varshiye Koli Sudhar Sabha, the precursor to the Kori Mahasabha, was founded in 1910 in Lahore, largely through the initiative of army officers and railway workers who had come under the influence of the Arya Samaj, with assistance from Lajpat Rai. The Sabha worked for the social improvement of the Kori (weaving) community specifically, encouraging the abandonment of intoxicants and early-marriage practices, and promoting education. Multiple branches were established across the United Provinces (Chancharik & Lal, 2003). In 1940, the organization was

reconstituted as the Kori Mahasabha, reflecting its expanded ambitions and broadened political programme.

Passi Mahasabha (est. 1915, Allahabad)

The Passi community was concentrated primarily in the Oudh region and the eastern districts of the United Provinces. Traditionally engaged in the tapping of date palms for tari (a fermented palm product), members of the community occupied an ambiguous social position marginalized within the caste hierarchy but possessed of an identifiable occupational niche (Briggs, 1920). Early community organization took the form of bhajan mandalis (devotional singing groups) in Allahabad, which served informally as spaces for building collective awareness. From this devotional base, Vishweshwar Das and other community reformers constituted the Passi Mahasabha in 1915, subsequently developing branches in Allahabad, Rae Bareilly, Lucknow, and Barabanki, with social mobility and dignity as its guiding objectives.

Jatav Mahasabha (est. 1917 / 1924, Agra)

The Jatavs were a sub-caste of the Chamar community concentrated in and around Agra. In 1917, community members established the Jatav Veer Mahasabha, followed by the Jatav Pracharak Mandal in 1924 (Rawat, 2012). These organizations pursued a dual agenda: the internal reform of community conditions through educational improvement and the abandonment of stigmatized practices, and the external assertion of a distinctive Jatav identity including the demand to be recognized as a separate caste within official administrative categories. The Jatav movement demonstrated the capacity of communities within the Dalit world to generate political demands that went beyond mere assimilation into higher-caste frameworks.

Adi-Hindu Mahasabha (est. 1918)

The Adi-Hindu Mahasabha, founded by Swami Achutanand in 1918, was the most ideologically coherent and organizationally extensive Dalit association of the period in the United Provinces. It combined a revisionist historical narrative positioning Dalits as the pre-Aryan original inhabitants of India with active political mobilization, cultural consciousness-raising campaigns, and direct engagement with colonial authorities on Dalit rights. Its network of branches extended from Agra and Delhi across the subcontinent, and its 1928 memorandum to the Simon Commission marked a significant moment in the formalization of Dalit political demands within the colonial constitutional framework.

Akhil Bharat Barshiye Nishad Sabha (est. 1920, Lucknow)

The Mallah (fisherman and boatman) community, associated with the Luniya group, was represented by the Nishad Mahasabha, established in Lucknow in 1920 under the leadership of Rai Saheb Babu Ram Charanji (Harijan Dept., 1934). The

organization's central demands were for civic rights and social recognition a place in public life commensurate with the economic importance of the community's role in river trade and transportation.

Chamar Mahasabha (est. May 1924, Mainpuri)

The Chamars were the largest single Dalit community in the United Provinces, comprising approximately 14 percent of the provincial population according to the 1911 census. The Chamar Mahasabha was formally established at Mainpuri in May 1924 (Sachdeva, Pradhan & Venugopalan, 2019) with the objective of liberating the community from overlapping forms of oppression: begari pratha (forced unpaid labour for upper-caste patrons), the stigma of leatherwork, and the broad social discrimination that accompanied their occupational identity. Internally, the Mahasabha urged community members to abandon intoxicants, meat consumption, and leatherwork. Externally, it asserted a kshatriya (warrior) lineage for the Chamar community a claim designed to reposition the community within the caste hierarchy by emphasizing martial ancestry. The organization developed branches in multiple regions beyond the United Provinces, giving it a genuinely national reach.

