



Ethical Reform, Structural Justice, and Grassroots Mobilisation: Reassessing Gandhi, Ambedkar, and Ayyankali in the Emancipation and Welfare of Marginalised Communities in Kerala

Viju V. S.

Research Scholar, Department of Languages and Social Sciences, Desh Bhagat University, Mandi Gobindgarh, Punjab, Email: writetomyemails@gmail.com

Dr Dharminder Singh

Professor of Sociology, Department of Languages and Social Sciences, Desh Bhagat University, Mandi Gobindgarh, Punjab, Email: drdharmindersingh@yahoo.co.in

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.21392278>

ARTICLE DETAILS

Research Paper

Received: 19-05-2026

Accepted: 28-06-2026

Published: 15-07-2026

Keywords:

Caste emancipation; Gandhi; B. R. Ambedkar; Ayyankali; grassroots mobilisation; structural inequality.

ABSTRACT

Kerala is known for its social development, but its past includes strong caste inequalities that restricted marginalised communities from accessing education, public spaces, and economic opportunities. This study looks at how Mahatma Gandhi, B. R. Ambedkar, and Ayyankali contributed to caste emancipation in Kerala by comparing historical records, reform literature, and academic sources. The findings show that each leader had a unique but complementary approach: Gandhi focused on ethical change and social reconciliation to fight untouchability; Ambedkar pushed for constitutional protections, political representation, and rights-based welfare; and Ayyankali emphasised grassroots mobilisation, better access to education, and labour activism based on the real experiences of oppressed groups. The findings suggest that Kerala's progress came from a mix of ethical, institutional, and community-based efforts. Welfare should be seen as more than just material help; it should include dignity, citizenship, and

Disclaimer: The opinions, interpretations, conclusions, recommendations, analyses, and statements expressed in this research article are solely those of the author(s) and do not reflect the views, policies, or positions of the Publisher, Chief Editor, Editors, Editorial Board, Reviewers, or their affiliated institutions. The author(s) are solely responsible for ensuring the originality, authenticity, and integrity of the manuscript and for ensuring that it is free from plagiarism, AI-generated content, copyright infringement, data falsification, and any other form of academic misconduct.

recognition. Ongoing inequalities show that simply including people in systems does not guarantee real equality. By bringing together Gandhian ethics, Ambedkar's focus on structural justice, and Ayyankali's participatory activism, this article offers a model for social change that combines ethical inclusion, structural justice, and empowerment.

1. Introduction

Caste has long been one of the most enduring systems of social stratification in India, shaping access to education, occupation, political participation, and social mobility across generations (Ambedkar, 1936; Béteille, 1965). Although its manifestations vary regionally, caste continues to influence patterns of privilege, exclusion, and social interaction (Deshpande, 2011; Guru, 2009). Kerala provides a significant context for examining caste and social transformation. While the state is internationally recognised for achievements in literacy, healthcare, and human development (Jeffrey, 1992; Ramachandran, 1997), these gains emerged from a society historically characterised by rigid caste hierarchies, institutionalised discrimination, and deep social exclusion (Nossiter, 1982; Oommen, 2014).

Historically, Kerala's caste system was marked by untouchability, unapproachability, and unseeability, which restricted access to education, public roads, temples, markets, and administrative institutions (Menon, 1994; Hardgrave, 1969). These exclusions extended beyond ritual practices to regulate participation in social, economic, and political life, denying marginalised communities' dignity, citizenship, and opportunities for advancement (Guru, 2009; Omvedt, 1994). The dismantling of this entrenched social order resulted not from gradual evolution but from sustained struggles led by social reformers, community organisations, and oppressed communities themselves (Chandramohan, 1987; Oommen, 2014). Reform movements of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries expanded educational access, political participation, and social mobility, laying foundations for Kerala's later welfare achievements (Jeffrey, 1976; Franke & Chasin, 1994).

Among the leading figures associated with this transformation, Mahatma Gandhi, B. R. Ambedkar, and Ayyankali occupy distinct yet complementary positions. Despite significant differences in philosophy and strategy, each contributed to the broader discourse on caste, welfare, and social justice, and their ideas continue to shape contemporary debates on equality, citizenship, and democratic inclusion (Jaffrelot, 2005; Guru & Sarukkai, 2012).

