

# THE RISE OF LOCAL DALIT LEADERSHIP AND THE SPREAD OF AMBEDKARITE IDEOLOGY IN NAGPUR AND AMRAVATI DISTRICTS (1925–1956)

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## ABSTRACT

Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar's contribution to the social movements against social inequality in colonial India is exceptional. His social, educational, and political movements provided ideological and organizational foundations for the fight against untouchability. Ambedkar's work was not limited to the national level but also had a wide impact at various regional levels. Particularly, in the Vidarbha region of Maharashtra, his ideas found significant expression. The districts of Nagpur and Amravati in Vidarbha became not just small centers of Ambedkarite thought but fertile grounds for building a broader movement. Nagpur was the site of many important events in Ambedkar's life be it the historic announcement of his religious conversion or the revolutionary ceremony of Dhamm Diksha. Against this backdrop, Nagpur energized the social transformation struggle. Similarly, Amravati district saw the rise of Dalit leadership that was not merely imitative but created movements relevant to local conditions. In the 1920s, the untouchable community was deprived of education, rights, self-respect, and social dignity. As British colonial reforms slightly opened some doors, under Ambedkar's leadership, the Dalit community began to awaken to new social consciousness. Local activists in Nagpur and Amravati not only limited this awareness to propaganda but transformed it into action that impacted social behavior. They organized local associations, held meetings, conducted awareness on religious conversion, and laid the groundwork for a broader social revolution.

This research will conduct an in-depth analytical study of the rise of Dalit leadership in Nagpur and Amravati, their methods of work, their commitment to Ambedkar's ideas, and how Ambedkarite ideology spread in these two districts. It will examine the work of local leaders, the establishment of organizations, the participation of women, initiatives related to Buddhist dhamma acceptance, and socio-political outcomes. The focus of this study will be on the expansion of the movement and the consequent ideological and social awakening of the Dalit community between 1925 and 1956.

**Keywords:** Ambedkarite Movement, Local Leadership, Social Transformation, Bahishkrit Hitkarini Sabha, Vidarbha

## 1. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1. SOCIAL BACKGROUND (IN THE 1920S)

The 1920s marked an important phase of social and political transformation in India. Under colonial rule, national movements were emerging, but these were predominantly led by upper-caste leadership. During this period, the life of the Dalit community, also referred to as the so-called “untouchable” class, was extremely miserable. They were excluded from education, administration, business, politics, and social prestige. The situation in Vidarbha was no different. Although cities like Nagpur and Amravati were centers of urbanization, the life of the Dalit population there was as wretched as that of their rural counterparts. Their settlements were located away from main habitations, deprived of resources, and trapped in social neglect.

For centuries, the Dalit community in Vidarbha had been living a life based on manual labor and social humiliation. Access to education was almost negligible, and what little was available was difficult to obtain due to social discrimination, humiliation, and separate seating arrangements. There appeared to be no clear way out of this situation. At such a time, the ideas of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar and the movement he led became a beacon of hope for this community.

In 1920, Dr. Ambedkar established the 'Bahishkrit Hitakarini Sabha' (Ex-untouchables Welfare Society), aiming to awaken education, organization, and self-respect among the untouchable community. Although this Sabha operated at a national level, its influence gradually spread to Vidarbha as well. Nagpur, being a center of education and administration, became a hub from which these ideas radiated. Through Ambedkar's weekly publications 'Mooknayak' (1920) and 'Bahishkrit Bharat' (1927), the problems, self-respect, and struggle against social injustice of the untouchable community started reaching the masses. Notably, in Nagpur and Amravati, some social reform efforts were already underway. The influence of the Phule ideology was somewhat active here. Therefore, when Ambedkar's writings and ideas reached Vidarbha, local activists and readers emerged who resonated with them. These activists would later become the local leadership.

During this period, a sense of restlessness and awakening was growing within the Dalit community. Some reforms in British laws, the limited influence of Mahatma Phule and the Satyashodhak movement, and the new consciousness sparked by Ambedkar's writings encouraged the Dalit community in Vidarbha to reflect on their present and future. After 1920, the number of Dalit students in Nagpur and Amravati slowly increased, local libraries, study circles, and discussion groups were established, and a process of emerging from illiteracy and backwardness began. Thus, in the 1920s, the social struggle of the Dalit community in Vidarbha reached a new turning point. This background laid the foundation for the subsequent expansion of the Ambedkarite movement and the rise of local leadership.

## 2. THE RISE OF LEADERSHIP IN NAGPUR

After 1920, Nagpur emerged as an important center of the Ambedkarite movement. Due to its geographical, educational, and administrative significance, the city provided a conducive environment for social awakening. Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar's ideas reached Nagpur early, inspiring many young activists to actively participate in social transformation. The Dalit leadership in Nagpur played a crucial role in promoting and spreading Ambedkar's movement, contributing significantly to local organization, activism, and mass awareness.

