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Caste Consciousness Movements, 19th Century

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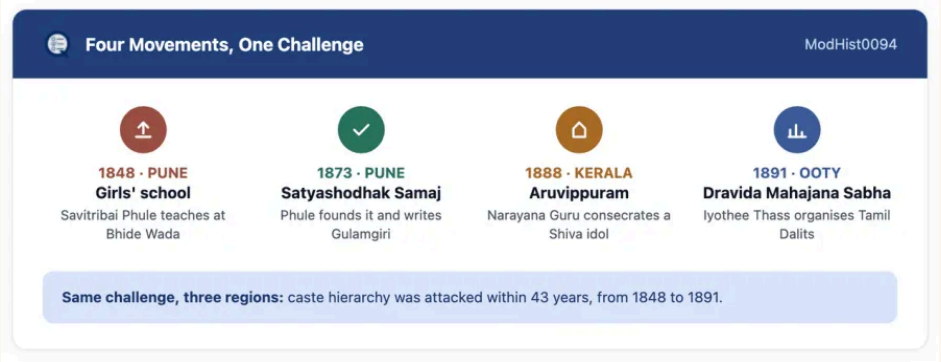
In 1848, two young teachers opened a school for girls in Pune. One of them, Jyotirao Phule, went on to found a movement against caste hierarchy itself.

Across the 19th century, reformers in Maharashtra, Kerala and Tamil Nadu built similar movements. Each rejected Brahmin ritual authority in its own region. This lesson covers those dated 19th-century roots, and the 20th-century sequel that followed.



सावित्रीबाई फुले आणि फातिमा शेख त्यांच्या
शाळेतील दोन विद्यार्थिनींसह
(शंभर वर्षांपूर्वी निगेटिव्हवरून तयार केलेले दुर्मिळ छायाचित्र)

Savitribai Phule and Fatima Sheikh with students from the school they ran together in Pune. Photographer unknown, public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.



Four movements in three regions, all challenging caste hierarchy itself.

> **1848.** Savitribai Phule teaches at the Bhide Wada girls' school in Pune.
> **1873.** Phule founds the Satyashodhak Samaj and writes Gulamgiri.
> **1888.** Narayana Guru at Aruvippuram. Walangkar launches Vital-Vidhvansak.
> **1891.** Iyothee Thass founds the Dravida Mahajana Sabha at Ooty.
> **1903.** The SNDP Yogam is founded in Kerala.
> **1916 to 1932.** Justice Party, Self-Respect, Vaikom, Kalaram and the Poona Pact.

Caste hierarchy: a ranking of birth-based groups, with ritual purity at the top and "untouchability" at the bottom.

Non-Brahmin movement: an organised push by lower and middle castes against Brahmin ritual and political dominance.

Depressed Classes: the colonial-era name for communities now listed as Scheduled Castes.

1 Why did caste consciousness rise in the 19th century?

Colonial rule made caste visible, countable and political.

- Colonial officials began counting castes in the census from **1872**. Each community had to fit a named slot.
- This froze fluid identities into fixed ones. People who once moved between groups were now listed in one rank.
- Once the state ranked groups, a “lower” rank had real costs. So the excluded began to organise as communities.
- Earlier revolts had targeted a zamindar, a tax or a ruler. These movements targeted **the principle of caste hierarchy**.
- Printing presses, schools and railways spread the same grievance across regions in the same decades.
- The result was a shift. Caste moved from a private ritual matter to a public political question.

2 What did Jyotirao and Savitribai Phule build?

They started with schools, then built an organisation and a founding text.

- On **1 January 1848**, Jyotirao and Savitribai Phule opened a girls’ school at Bhide Wada in Pune. Savitribai was the teacher.
- She taught alongside **Fatima Sheikh**, a Muslim educator. Together they ran the Phules’ schools.
- In 1863, the Phules opened a home to prevent infanticide. It first served widows who needed a safe place to give birth.

- Jyotirao founded the **Satyashodhak Samaj** (Truth-Seekers' Society) in Pune on 24 September 1873.
- The Samaj rejected idol worship and Brahmin-led ritual. Phule saw priests as the daily working parts of caste.
- Its leadership came mainly from backward-class communities such as the Malis. See Satya Shodhak Samaj: Phule's Anti-Caste Movement.
- His 1873 book **Gulamgiri** ("Slavery") compared the treatment of lower castes to slavery in the United States.
- He dedicated it to American abolitionists. This linked the Indian struggle to a fight the world already knew.
- In 1888, Vithalrao Krishnaji Vandekar gave Phule the title "Mahatma". See ModHist0115: Jyotirao Phule.
- B.R. Ambedkar later named Phule among the three main influences on his own thinking.