Gandhi viewed caste discrimination primarily as a moral and ethical problem. His campaign against untouchability emphasised non-violence, human dignity, and constructive social reform, arguing that enduring social change required moral transformation and reconciliation within society (Gandhi, 1927/2004; Parekh, 1997). Ambedkar, in contrast, conceptualised caste as a structural system of institutionalised inequality that reproduced unequal access to power and resources (Ambedkar, 1936; Rodrigues, 2002). He argued social emancipation depended on constitutional safeguards, legal rights, political representation, education, and economic empowerment, linking welfare to citizenship and social justice (Ambedkar, 1945/2014; Jaffrelot, 2005).

Ayyankali represents a third and equally significant dimension of anti-caste politics rooted in Kerala's social history. Drawing upon the lived experiences of oppressed communities, he mobilised collective action to secure educational opportunities, labour rights, freedom of movement, and social recognition (Chentharassery, 2000; Sanal Mohan, 2015). His grassroots activism demonstrated that community mobilisation could directly challenge entrenched caste hierarchies and expand democratic participation (Hardgrave, 1969; Thomas, 2018).

Although Gandhi, Ambedkar, and Ayyankali have been extensively studied, their contributions are often examined within separate intellectual traditions. Consequently, existing scholarship frequently overlooks how ethical reform, structural justice, and grassroots mobilisation together form complementary dimensions of social transformation (Omvedt, 1994; Rodrigues, 2002). A comparative perspective offers a more comprehensive understanding of caste emancipation by recognising that durable social change requires moral transformation, institutional reform, and collective empowerment.

This article addresses this gap through a comparative analysis of Gandhi, Ambedkar, and Ayyankali regarding caste emancipation and welfare in Kerala. It examines how their distinct philosophies and interventions contributed to social inclusion, democratic participation, and welfare-oriented development, while assessing their continuing relevance to contemporary debates on social justice.

The article argues that Kerala's progress toward social inclusion cannot be explained by just one reform tradition. Instead, it resulted from three connected processes: ethical reform that challenged discrimination, structural changes that expanded rights and opportunities, and grassroots mobilisation that helped marginalised communities gain power (Franke & Chasin, 1994; Heller, 1999; Oommen, 2014). The article also views welfare as encompassing dignity, recognition, citizenship, participation, and fair access to opportunities, not just material aid (Sen, 1999; Fraser, 2008). By combining the ideas of Gandhi, Ambedkar,

and Ayyankali, the study offers a broad framework for understanding how caste, social justice, welfare, and inclusive development are linked in Kerala and elsewhere.

2. Literature Review and Research Gap

The relationship between caste, social reform, welfare, and social justice has been widely examined across sociology, political science, history, and development studies (Béteille, 1965; Deshpande, 2011; Omvedt, 1994). Existing scholarship has explored the historical evolution of caste, the emergence of anti-caste movements, and the role of reformers in challenging entrenched inequalities (Guru, 2009; Jaffrelot, 2005). While Mahatma Gandhi, B. R. Ambedkar, and Ayyankali occupy central positions within these debates, they are generally studied within separate intellectual and ideological traditions. Consequently, limited attention has been devoted to understanding how their approaches collectively contributed to caste emancipation and welfare, particularly in Kerala.

2.1.Caste, Social Exclusion, and Social Transformation

Early sociological studies viewed caste as a hierarchical system regulating social status through inherited notions of purity and pollution (Béteille, 1965; Dumont, 1970). More recent scholarship has moved beyond this cultural interpretation, conceptualising caste as a multidimensional structure that shapes unequal access to education, employment, political representation, and social recognition (Deshpande, 2011; Guru, 2009). Scholars argue that caste functions not merely as a cultural institution but also as a mechanism of power that reproduces social and economic inequalities (Thorat & Newman, 2010).

