



## FROM UNTOUCHABILITY TO WELFARE: GANDHI'S AMBIVALENT LEGACY IN KERALA'S CASTE EMANCIPATION

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### RESEARCH ARTICLE



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#### Abstract

This paper explores Mahatma Gandhi's ambivalent legacy in Kerala's caste emancipation, tracing the shift from untouchability to welfare. Using a qualitative historical-sociological approach, the study draws on archival records, government welfare documents (1920–1950), Gandhi's writings, and oral testimonies from Dalit community elders. Guided by social movement theory and postcolonial perspectives, the findings reveal Gandhi's dual impact: symbolic inclusion and welfare initiatives that advanced dignity, literacy, and social mobility, alongside paternalistic strategies that reinforced hierarchical structures. The analysis highlights both tangible welfare gains and enduring contradictions in caste emancipation. By situating Kerala's experience within global debates on marginalization and reform, the paper underscores the tension between symbolic inclusion and structural transformation, offering insights into the complex legacies of reformist movements in struggles for social justice worldwide.

**Keywords:** *Dalits, Caste Reform, Kerala Social Movements, Social Justice, Structural Inequality, Grassroots Mobilization, Symbolic Inclusion, Postcolonial Sociology, Social Movement Theory*

#### Introduction

This paper explores Mahatma Gandhi's ambivalent legacy in Kerala's caste emancipation, tracing the shift from untouchability to welfare. Using a qualitative historical-sociological approach, the study draws on archival records, government welfare documents (1920–1950), Gandhi's writings, and oral testimonies from Dalit community elders. Guided by social movement theory and postcolonial perspectives, the findings reveal Gandhi's dual impact: symbolic inclusion and welfare initiatives that advanced dignity, literacy, and social mobility, alongside paternalistic strategies that reinforced hierarchical structures. The analysis highlights both tangible welfare gains and enduring contradictions in caste emancipation. By situating Kerala's experience within global debates on marginalization and reform, the paper underscores the tension between symbolic inclusion and structural transformation, offering insights into the complex legacies of reformist movements in struggles for social justice worldwide.

**Positioning of the Present Study:** This study addresses these gaps through a comparative, integrative, and region-specific analysis of the contributions of Gandhi, Ambedkar, and Ayyankali. Methodologically, it employs a qualitative, interpretive approach with thematic analysis and source triangulation.

The study contributes by:

- Integrating ethical, structural, and subaltern perspectives
- Grounding national theories within Kerala's socio-historical context
- Expanding the concept of welfare to include dignity, rights, and lived experience.

**Objectives of the Study:** This study explores to critically examine the impact of Mahatma Gandhi, B. R. Ambedkar, and Ayyankali on the emancipation and welfare of Harijans in Kerala. The specific aims are:

1. To analyze the ideological foundations of Gandhian, Ambedkarite, and Ayyankali-led approaches to caste reform and Harijan welfare.
2. To examine the nature and extent of Gandhian interventions in Kerala, particularly in relation to anti-untouchability campaigns and social inclusion.
3. To assess the influence of Ambedkar's structural and rights-based framework on the welfare and socio-political mobility of Dalits in Kerala.

4. To evaluate the role of Ayyankali's grassroots mobilization in transforming the lived realities of marginalized communities in Kerala.
5. To compare the ethical, structural, and grassroots approaches to understanding their respective contributions and limitations.
6. To explore the continuing relevance of these approaches in addressing contemporary caste inequalities in Kerala.

To propose an integrated analytical framework that combines moral, structural, and participatory dimensions of social change.

**Research Gap:** Despite extensive scholarship on caste, untouchability, and social reform in India, important analytical and methodological gaps persist, particularly in region-specific and integrative studies. A significant analytical gap persists regarding the specific influence of Gandhi and Ambedkar in Kerala, despite the vast body of literature on their broader national legacies.

The existing research tends to separate Gandhian moral reform from the structural critique of Ambedkar, framing them as opposing paradigms rather than interconnected approaches (Ambedkar, 1936; Omvedt, 1994). This checks the development of integrative frameworks capable of capturing the layered nature of caste transformation in specific contexts. Similarly, while regional studies acknowledge the contributions of Ayyankali, his role is descriptive and under-theorized, particularly in relation to subaltern agency and grassroots resistance (Kumar, 2012; Nisar & Kandasamy, 2007).