> **Quick check 1.** Jyotirao Phule founded the Satyashodhak Samaj in Pune in 1873. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

3 What did Narayana Guru and Iyothee Thass do in the south?

Kerala and the Tamil country produced their own movements in the same years.

- In **1888**, Narayana Guru installed and consecrated a Shiva idol at Aruvippuram in Travancore.
- Only Brahmin priests were normally allowed to do this. His act defied that ritual monopoly.
- His message was “one caste, one religion, one god for man”. Spiritual equality came first, social equality followed.
- The **SNDP Yogam**, founded in 1903 under his guidance, built schools and welfare groups for the Ezhava community.
- In the Tamil country, Pandit **Iyothee Thass** founded the Dravida Mahajana Sabha at Ooty in 1891.
- Thass argued that Tamil Dalits were not Hindus by birth. He said they were a separate people, originally Buddhist.
- He converted to Buddhism in 1898 and founded the Sakya Buddhist Society in Madras.
- All three leaders worked in different regions. None had a shared plan. The common pattern came from a common cause.

4 How did Walangkar and the “reform from within” groups differ?

Some reformers wanted to clean up Hinduism. Others said caste was part of the design.

- **Gopal Baba Walangkar** was a retired Mahar soldier who had served in the British Indian Army.
- In 1888 he launched **Vital-Vidhvansak** ("Destroyer of Caste-Creeds"). It was the first monthly journal aimed at untouchable readers.
- He also wrote petitions to the British government. See Gopal Baba Walangkar and the Vital-Vidhvansak.
- Military service gave his generation a claim. If Mahars could serve the Empire, why were they untouchable at home?
- The **Brahmo Samaj** (1828, Raja Ram Mohan Roy) attacked idol worship and old ritual from inside Hinduism.
- The **Arya Samaj** (1875, Dayananda Saraswati) did the same. Both wanted a cleaner, reformed religion.
- Their idea was that caste abuses were later corruptions of an earlier, purer Vedic age.
- Phule, Guru and Thass disagreed. For them, ranking was built into the system. That is why they challenged the priesthood itself.
- A useful chronology: Brahmo Samaj 1828, Paramhans Mandali 1849, Arya Samaj 1875, Ramakrishna Mission 1897. Satyashodhak Samaj (1873) falls between the second and third.

> **Quick check 2.** Narayana Guru's SNDP Yogam was founded in 1888 at Aruvippuram. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

5 What came next in the 20th century?

The 19th-century groups set the stage. The 20th century added elections, mass protest and law.

- The **Justice Party** (South Indian Liberal Federation, 1916) took non-Brahmin politics into Madras elections.
- Periyar's **Self-Respect Movement** (1925) then made it a mass social movement. See ModHist0251: Periyar E.V. Ramasamy.
- In 1944, Periyar turned the Justice Party into the Dravidar Kazhagam.
- Temple access was the sharpest test of caste, because it was a ritual gate.
- The struggle ran from Aruvippuram (1888) to the **Vaikom Satyagraha** (1924 to 1925, Kerala).
- It reached the **Kalaram temple Satyagraha** at Nashik in 1930, led by Ambedkar.
- Ambedkar also led the Mahad tank satyagraha in 1927. He treated untouchability as a political problem.
- The **Poona Pact (1932)** was an agreement between Gandhi and Ambedkar. It replaced separate electorates with reserved seats in joint electorates.
- Gandhi then ran his Harijan campaign and set up the Harijan Sevak Sangh.
- Gandhi wanted to reform Hinduism from within. Ambedkar wanted equal citizenship enforced by law.
- In 1942, Ambedkar organised the All India Scheduled Castes Federation.
- Both strands reached the Constitution. Article 17 abolishes untouchability. Article 25 opens Hindu religious institutions to all sections.

Quick check 3. The Brahmo Samaj and Arya Samaj argued that caste was built into the design of Hinduism. *(True or False?)* See answer ↓

Remember: 1848 girls' school. 1873 Satyashodhak Samaj and Gulamgiri. 1888 Aruvippuram and Vital-Vidhvansak. 1891 Dravida Mahajana Sabha. 1903 SNDP Yogam. 1916 Justice Party. 1930 Kalaram. 1932 Poona Pact.

Think it through: Why did Phule, Guru and Thass attack the priesthood instead of just asking for a purer religion?

They saw caste ranking as part of how the system worked, not a later corruption. Priests ran the daily rituals that kept the ranking alive. So challenging priestly authority meant challenging caste at its working parts. Brahmo and Arya reformers held the opposite view: fix the religion and caste would shrink.

Practice MCQs

1. In 1848, Jyotirao Phule founded India's first school for girls in Pune. Who taught there, becoming India's first female teacher?