Established in Nagpur in 1922, the Chokhamela Sudharak Mandal sowed the seeds of social reform within the Dalit community. The organization aimed to awaken self-awareness, promote education, and fight against social customs that oppressed the untouchable society. The Mandal worked to organize Dalit youth and created, for the first time in the Nagpur region, a thoughtful Dalit platform. It started libraries, organized public lectures, and encouraged Dalit youth to pursue education. The Mandal particularly focused on instilling Ambedkarite ideas among Dalit students. Through this institution, a new generation of leadership was formed, which later became the backbone of the Ambedkarite movement.

Rewaram Vithoba Kavadhe was a prominent leader of the Ambedkarite movement in Nagpur. Not merely a follower of Ambedkar, he was also recognized as his close associate. His leadership began through the 'Yuva Mahar Sangh'—an organization that worked to foster organization and social awareness among Dalit youth in the Nagpur region. After 1930, Kavadhe worked through Ambedkar-led organizations like the Bahishkrit Hitakarini Sabha and the Samata Sainik Dal. He led public meetings, satyagraha marches, and large gatherings propagating Ambedkarite ideology in Nagpur. Particularly after 1932, he played an active role in awareness campaigns opposing the Poona Pact. He mobilized extensive public awareness in areas like Kamptee, Gangabai Ghat, and Lakadganj in Nagpur. His work was not limited to speeches but was also organizationally strong. Under Dr. Ambedkar's direct guidance, Rewaram Kavadhe organized training camps of the Samata Sainik Dal in Nagpur, focusing on disciplined organization, social security, and ideological propagation. He inspired students with a sense of leadership, a generation that later energized the conversion movement.

After 1950, Nagpur became the focal point against the backdrop of Dr. Ambedkar's decision to convert. During this period, activists like Rewaram Kavadhe, Sambhaji Shivaji Godghate, and P. R. Meshram intensified the pre-conversion awareness movement. These leaders organized lectures on dhamma, distributed literature, held study classes on Buddhist ideology, and undertook initiatives for building 'Buddha Vihar,' generating new consciousness. Rewaram Kavadhe established libraries for dhamma literature across Nagpur. Along with associates like Godghate and Meshram, he took charge of building public Buddha Vihars, which were not only religious centers but also hubs for social

reconstruction. They propagated the idea that 'Buddha Vihar is a center of new culture for the Dalit society. During this period, Dr. Ambedkar frequently visited Nagpur, and the preparations for conversion were centered in the city. Against this backdrop, these local leaders played an important role in spreading Dr. Ambedkar's ideas deep into the grassroots of society.

### 3. THE RISE OF LEADERSHIP IN AMRAVATI

Like Nagpur, the Amravati district also became a significant stronghold of the Ambedkarite movement. In Amravati, part of the Varhad region, the city was a center of education, railway, and colonial administration during British rule, and it had a large Dalit population. The influence of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar's social revolution reached here in the 1920s. During this time, local leadership emerged in Amravati, who were not only thinkers but also active carriers of the movement. The Varhad Provincial Untouchable Conference held in 1935 at Amravati was a significant event in the history of the Ambedkarite movement in Vidarbha. Local leaders like Kalicharan Nandagawali, R.B. More, played important roles in organizing this conference. For the first time, the idea of religious conversion was seriously discussed at this conference, sowing the seeds of a new movement in Vidarbha.

Kalicharan Nandagawali was an influential leader from Amravati who established hostels, study groups, and libraries for the untouchable students. He frequently invited Dr. Ambedkar to Amravati for lectures and organized events for his speeches. He started reading circles and awareness campaigns centered around the publication *Bahishkrit Bharat* (Excluded India). His efforts awakened intellectual and social consciousness among the Dalit community in Amravati.

R.B. More remained active in Amravati's student organizations and awareness efforts following the Mahad Satyagraha. He focused on organizing student groups and enlightening the public. He also held mass meetings for awareness regarding religious conversion and distributed books promoting Buddhist teachings. After 1950, preparations for religious conversion started in Amravati, similar to Nagpur. Activities such as the establishment of Buddhist Viharas, public lectures, and Buddhist Dharma study classes began. Local leaders actively invited Dr. Ambedkar for religious conversion events and participated prominently in the conversion process.

### 4. JOINT EFFORTS AND SPREAD OF IDEAS BETWEEN NAGPUR AND AMRAVATI

Local leaders from Nagpur and Amravati often worked together to promote Ambedkarite ideology. There was continuous communication, correspondence, meetings, and joint programs between leaders from both districts. Initiatives like Dalit student organizations, social gatherings, Dharma Jayanti celebrations, and awareness campaigns were led jointly by leaders from Nagpur and Amravati.