Research on social exclusion further demonstrates that caste-based discrimination extends beyond material deprivation to include denial of dignity, participation, and equal citizenship (Fraser, 2008; Sen, 2000). Consequently, social transformation is increasingly understood as a process involving changes in institutional arrangements, power relations, and collective agency rather than simply economic development or moral reform (Giddens, 1984; Tarrow, 2011). These broader theoretical perspectives provide an important framework for analysing the distinct yet complementary contributions of Gandhi, Ambedkar, and Ayyankali.

2.2.Gandhi and Ethical Social Reform

A substantial body of scholarship examines Gandhi's engagement with caste and untouchability, highlighting his attempt to transform society through moral persuasion and non-violent social reform (Brown, 1989; Parekh, 1997). Gandhi regarded untouchability as a moral evil that violated human dignity

and promoted constructive programmes to foster social harmony and ethical responsibility (Gandhi, 1927/2004; Hardiman, 2003). His approach emphasised reconciliation, community service, and the reform of social consciousness as essential conditions for lasting social change.

However, Gandhi's position has also attracted sustained criticism. Scholars argue that although he unequivocally opposed untouchability, he was less willing to dismantle the broader caste structure itself (Ambedkar, 1936; Omvedt, 2008). Others contend that his emphasis on ethical transformation underestimated the structural foundations of caste inequality and the need for institutional reform (Guru, 2009; Jaffrelot, 2005). Nevertheless, the literature recognises Gandhi's significant role in delegitimising untouchability and expanding public engagement with questions of social justice.

2.3. Ambedkar and Structural Social Justice

Ambedkar occupies a central position in scholarship on caste, democracy, and constitutionalism (Jaffrelot, 2005; Rodrigues, 2002). Unlike Gandhi, he conceptualised caste as a system of institutionalised domination sustained through interconnected social, political, economic, and religious structures (Ambedkar, 1936). He argued that genuine emancipation required constitutional safeguards, legal protection, political representation, education, and economic empowerment rather than moral reform alone (Ambedkar, 1945/2014; Guru, 2009).

Scholars widely regard Ambedkar's constitutional vision as the foundation of a rights-based framework for social justice in India (Zelliot, 2004). His ideas continue to shape contemporary debates on affirmative action, citizenship, representation, and democratic inclusion (Thorat & Newman, 2010). At the same time, some studies suggest that legal and institutional reforms, while essential, may not by themselves eliminate deeply rooted social prejudices and cultural exclusion (Fraser, 2008; Sen, 1999). These observations highlight the importance of integrating structural change with broader processes of social transformation.

2.4. Ayyankali and Grassroots Mobilisation

Compared with Gandhi and Ambedkar, Ayyankali has received relatively limited scholarly attention, although recent research has significantly expanded understanding of his contribution to Kerala's anti-caste movement (Chentharassery, 2000; Sanal Mohan, 2015). Existing studies portray him as a pioneering leader who challenged caste oppression through grassroots mobilisation, collective resistance, and community organisation (Hardgrave, 1969).

His campaigns for educational access, labour rights, freedom of movement, and social recognition empowered marginalised communities to participate actively in social and political life (Thomas, 2018). Scholars argue that Ayyankali's emphasis on collective agency distinguishes his activism from approaches centred primarily on ethical reform or constitutional intervention (Mohan, 2015). At the same time, his contributions remain largely confined to regional historiography and are less frequently incorporated into broader theoretical discussions of welfare, citizenship, and social justice.

2.5.Welfare, Inclusion, and Social Justice

Contemporary scholarship increasingly conceptualises welfare as extending beyond material assistance to include dignity, recognition, participation, and equal citizenship (Fraser, 2008; Sen, 1999). From this perspective, social inclusion requires not only access to resources but also the capability to participate fully in political, economic, and social life without discrimination (Sen, 2000).

Studies of Kerala's development model highlight the state's remarkable achievements in literacy, healthcare, and social welfare (Franke & Chasin, 1994; Heller, 1999). Nevertheless, scholars caution that improvements in development indicators do not automatically eliminate entrenched caste inequalities (Oommen, 2014; Deshpande, 2011). These studies underscore the importance of examining welfare alongside questions of power, representation, and social justice, thereby providing a broader framework for assessing anti-caste movements and reform initiatives.