All India Rajak (Dhobi) Mahasabha

The Dhobi (washerman) community occupied a particularly paradoxical position within the caste order: their untouchable status derived entirely from work associated with their occupation, i.e., washing clothes. Dhobi community leaders organized the All-India Rajak Mahasabha in Lucknow to assert a kshatriya social identity and to demand inclusion in the official Scheduled Castes lists from which they had initially been excluded (Harijan Dept., 1934). The Mahasabha drew participants from communities across an extraordinary geographic range, from Allahabad, Kanpur, and Varanasi in the United Provinces to Almora, Quetta, Secunderabad, Ajmer, Indore, Pune, and Jalandhar (Harijan Dept., 1934). While a direct positive response from the colonial government was not forthcoming, the matter was formally forwarded to the Government of India on 15 April 1933, representing a partial institutional acknowledgment of the community's claim.

Harijan Sewak Sangh (est. 1933)

The Harijan Sewak Sangh was established by Gandhi in 1933 as the institutional expression of the commitments he had made following the Poona Pact. It developed an extensive network of branches across the United Provinces and worked on a range of activities: campaigns against untouchability, improving Dalit access to water in rural areas, temple entry campaigns, and a publication programme (Jaffrelot, 2010). Ambedkar and other Dalit intellectuals criticized the Sangh sharply, arguing that its welfarist framework which placed upper-caste Hindu benefactors in the role of agents of Dalit uplift reproduced the paternalistic logic

it claimed to oppose. The Sangh's activities were charity, not justice, and charity without political empowerment left the fundamental structures of inequality intact.

Scheduled Castes Federation (est. 1942)

The Scheduled Castes Federation, established by Ambedkar in Maharashtra in 1942, was the most explicitly political of the major Dalit organizations of the period. Developed with the support of B.K. Gaekwad, it sought to create a national political platform for Dalit demands. Branches were rapidly established across the United Provinces, Madras, Mysore, Punjab, Gujarat, and Karnataka. It was the organizational vehicle through which Ambedkar presented his States and Minorities memorandum to the Constituent Assembly in 1946 one of the most consequential political documents of the independence era.

United Provinces Adi-Hindu Depressed Classes Association (est. 27 June 1942)

This organization focused specifically on the political and developmental dimensions of Dalit life within the United Provinces (Harijan Dept., 1934). Its demands were wide-ranging: it urged the colonial government to provide grant-in-aid support to Dalit-oriented publications such as Sant Sudha and Samter; it advocated for the creation of advisory committees and welfare bodies for Dalit communities at both provincial and national levels; and it worked to keep Dalit educational advancement on the government's policy agenda.

Valmiki Mahasabha

The Valmiki community whose traditional occupation of manual scavenging placed them, in the eyes of the caste hierarchy, at the very lowest point of the social order organized themselves through the Valmiki Mahasabha, also known as the Balmik Achhut Mandal. The central objective of this organization was the collective repudiation of untouchable identity through organized action: strikes, petitions, and public assertions of community dignity. Despite sustained effort, the Valmikis found it extremely difficult to secure improvements in wages or working conditions through collective action alone, (Mathur, 1975) reflecting the particular vulnerability of communities whose occupations were directly controlled by the state and whose options for economic diversification were severely limited by law, custom, and social prejudice.

CONCLUSION

The reform movements examined in this paper stand as a powerful correction to the historical narrative that has typically presented Indian reform as a gift from the educated elite to the suffering poor. The evidence from the United Provinces between 1900 and 1950 represents an interesting historical trajectory of reform movement in modern India from Dalit perspective. It demonstrates organized, self-aware, and strategically

sophisticated Dalit communities generating their own ideas, building their own institutions, and making their own demands in response to their specific experience of oppression. These movements were not confined to a single domain. At the level of religious identity, they challenged the scriptural and ritual justification of untouchability, asserted the right to temple entry and sacred water access, and constructed alternative historical narratives most powerfully through the Adi-Hindu tradition that placed Dalit identity at the origin of Indian civilization rather than at its margins. At the level of social organization, they built a dense network of caste associations that gave communities the capacity to articulate collective demands and negotiate with the colonial state and upper-caste civil society. At the level of formal politics, they engaged with the constitutional process, challenged the terms of electoral representation, and produced in Ambedkar's State Socialism proposal one of the most ambitious programmes for economic restructuring ever laid before an Indian legislative body. The Dalits of the United Provinces were not the passive subjects of history. They were among its most determined and creative makers. Their movements, their ideas, and their organizations deserve to stand at the centre of any serious account of colonial India's social transformation.

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