Dr. Ambedkar's tours in Vidarbha were often planned by combined committees from these two districts. For example, after 1945, his propaganda meetings, pre-conversion lectures, and various gatherings in Vidarbha were held with active participation from both cities. This coordinated leadership helped strengthen the Dalit movement in Vidarbha.

### 5. SPREAD OF AMBEDKARITE IDEAS: MEDIA AND METHODS

Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar's social and political ideas reached the major districts of Nagpur and Amravati effectively due to the activism of local workers and efficient propaganda machinery. From 1920 to 1956, Ambedkarite ideas were spread through various means and strategies including educational assemblies, gatherings, propaganda tours, religious workshops, libraries, and organizational activities. The sowing of Ambedkarite ideas in Nagpur and Amravati was primarily through public assemblies. Dr. Ambedkar's historic speech in Nagpur in 1942 awakened self-respect and a sense of transformation in the Dalit society of Vidarbha. Following this, large-scale assemblies, lectures, and gatherings were held annually. Conferences such as the Varhad Provincial Untouchable Conference (1935) in Amravati, subsequent meetings, and various Dharma awareness tours in Nagpur helped spread Ambedkarite thoughts to the masses. Activists toured Dalit settlements in both urban and rural areas distributing Ambedkar's writings and excerpts from his speeches published in periodicals like *Bahishkrit Bharat*, *Janata*, and *Prabuddha Bharat*.

## 6. PREPARATIONS AFTER THE DECLARATION OF CONVERSION (1950–1956)

After Dr. Ambedkar declared his intention to convert in 1935, a long phase of preparation began in Vidarbha for religious conversion. Between 1950 and 1956, local activists in Nagpur and Amravati actively worked to disseminate Buddhist Dharma principles among society. Dharma Education Camps: Camps were held for youth and students to understand Buddhist philosophy, Ambedkar's thoughts, and his historic decision of conversion.

Libraries and Study Centers: Many Dalit settlements established libraries where Buddhist literature, collections of Ambedkar's speeches, and books like Gautam Buddha and His Dharma were read and studied. Buddhist Viharas: Several Buddhist Viharas were built near the conversion sites in Nagpur and in important localities in Amravati. These were not only religious centers but also hubs of intellectual awakening.

The Samata Sainik Dal, founded by Dr. Ambedkar for the protection of social revolution, played an important role in Nagpur and Amravati. Organizing Youth: The Dal inculcated Ambedkarite ideology among the youth and provided disciplined organizational training. Processions and Protection: The Dal members were responsible for security during meetings and events. They also organized peaceful marches protesting injustices in Dalit settlements to raise public awareness. Role in Dharma Conversion Ceremonies: The Samata Sainik Dal actively participated in organizing and managing the historic Dharma Conversion ceremony held on 14th October 1956 in Nagpur.

## 7. CONCLUSION

Between 1920 and 1956, the Dalit leadership in the districts of Nagpur and Amravati not only propagated Ambedkarite ideology but also successfully embedded these ideas into the social practices and lifestyles of the community. This leadership actively participated in Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar's social, political, and religious movements, igniting a beacon of transformation in the Vidarbha region. A distinctive feature of this leadership was their ability to link the dissemination of ideas with practical implementation. Through organizations such as the Bahishkrit Hitakarini Sabha, Chokhamela Sudharak Mandal, Yuva Mahar Sangh, and Samata Sainik Dal, they worked systematically to organize society at the grassroots level. They embodied Ambedkar's threefold motto: "Educate, Organize, and Agitate."

Education was the foremost pillar of this movement. The leadership in Nagpur and Amravati focused on directing youth towards education by establishing libraries, study groups, and student organizations. They cultivated an awareness at the local level that educational empowerment was essential for social liberation. Organization formed the second pillar. Dalit communities across various villages in Vidarbha were mobilized by setting up branches, conducting assemblies, conferences, and satyagrahas to raise consciousness about their rights. Particularly through the Samata Sainik Dal, an organized force and protective mechanism were established. Conversion to Buddhism (Dhammadiksha) became the third and decisive pillar. After 1950, local activists intensively promoted Buddhism by organizing camps, lectures, and distributing literature. The historic conversion ceremony held in Nagpur in 1956 was centrally organized by this local leadership. They also established Buddhist viharas, laying the foundation of the Neo-Buddhist cultural renaissance.

Overall, the Dalit leadership in Nagpur and Amravati acted as local propagators, motivators, and revolutionaries of Ambedkarite thought. They did not merely emulate Dr. Ambedkar but also played an independent role as thinkers and organizers who expanded his movement. Because of this leadership, Dalit society in Vidarbha awakened to self-awareness, developed social identity, and laid the groundwork for a new social order based on religious and cultural transformation.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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