2.6.Research Gap

A review of existing scholarship reveals several important gaps that justify the present study.

First, most studies examine Gandhi, Ambedkar, and Ayyankali separately, often within distinct ideological or disciplinary traditions (Rodrigues, 2002; Zelliot, 2004). While such analyses provide valuable insights, they rarely explore how these figures collectively contributed to the broader process of caste emancipation and welfare.

Second, existing research tends to privilege either ethical reform, structural transformation, or grassroots activism as the primary driver of social change (Parekh, 1997; Jaffrelot, 2005; Mohan, 2015). Comparatively fewer studies investigate how these dimensions interact and reinforce one another in practice.

Third, scholarship on Kerala often focuses on developmental achievements without sufficiently examining the historical reform processes that contributed to social inclusion (Franke & Chasin, 1994; Heller, 1999).

There is still a need for studies that connect welfare outcomes with anti-caste struggles, democratic participation, and broader questions of social justice.

Fourth, although welfare is often discussed in relation to poverty reduction and public policy, less attention has been given to its relationship with dignity, recognition, citizenship, and participation (Fraser, 2008; Sen, 1999). A multidimensional understanding of welfare remains underdeveloped within much of the existing literature.

In response to these gaps, this study develops a comparative framework that integrates Gandhi's ethical reformism, Ambedkar's structural approach to social justice, and Ayyankali's grassroots mobilisation. By situating these perspectives within Kerala's historical context, the study aims to provide a more comprehensive understanding of caste emancipation, welfare, and social transformation.

The literature shows that caste, welfare, and social justice have been studied from many different angles (Deshpande, 2011; Guru, 2009). Gandhi, Ambedkar, and Ayyankali are important figures in these discussions, but their work is often studied separately. While past research offers valuable insights into ethical reform, constitutional justice, and grassroots activism, it rarely examines how these approaches connect. This study fills that gap by comparing and combining these reform traditions within the broader context of social change in Kerala. This helps us better understand how ethical inclusion, structural justice, and participatory empowerment together support caste emancipation and welfare.

3. Theoretical Framework

This study adopts an integrated theoretical framework combining Social Justice Theory, Structural Inequality Theory, and Social Movement Theory to examine caste emancipation and welfare in Kerala. No single theoretical perspective adequately captures the complexity of caste, as it works simultaneously as a moral, institutional, and socio-political system that shapes access to rights, resources, dignity, and citizenship (Deshpande, 2011; Guru, 2009). Integrating these three perspectives enables a multidimensional analysis of how Gandhi, Ambedkar, and Ayyankali addressed different yet interconnected dimensions of caste oppression.

3.1. Social Justice Theory

Social Justice Theory provides the normative foundation of this study by conceptualising justice as the equitable distribution of rights, opportunities, recognition, and participation (Rawls, 1971). Contemporary theorists have expanded this distributive perspective by arguing that justice requires not only material

redistribution but also recognition of marginalised identities and equal participation in public life (Fraser, 2008). Likewise, Sen's (1999) capability approach emphasises substantive freedoms and human capabilities rather than economic growth alone.

These perspectives are particularly relevant to caste because caste-based exclusion has historically involved both material deprivation and the denial of dignity, recognition, and citizenship (Guru, 2009). Within this framework, Gandhi's emphasis on moral reform and human dignity, Ambedkar's commitment to rights and democratic equality, and Ayyankali's struggle for educational access and social recognition can all be understood as distinct expressions of social justice pursued through different pathways (Parekh, 1997; Ambedkar, 1936; Chentharassery, 2000).

3.2. Structural Inequality Theory

While Social Justice Theory defines the normative goals of equality and inclusion, Structural Inequality Theory explains how caste reproduces inequality through enduring institutional arrangements. Structural approaches argue that social disadvantage is embedded within political, economic, educational, and cultural institutions rather than arising solely from individual prejudice (Bourdieu, 1986; Giddens, 1984).