Methodologically, there is a lack of studies that bridge macro-level ideological analysis and micro-level lived experiences, with limited use of comparative and thematic approaches. This constrains a holistic understanding of caste reform. Furthermore, the concept of "welfare" is narrowly defined in policy terms, often overlooking dimensions of dignity, access, and lived transformation (Pai, 2002).

In the Kerala context, although development achievements are well documented, the persistence of caste inequalities is still ineffectively examined (Ramachandran, 1996; Devika, 2010). The relationship between symbolic reforms and substantive structural change is particularly underexplored, as is the long-term relevance of reform movements in contemporary (post-2000) Kerala.

**Research Questions and Hypotheses:** This study is conducted by the following research questions:

1. How did Mahatma Gandhi conceptualize and address the issue of untouchability, and what was the impact of his interventions in Kerala?
2. In what ways does B. R. Ambedkar's structural critique of caste differ from Gandhian reformism, and how has it influenced Dalit welfare in Kerala?
3. How did the grassroots activism of Ayyankali reform access to education, labor rights, and public spaces for marginalized communities?
4. In what ways do the Gandhian, Ambedkarite and Ayyankali frameworks for Harijan welfare converge and diverge within the socio-historical context of Kerala?
5. To what extent have these interventions contributed to both symbolic emancipation and structural transformation in Kerala?
6. Why does caste inequality persist in Kerala despite significant reform efforts and progressive social indicators?

### Literature Review

The question of caste, untouchability, and the emancipation of marginalized communities in India has generated a substantial body of interdisciplinary scholarship across history, sociology, political theory, and development studies. Central to this discourse are the contrasting yet interrelated perspectives of Mahatma Gandhi and B. R. Ambedkar, whose debates continue to shape contemporary understandings of caste reform and social justice.

Gandhian scholarship situates untouchability within a moral and ethical framework, emphasizing reform from within Hindu society. Gandhi conceptualized caste as a social distortion rather than an immutable structure, advocating transformation through ethical persuasion, self-purification, and non-violent social action (Gandhi, 1958). Scholars such as Brown (1989) interpret Gandhi's approach as ethical humanism that sought to reconcile tradition with reform. However, critics argue that this framework underestimated the structural depth of caste and relied excessively on upper-caste goodwill (Ambedkar, 1945).

In contrast, Ambedkar's writings provide a radical critique of caste as a system of graded inequality embedded in religious, economic, and political institutions (Ambedkar, 1936). His work reoriented the discourse from moral reform to structural transformation, emphasizing legal safeguards, political representation, and economic redistribution. Omvedt (1994) highlights Ambedkar's contribution in reframing caste as a question of rights and justice, while Jaffrelot (2003) situates his ideas within the broader trajectory of democratic transformation in India. This perspective underscores the limitations of symbolic change without institutional reform.

Beyond this binary, sociological scholarship has conceptualized caste as both cultural and structural. Bêteille (1991) and Srinivas (1962) analyze caste as a dynamic system shaped by processes such as Sanskritization and modernization, while Oommen (1990) emphasizes the role of social movements in mediating change. Subaltern studies further foreground marginalized communities as active agents of history, challenging elite-centric narratives of reform (Guha, 1982). This perspective is particularly relevant for understanding Ayyankali, whose activism exemplifies grassroots resistance in Kerala (Kumar, 2012; Nisar & Kandasamy, 2007).

Regional studies of Kerala highlight temple entry agitations, struggles for access to public spaces, and Dalit movements as critical in challenging caste hierarchies (Menon, 1967; Panikkar, 1989). While Kerala is often notable for its achievements in education and health, scholars note that these gains have not fully translated into social equality (Ramachandran, 1996; Devika, 2010). This disjuncture between developmental progress and caste eradication underscores the need for multidimensional approaches that integrate ethical, structural, and participatory dimensions of reform.

Despite this rich scholarship, significant gaps have not yet solved. Most studies focus on Gandhi, Ambedkar, or Ayyankali in isolation, without adequately exploring intersections between their approaches within Kerala's socio-historical context. Furthermore, the concept of welfare is often narrowly defined in policy terms, overlooking dimensions of dignity, access, and lived transformation (Pai, 2002). This study addresses these gaps by offering a comparative and theoretically integrated analysis, situating national debates within regional realities to provide a more nuanced understanding of caste reform and social justice in Kerala.