A. His mother

B. His wife, Savitribai Phule

C. His sister

D. A British missionary

See answer ↓

2. Jyotirao Phule's 1873 book 'Gulamgiri' ('Slavery') was dedicated to which group?

A. British parliamentarians

B. American abolitionists

C. Christian missionaries in Bengal

D. Indian National Congress leaders

See answer ↓

3. Jyotirao Phule founded the Satyashodhak Samaj ('Truth-Seekers' Society') in Maharashtra in 1873, primarily to work toward which goal?

A. Social equality and upliftment of lower castes and peasants against Brahminical dominance

B. Reforming Zoroastrian religious practice

C. Promoting English-medium education exclusively for the elite

D. Reviving Vedic ritual practice among Brahmins

See answer ↓

4. In 1888, what ritual act did Narayana Guru perform at Aruvippuram, defying a Brahmin ritual monopoly?

A. He led a mass conversion to Buddhism

B. He installed and consecrated a Shiva idol himself

C. He built India's first girls' school

D. He founded the SNDP Yogam

See answer ↓

5. In which year did Iyothee Thass found the Dravida Mahajana Sabha, and where did he hold its first conference?

A. 1891, in Ooty

B. 1898, in Madras

C. 1873, in Pune

D. 1925, in Erode

See answer ↓

6. Gopal Baba Walangkar's journal Vital-Vidhvansak, launched in 1888, was the first monthly journal aimed at which audience?

A. Peasant readers

B. Untouchable readers

C. Army officers

D. Women readers

See answer ↓

7. Which one of the following statements about the Justice Party is not correct?

A. It clamoured for the same kind of separate communal representation for the Non-Brahmins as had been granted to the Muslims by the Morley-Minto Reforms.

B. It was patronized mainly by richer landowning and urban middle class Non-Brahmins.

C. It succeeded in getting the provision for 28 reserved seats for the Non-Brahmins in the Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms.

D. It supported the call given by the Congress to boycott elections in 1920.

See answer ↓

8. The Kalaram temple, known for temple entry movements in the early twentieth century, is located in which state of India?

A. Karnataka

B. Maharashtra

C. Kerala

D. Tamil Nadu

See answer ↓

Answer Key

1. **B.** Savitribai Phule taught at the 1848 school, becoming India's first female teacher. ↑ Q1
2. **B.** 'Gulamgiri' was dedicated to American abolitionists, comparing India's caste system to slavery. ↑ Q2
3. **A.** Phule's Satyashodhak Samaj campaigned against caste-based social oppression and Brahminical religious authority, championing education and rights for the 'Shudra' and 'Ati-Shudra' communities as well as women and peasants, and is considered a foundational movement in India's anti-caste tradition. His influential book 'Gulamgiri' ('Slavery') drew a pointed comparison between the caste system's treatment of lower castes and slavery in the United States. Phule's wife, Savitribai Phule, worked alongside him and started one of India's earliest schools for girls, at Pune in 1848, making the couple pioneers in both anti-caste and women's education movements. ↑ Q3
4. **B.** Narayana Guru consecrated a Shiva idol at Aruvippuram in 1888, a role usually reserved for Brahmin priests alone. He then declared "one caste, one religion, one God for mankind." ↑ Q4
5. **A.** Iyothee Thass founded the Dravida Mahajana Sabha in 1891, holding its first conference in Ooty. 1898 and Madras instead mark his later Sakya Buddhist Society; 1925 and Erode is Periyar's Self-Respect Movement; 1873 and Pune is Phule's Satyashodhak Samaj. ↑ Q5
6. **B.** The correct answer is untouchable readers. Vital-Vidhvansak, meaning “Destroyer of Ceremonial Pollution,” was the first monthly journal to target untouchable readers. ↑ Q6
7. **D.** The Justice Party (South Indian Liberal Federation, 1916) opposed the Congress non-cooperation call and contested the 1920 elections, winning the Madras Presidency ministry - so it did NOT support the Congress boycott of the 1920 elections. Statements (a)-(c) match its record: it demanded separate communal representation for Non-Brahmins, drew support from wealthy landowning and urban middle-class Non-Brahmins, and is credited with securing reserved seats for Non-Brahmins during the Montagu-Chelmsford reforms era. ↑ Q7

8. **B.** The Kalaram temple at Nashik is in Maharashtra. It became a landmark of the temple-entry movement when B.R. Ambedkar led a Satyagraha there in March 1930 — a campaign that echoes Narayana Guru's Aruvippuram consecration of 1888 in Kerala and the Vaikom Satyagraha of 1924-25. ↑ Q8

Quick-check answers

1. **True.** ↑ 1
2. **False.** ↑ 2
3. **False.** ↑ 3

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