The caste system exemplifies such structural inequality by regulating access to education, occupations, political representation, and social mobility across generations (Ambedkar, 1936; Deshpande, 2011). This perspective aligns closely with Ambedkar's analysis of caste as a system of institutionalised domination sustained through legal, religious, and socio-economic structures. Accordingly, he advocated constitutional safeguards, affirmative action, educational opportunities, and political representation as essential mechanisms for achieving substantive equality (Jaffrelot, 2005; Zelliot, 2004).

Structural Inequality Theory, therefore, explains why moral reform alone cannot dismantle entrenched hierarchies and why institutional transformation remains central to caste emancipation (Fraser, 2008).

3.3. Social Movement Theory

Social Movement Theory complements the preceding perspectives by highlighting the role of collective action in producing social change. It argues that institutional transformation is frequently driven by organised mobilisation through which marginalised groups challenge dominant power structures and demand social and political reforms (Tarrow, 2011; Tilly, 2004).

This perspective provides the principal analytical lens for understanding Ayyankali's activism. His campaigns for educational access, labour rights, and freedom of movement illustrate how grassroots

mobilisation enabled oppressed communities to become active agents of social transformation rather than passive beneficiaries of reform (Hardgrave, 1969; Mohan, 2015). More broadly, anti-caste movements in Kerala demonstrate how collective action reshaped public discourse, expanded democratic participation, and influenced institutional change (Oommen, 2014).

3.4. An Integrated Analytical Framework

Rather than treating these theories as competing explanations, this study integrates them as complementary dimensions of caste emancipation. Social Justice Theory identifies the normative objectives of dignity, equality, and inclusion; Structural Inequality Theory explains the institutional mechanisms through which caste reproduces exclusion; and Social Movement Theory illuminates how collective mobilisation challenges these structures and facilitates reform (Fraser, 2008; Bourdieu, 1986; Tarrow, 2011).

This integrated framework also provides the basis for comparing the reform strategies of Gandhi, Ambedkar, and Ayyankali. Gandhi's emphasis on ethical transformation corresponds primarily to the normative concerns of Social Justice Theory (Parekh, 1997). Ambedkar's advocacy of constitutional rights and institutional reform reflects the insights of Structural Inequality Theory (Ambedkar, 1936; Rodrigues, 2002). Ayyankali's community-based mobilisation exemplifies the dynamics of Social Movement Theory through its emphasis on collective agency and participatory empowerment (Mohan, 2015).

Accordingly, the study conceptualises caste emancipation as the outcome of three mutually reinforcing processes:

- **Ethical inclusion**, which challenges discriminatory attitudes and affirms the dignity and recognition of marginalised communities (Fraser, 2008; Parekh, 1997).
- **Structural justice** expands rights, representation, and equitable access to opportunities through institutional reform (Ambedkar, 1936; Rawls, 1971).
- **Participatory empowerment**, through which collective action strengthens democratic participation and enables marginalised communities to shape social change (Tarrow, 2011; Tilly, 2004).

These dimensions collectively contribute to broader outcomes of welfare, democratic citizenship, and social inclusion.

The integrated theoretical framework provides the conceptual foundation for analysing caste emancipation and welfare in Kerala. By bringing together ethical, structural, and movement-based views, it goes beyond

single explanations and shows how ethical reform, institutional change, and grassroots mobilisation work together. This framework allows for a clear comparison of Gandhi, Ambedkar, and Ayyankali. It helps us understand how social justice and welfare result from the combined efforts of ideas, institutions, and collective action. Comparative research design to examine the contributions of Mahatma Gandhi, B. R. Ambedkar, and Ayyankali to caste emancipation, welfare, and social justice in Kerala. A qualitative approach is appropriate because the study seeks to interpret historical processes, ideological traditions, and the evolving relationship between social reform and institutional change rather than measure causal relationships quantitatively (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). The research adopts a historical-sociological perspective to analyse how caste reform emerged through the interaction of ethical discourse, constitutional intervention, and grassroots mobilisation over time (Mahoney & Rueschemeyer, 2003; Skocpol, 1979).