### **Methodology**

This study adopts a qualitative historical-sociological design to examine Gandhi's influence on the emancipation and welfare of Harijans in Kerala. The research integrates archival analysis, oral testimonies, and secondary literature to construct a multi-layered understanding of Gandhi's interventions and their sociological implications.

### **Data Sources**

- **Primary Sources:** Gandhi's speeches, writings, and correspondence related to Harijan welfare; Kerala government welfare records (1920–1950); and oral testimonies collected from Harijan community elders in regions where Gandhi's initiatives were most active.
- **Secondary Sources:** Scholarly works on caste dynamics, social reform movements, and postcolonial critiques of Gandhi's role in Kerala.

**Sampling and Selection:** The participants in the oral testimonies selected through purposive sampling, including individuals and families who had direct or inherited experience with Gandhiji's Harijan Upliftment programs. Archival documents selected for their relevance to welfare initiatives and the broader struggle for caste liberation.

**Analytical Framework:** The analysis is guided by social movement theory and postcolonial sociological perspectives, situating Gandhi's interventions within broader debates on caste stratification, collective action, and paternalism in reformist movements. Archival texts and oral narratives were subjected to thematic coding, finding recurring motifs of emancipation, welfare, resistance, and paternalism. Comparative historical analysis was employed to trace continuities and contradictions between Gandhi's ideals and their practical outcomes in Kerala.

**Limitations:** The study acknowledges constraints such as reliance on oral memory, regional specificity, and the interpretive nature of archival sources. These limitations are addressed in the discussion to ensure transparency and critical balance.

### **Theoretical Framework**

#### **Normative Perspective: Gandhian Ethics**

At the normative level, Gandhi conceptualized social transformation as a process of moral regeneration rooted in non-violence, self-purification, and social inclusion (Gandhi, 1958; Brown, 1989). His ethical framework emphasized reshaping social attitudes and delegitimizing untouchability through moral persuasion. This perspective situates caste reform within conscience and ethical awareness, highlighting symbolic transformation as a precursor to social change.

#### **Structural Perspective: Ambedkarite Critique**

Ambedkar framed caste as an institutionalized system of inequality embedded in religious, economic, and political structures (Ambedkar, 1936; Omvedt, 1994). His structuralist approach emphasized legal safeguards, political representation, and redistributive policies as necessary conditions for emancipation. By embedding rights-based mechanisms within the Constitution, Ambedkar shifted the discourse from moral reform to institutional restructuring, underscoring the importance of systemic change for substantive equality (Jaffreot, 2003).

#### **Subaltern Perspective: Ayyankali's Praxis**

Ayyankali's activism exemplifies subaltern agency, wherein marginalized communities actively resist and transform oppressive structures through collective mobilization (Kumar, 2012; Nisar & Kandasamy, 2007). His struggles for education, labor dignity, and access to public spaces highlight experiential transformation rooted in lived realities. This perspective aligns with subaltern studies, particularly Guha (1982), which foregrounds marginalized groups as central actors in historical processes rather than passive recipients of reform.

#### **Integrative Perspective: Structuration and Agency**

To integrate these perspectives, the study draws on Giddens' (1984) theory of structuration, which conceptualizes social change as the dynamic interaction between agency and structure. Gandhian ethics stand for discursive transformation, Ambedkarite structuralism institutionalizes justice, and Ayyankali's praxis embodies grassroots resistance. Together, they illustrate that caste reform in Kerala is best understood as a layered process involving ethical awareness, institutional safeguards, and participatory

mobilization. This integrative framework situates Kerala's experience within broader debates on social justice, highlighting both the possibilities and limitations of reform movements.

### **Analysis: Gandhi, Ambedkar, and Ayyankali**

#### **Ethical Dimension: Gandhian Reform**

Gandhi's interventions in Kerala, particularly during the Vaikom Satyagraha, reshaped public consciousness by delegitimizing untouchability and promoting moral regeneration. His emphasis on ethical persuasion and symbolic inclusion created a discursive shift, encouraging upper-caste Hindus to reconsider entrenched practices. However, the reliance on conscience and goodwill limited the depth of transformation, as structural inequalities remained largely intact (Brown, 1989; Devika, 2010).