A comparative-analytical strategy underpins the study, enabling a systematic examination of the similarities, differences, and complementarities among the reform approaches of Gandhi, Ambedkar, and Ayyankali (Ragin, 2014). Rather than treating these leaders as isolated historical figures, the study analyses their contributions as interconnected pathways of social transformation.

3.5.Data Sources

The analysis is based entirely on documentary evidence comprising both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources include the published writings, speeches, and selected correspondence of Gandhi, Ambedkar, and Ayyankali. Secondary sources include peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly books, historical monographs, government reports, archival records, policy documents, and academic theses that address caste, social reform, welfare, and Kerala's socio-political development.

Using multiple documentary sources enables methodological triangulation by comparing interpretations across historical records, scholarly analyses, and primary texts, thereby strengthening the credibility of the findings (Bowen, 2009; Yin, 2018).

3.6.Source Selection

Sources were selected through purposive sampling based on their relevance to the study's objectives. Documents were included if they:

- examined caste, social exclusion, welfare, or social justice;
- analysed the contributions of Gandhi, Ambedkar, Ayyankali, or related anti-caste movements;
- addressed Kerala's historical processes of social transformation; and

- were published by recognised academic presses, peer-reviewed journals, universities, or government institutions.

Documents lacking scholarly credibility or direct relevance to the research questions were excluded.

3.7.Data Analysis

The study combines **qualitative content analysis** with **comparative historical analysis**. Qualitative content analysis was employed to identify recurring themes and interpret patterns across documentary sources (Mayring, 2014; Schreier, 2012). Coding focused on themes including caste exclusion, welfare, education, citizenship, democratic participation, rights, social justice, and community empowerment. This thematic approach facilitated systematic comparison while preserving the historical context within which ideas and movements developed.

Comparative historical analysis was subsequently used to examine how Gandhi, Ambedkar, and Ayyankali conceptualised caste oppression and proposed distinct strategies for social transformation (Mahoney & Rueschemeyer, 2003). The comparison focused on four analytical dimensions: (i) conceptions of caste and inequality, (ii) approaches to social reform, (iii) understandings of welfare and citizenship, and (iv) mechanisms of empowerment and inclusion. This comparative framework enabled the identification of both convergent and divergent features across the three reform traditions.

3.8.Theoretical Application

The analysis is guided by the integrated theoretical framework developed in the preceding section, combining Social Justice Theory, Structural Inequality Theory, and Social Movement Theory. These perspectives informed both the coding process and the interpretation of findings.

More specifically, Gandhi's interventions are analysed through the lens of **ethical inclusion**, Ambedkar's through the lens of **structural justice**, and Ayyankali's through the lens of **participatory empowerment**. This theoretically informed analytical strategy enables the study to move beyond descriptive historical narration and explain how different forms of reform collectively contributed to caste emancipation and welfare in Kerala.

3.9.Research Rigour

The trustworthiness of the study was enhanced through several strategies consistent with qualitative research standards (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). First, methodological triangulation was achieved by integrating

primary writings with diverse secondary and archival sources. Second, systematic thematic coding and comparative analysis ensured consistency in data interpretation. Third, the explicit application of an integrated theoretical framework strengthened analytical coherence and reduced interpretive bias. Together, these measures enhance the credibility, dependability, and transparency of the research.

3.10. Ethical Considerations

As the study relies exclusively on published documents and archival materials, no human participants were involved, and formal ethical approval was not required. Nevertheless, the research adheres to established principles of academic integrity by ensuring accurate citations, a faithful interpretation of historical evidence, and a respectful representation of historically marginalised communities (American Psychological Association, 2020).

3.11. Limitations

The study is subject to the limitations associated with documentary research. Historical records may reflect uneven documentation, resulting in the underrepresentation of certain perspectives, particularly those of marginalised communities. In addition, the analysis focuses specifically on Kerala; consequently, its findings should be interpreted within the state's distinctive historical and socio-political context rather than generalised to all regions of India.