#### **Structural Dimension: Ambedkarite Transformation**

Ambedkar's framework reoriented caste reform toward institutional safeguards and rights-based restructuring. His insistence on constitutional guarantees, reservations, and political representation provided Dalits with tools for substantive equality. In Kerala, Ambedkarite thought influenced welfare policies and Dalit political mobilization, embedding structural justice within democratic institutions. Yet, the effectiveness of these measures depended on consistent implementation, and inequalities persisted despite legal progress (Omvedt, 1994; Jaffrelot, 2003).

#### **Grassroots Dimension: Ayyankali's Mobilization**

Ayyankali's activism exemplified subaltern agency, as his struggles for education, labor dignity, and access to public spaces directly confronted caste hierarchies. His grassroots mobilization produced tangible improvements in Dalit lives, showing that lived transformation requires collective resistance. Ayyankali's praxis is still a model for participatory action, though its localized scope limited national institutional reach (Kumar, 2012; Nisar & Kandasamy, 2007).

#### **Comparative Synthesis**

The Kerala experience illustrates that emancipation cannot be achieved through ethical persuasion, structural reform, or grassroots mobilization alone. Instead, meaningful transformation requires their integration. Gandhi reshaped conscience, Ambedkar institutionalized justice, and Ayyankali embodied lived resistance. Together, they highlight the layered nature of caste reform and the continuing relevance of multidimensional approaches in addressing inequality.

Gandhi's intervention in Kerala, particularly during the Vaikom Satyagraha, constituted a critical moment in challenging caste-based exclusion and contesting the denial of public space to marginalized communities (Brown, 1989). His emphasis on moral reform helped delegitimize untouchability at the level of social consciousness and contributed to the gradual opening of access to roads and public institutions. However, this transformation remained largely symbolic and did not significantly disrupt the underlying structural foundations of caste hierarchy. Thus, Gandhi's contribution can be understood as a form of discursive and ethical transformation, which influenced attitudes but had limited impact on material inequalities.

In contrast, Ambedkar's intervention stands for a structural and institutional approach to caste reform. Although his direct engagement with Kerala was limited, his influence functions through the Indian Constitution and the framework of affirmative action, which institutionalized safeguards such as reservations in education and employment (Jaffrelot, 2003). Ambedkar's approach shifted the focus from moral persuasion to rights-based restructuring, emphasizing legal equality, political representation, and social justice as necessary conditions for emancipation. His framework addresses the structural roots of caste by embedding mechanisms of redress within state institutions.

Ayyankali's activism, by comparison, is a grassroots and experiential mode of transformation that developed from within the lived realities of caste oppression in Kerala. His struggles for access to education, public roads, and dignified labor directly confronted entrenched forms of social exclusion (Kumar, 2012; Nisar & Kandasamy, 2007). Unlike top-down reform, Ayyankali's efforts were rooted in collective mobilization and everyday resistance, making his contribution particularly significant in altering the material conditions of marginalized communities. Theoretically, his actions exemplify subaltern agency, wherein oppressed groups actively resist hegemonic structures and produce change through lived struggle rather than institutional or moral discourse alone.

The comparative analysis (see Table 1) highlights three distinct but interrelated dimensions of social transformation:

**Comparative Table 1: Gandhi, Ambedkar, and Ayyankali in Kerala**

<b>Dimension</b>	<b>Gandhi</b>	<b>Ambedkar</b>	<b>Ayyankali</b>	<b>Integrated Insight</b>
Ethical	Delegitimized untouchability; reshaped conscience	Critiqued symbolic reform as insufficient	Embodied dignity through lived struggles	Ethical awareness necessary but incomplete
Structural	Relied on persuasion, not redistribution	Institutionalized rights, reservations, and safeguards	Limited institutional reach	Structural reform essential for equality
Grassroots	Mobilized moral discourse	Focused on legal frameworks	Collective resistance transformed lived realities	Grassroots action sustains reform
Limitations	Symbolic, lacked redistribution	Dependent on implementation	Localized, contested by elites	Integration required for lasting change

Taken together, these approaches illustrate that social change in Kerala is best understood as a layered and multi-scalar process, involving the interaction of ethical reform, institutional restructuring, and grassroots mobilization. While Gandhi reshaped moral consciousness, Ambedkar institutionalized justice, and Ayyankali translated resistance into lived transformation, their combined influence reveals both the possibilities and limitations of caste reform in India.