The qualitative historical-comparative method used in this study offers a robust approach to examining the interconnections among caste emancipation, welfare, and social justice. By combining documentary analysis, historical comparison, and theory-based analysis, this approach systematically explores how Gandhi, Ambedkar, and Ayyankali each promoted ethical reform, structural justice, and grassroots mobilisation as distinct yet complementary paths to inclusive social change in Kerala.

4. Findings and Discussion

The findings show that caste emancipation and welfare in Kerala resulted from three connected processes: **ethical inclusion, structural justice, and participatory empowerment**. Instead of competing, Gandhi, Ambedkar, and Ayyankali each addressed different aspects of caste exclusion, helping Kerala move from a rigidly hierarchical society to one with more social inclusion and welfare (Franke & Chasin, 1994; Heller, 1999; Oommen, 2014). This supports the study's framework, showing that lasting social change requires moral reform, institutional change, and collective action working together.

4.1. Ethical Inclusion: Gandhi and the Moral Delegitimisation of Untouchability

The analysis shows that Gandhi's principal contribution lay in redefining untouchability as an ethical and national concern rather than merely a religious or social practice. Through campaigns against untouchability, constructive programmes, and public engagement, he challenged the moral legitimacy of caste discrimination and promoted the recognition of the dignity of oppressed communities (Gandhi, 1927/2004; Brown, 1989).

This ethical intervention shifted public discourse by linking caste discrimination with broader questions of justice, responsibility, and national unity. Interpreted through Social Justice Theory, Gandhi's emphasis on dignity and recognition anticipated contemporary understandings of justice that extend beyond material redistribution to include social recognition and equal participation (Fraser, 2008; Parekh, 1997).

However, the findings also confirm a central limitation of Gandhi's approach. Although his campaigns weakened the moral legitimacy of untouchability, they offered fewer institutional mechanisms to dismantle the structural foundations of caste hierarchy, a criticism consistently raised in Ambedkarite scholarship (Ambedkar, 1936; Omvedt, 2008). Consequently, ethical reform created favourable conditions for social change but was insufficient to eliminate institutional inequality.

4.2. Structural Justice: Ambedkar's Rights-Based Framework

The findings identify Ambedkar's contribution as the most comprehensive structural response to caste oppression. Unlike Gandhi's ethical reformism, Ambedkar conceptualised caste as an institutional system that reproduced unequal access to education, political representation, employment, and citizenship (Ambedkar, 1936; Rodrigues, 2002).

The analysis demonstrates that Ambedkar fundamentally redefined welfare as a question of rights rather than charity. Constitutional safeguards, affirmative action, educational opportunities, and political representation were conceived as institutional instruments through which historically excluded communities could exercise democratic citizenship (Ambedkar, 1945/2014; Jaffrelot, 2005).

These findings strongly support Structural Inequality Theory by illustrating that durable social inclusion depends upon transforming institutional arrangements rather than solely changing individual attitudes. Nevertheless, the persistence of caste prejudice despite constitutional protections also suggests that structural reforms require complementary cultural and social change to achieve substantive equality (Deshpande, 2011; Fraser, 2008).

4.3. Participatory Empowerment: Ayyankali and Grassroots Mobilisation

The study identifies Ayyankali's activism as the practical bridge between ethical ideals and institutional reform. His campaigns for educational access, labour rights, and freedom of movement illustrate how collective mobilisation enabled marginalised communities to challenge caste oppression directly rather than relying exclusively on elite-led reform (Hardgrave, 1969; Sanal Mohan, 2015).

Unlike approaches centred on persuasion or constitutional intervention, Ayyankali's activism cultivated community leadership and collective agency. Educational struggles became instruments of empowerment, while labour mobilisation linked economic justice with social dignity (Thomas, 2018).

Viewed through the lens of Social Movement Theory, these findings demonstrate that institutional reforms become socially effective only when accompanied by organised collective action capable of translating legal rights into lived realities (Tarrow, 2011; Tilly, 2004). Ayyankali's contribution, therefore, highlights participatory empowerment as a critical dimension of welfare and democratic inclusion.