**Implications for Harijan Welfare**

The welfare of Harijan communities in Kerala today reflects the layered legacy of these three figures. Improvements in education, health, and political participation point to the success of combined ethical, structural, and grassroots interventions. Yet, continuing disparities in land ownership, employment, and social status reveal that the project of emancipation is still incomplete. A more holistic understanding of Harijan welfare appears when these perspectives are seen not as competing, but as complementary. Ethical transformation can erode prejudice, structural reform can redistribute power, and grassroots mobilization can ensure accountability and participation. Together, they form a triadic framework for understanding and advancing social justice.

**Comparative Table 2: Gandhi, Ambedkar, and Ayyankali on Harijan Welfare**

Dimension	Mahatma Gandhi	B. R. Ambedkar	Ayyankali
Core Ideology	Ethical reform; moral regeneration of Hindu society; <i>Sarvodaya</i> (welfare of all)	Structural transformation; annihilation of caste; rights-based justice	Grassroots resistance; social equality through direct action
View on Caste	Caste as a social distortion; reformable within Hinduism	Caste as a system of graded inequality; must be destroyed	Caste as lived oppression requiring immediate resistance
Approach to Harijan Welfare	Moral persuasion; uplift through service, education, and inclusion	Legal safeguards; political representation; economic redistribution	Social mobilization; access to education, labor rights, and public spaces
Methods Used	Non-violence, constructive programmes, temple entry movements	Constitutionalism, legislation, political activism, intellectual critique	Strikes, protests, community organization, direct confrontation
Key Contributions in Kerala Context	Support to Vaikom Satyagraha; anti-untouchability campaigns; national attention	Indirect influence via Constitution, reservation policies, rights discourse	Direct leadership in Dalit struggles; school access, road rights, labor dignity
Nature of Impact	Symbolic and moral transformation	Institutional and structural transformation	Immediate and localized social transformation
Strengths	Changed public consciousness; reduced social stigma	Provided durable legal and political tools for empowerment	Empowered Dalits directly; created tangible social change
Limitations	Lacked structural depth; dependent on upper-caste goodwill	Implementation gaps; slower social acceptance	Regionally confined; needed broader institutional backing
Type of Welfare Achieved	Normative inclusion and dignity	Rights-based welfare and state support	Practical access to resources and everyday dignity
Relevance to Kerala Dalits	Inspired reform movements and awareness	Enabled long-term mobility through policies	Directly transformed lived experiences of Kerala Dalits

**Contemporary Relevance**

Despite Kerala’s progress in education, health, and social development, caste disparities persist in subtle but significant forms, including social exclusion, economic inequality, and cultural marginalization (Devika, 2010; Jeffrey, 1992). Post-2000 developments reveal that while legal safeguards and educational gains have improved opportunities for Dalits, structural inequities exist deeply embedded in institutions and everyday practices (Ramachandran, 1996; Zachariah & Rajan, 2012). For instance, affirmative action policies and welfare schemes have expanded access to education and employment, yet these measures often do not dismantle entrenched hierarchies of power and privilege (Pai, 2002; Jaffrelot, 2003).

The persistence of caste inequality underscores the limitations of symbolic reforms alone. Gandhi’s emphasis on moral persuasion helped reshape public consciousness, but without structural redistribution, such ethical awareness risks occur superficial (Brown, 1989; Ambedkar, 1945). Ambedkar’s rights-based framework, institutionalized through constitutional safeguards, continues to provide a foundation for Dalit welfare, yet its effectiveness depends on consistent implementation and political accountability (Omvedt, 1994; Jaffrelot, 2003). Meanwhile, Ayyankali’s grassroots mobilization is relevant as a reminder that lived transformation requires collective resistance and participatory action from below (Kumar, 2012; Nisar & Kandasamy, 2007).

Contemporary Kerala illustrates the need for an integrated approach that combines ethical awareness, institutional reform, and grassroots mobilization. Developmental achievements in literacy and health have not fully translated into social equality, highlighting a disjuncture between progress in human development indicators and the eradication of caste hierarchies (Devika & Thampi, 2011; Tharakan, 1998). Addressing these challenges requires moving beyond welfare delivery toward structural

redistribution, social accountability, and community-based participation, ensuring that Dalit emancipation is not merely symbolic but substantively transformative (Oommen, 1990; Guha, 1982).

Despite Kerala's progress, caste disparities persist in subtle forms, including social exclusion and economic inequality (Devika, 2010). Post-2000 developments show that while legal and educational gains have improved conditions, structural inequities are still embedded. This underscores the continued relevance of integrating ethical awareness, institutional reform, and grassroots mobilization.

**Contemporary Relevance: Table 3**

Thinker/Reformer	Contemporary Relevance	Key Limitations	Supporting References
Mahatma Gandhi	Helped reshape public consciousness by delegitimizing untouchability and promoting ethical awareness. His influence persists in symbolic reforms and moral discourse around caste equality.	Ethical persuasion alone did not dismantle entrenched hierarchies; reforms risk being still superficial without structural redistribution.	Brown, 1989; Ambedkar, 1945; Devika, 2010
B. R. Ambedkar	Institutionalized rights-based safeguards through the Constitution, reservations, and legal equality. His framework continues to underpin Dalit welfare and political representation.	Effectiveness depends on consistent implementation; structural inequities are embedded despite legal progress.	Omvedt, 1994; Jaffrelot, 2003; Ramachandran, 1996
Ayyankali	Grassroots mobilization is a model for participatory action, reminding that lived transformation requires collective resistance. His struggles for education, labor dignity, and access to public spaces inspire contemporary Dalit movements.	Localized activism lacked national institutional reach; gains often contested by entrenched caste elites.	Kumar, 2012; Nisar & Kandasamy, 2007; Jeffrey, 1992
Integrated Approach	Kerala's experience shows that emancipation requires combining ethical awareness (Gandhi), institutional reform (Ambedkar), and grassroots mobilization (Ayyankali). Developmental progress in literacy and health has not fully translated into social equality.	Welfare delivery alone is insufficient; structural redistribution, accountability, and community participation are essential.	Devika & Thampi, 2011; Tharakan, 1998; Zachariah & Rajan, 2012

This table captures the layered nature of caste reform in Kerala: Gandhi's moral discourse reshaped attitudes, Ambedkar's structural interventions institutionalized justice, and Ayyankali's grassroots struggles transformed lived realities. Together, they highlight why caste inequality persists despite Kerala's developmental achievements, and why a holistic framework still necessary.

Would you like me to also visualize this synthesis as a conceptual diagram (e.g., three overlapping circles showing ethical, structural, and grassroots dimensions converging in contemporary relevance)? That could make the integrative framework even clearer.

### Conclusion

This study has examined Gandhi's interventions in Kerala, tracing the trajectory from untouchability to welfare and highlighting the ambivalent legacy of his reformist efforts. The findings reveal a dual impact: on one hand, Gandhi's campaigns advanced symbolic inclusion, dignity, and welfare initiatives that improved literacy and social mobility among Dalit communities; on the other, his paternalistic strategies and reliance on moral persuasion often reinforced hierarchical structures, limiting deeper structural transformation.

By situating Kerala's experience within sociological frameworks of social movement theory and postcolonial critique, the paper underscores the tension between symbolic inclusion and structural change. Gandhi's legacy in Kerala exemplifies the paradox of reformist movements: they can simultaneously empower marginalized groups and constrain the scope of emancipation.

This ambivalence carries broader implications for contemporary struggles for social justice. Reformist interventions must be critically assessed not only for their immediate welfare gains but also for their capacity to dismantle entrenched systems of inequality. Kerala's case contributes to global debates on marginalization, welfare, and reform, offering insights into how symbolic gestures and welfare policies interact with structural hierarchies.

Future research should extend this analysis by comparing Gandhi's Kerala initiatives with other regional contexts, exploring how reformist legacies continue to shape the trajectories of caste emancipation and social justice movements worldwide.

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