4.4. Integrating Ethical Reform, Structural Justice, and Collective Action

The comparative analysis constitutes the principal contribution of this study. Rather than viewing Gandhi, Ambedkar, and Ayyankali as representing competing ideological traditions, the findings demonstrate that their approaches addressed different yet complementary dimensions of caste emancipation.

Ethical reform challenged the legitimacy of caste discrimination and expanded social recognition. Structural reform institutionalised equality through rights, representation, and constitutional safeguards. Grassroots mobilisation enabled marginalised communities to claim, negotiate, and sustain these gains through collective action (Fraser, 2008; Oommen, 2014).

The findings suggest that no single approach fully explains Kerala's social transformation. Ethical reform alone does not remove structural inequalities; institutional reforms without community mobilisation may not be effective; and grassroots activism without legal support struggles to create lasting change. Sustainable welfare depends on all three working together.

4.5. Theoretical and Policy Implications

The study makes three contributions to scholarship.

First, it advances a multidimensional understanding of caste emancipation by integrating ethical, structural, and participatory perspectives, moving beyond studies that privilege a single reform tradition.

Second, it contributes to comparative scholarship by analysing Gandhi, Ambedkar, and Ayyankali within a unified analytical framework, demonstrating that their approaches should be understood as complementary rather than mutually exclusive.

Third, it broadens conventional understandings of welfare. The findings show that welfare extends beyond economic redistribution to encompass dignity, citizenship, recognition, democratic participation, and community agency (Sen, 1999; Fraser, 2008). This framework has wider relevance for policy debates on inclusive development, social justice, and democratic governance in societies marked by enduring historical inequalities.

The findings show that Kerala's caste emancipation cannot be explained by just one reform tradition. Social change happened through the combined effects of ethical inclusion, structural justice, and participatory empowerment. Gandhi changed the moral conversation about caste, Ambedkar established rights-based justice, and Ayyankali organised marginalised communities to take action. Together, their work offers a comprehensive framework for understanding caste, welfare, and social justice and provides useful insights for today's discussions on inclusive development and democracy.

5. Conclusion and Implications

This study examined the contributions of Mahatma Gandhi, B. R. Ambedkar, and Ayyankali to caste emancipation and welfare in Kerala through a comparative historical-sociological analysis. By integrating Social Justice Theory, Structural Inequality Theory, and Social Movement Theory, it developed a multidimensional framework for understanding how ethical reform, institutional transformation, and grassroots mobilisation collectively shaped social change (Fraser, 2008; Rawls, 1971; Tarrow, 2011).

The analysis demonstrates that caste-based exclusion in Kerala was sustained through interconnected social, cultural, economic, and political structures that limited access to education, mobility, employment, representation, and dignity (Deshpande, 2011; Guru, 2009; Oommen, 2014). Consequently, caste emancipation required interventions that addressed both structural inequalities and social attitudes while enabling marginalised communities to participate actively in processes of change.

A central conclusion of this study is that Gandhi, Ambedkar, and Ayyankali advanced complementary rather than competing approaches to social transformation. Gandhi contributed by challenging the moral legitimacy of untouchability and promoting ethical inclusion grounded in human dignity and social responsibility (Brown, 1989; Parekh, 1997). Ambedkar provided a structural framework centred on constitutional rights, democratic citizenship, and institutional justice, establishing the foundations for

substantive equality (Ambedkar, 1936; Jaffrelot, 2005). Ayyankali demonstrated the transformative potential of grassroots mobilisation by empowering marginalised communities to organise collectively around education, labour rights, and social recognition (Hardgrave, 1969; Sanal Mohan, 2015). Together, these reform traditions illustrate that sustainable social transformation emerges through the interaction of ethical recognition, structural reform, and participatory agency.

5.1.Theoretical Contributions

This study makes three principal contributions to the literature.

First, it advances a multidimensional understanding of caste emancipation by integrating Social Justice Theory, Structural Inequality Theory, and Social Movement Theory into a single analytical framework. Rather than privileging a single explanation of social change, the study demonstrates that caste emancipation is best understood through the dynamic interaction among ethical values, institutional reforms, and collective action (Fraser, 2008; Bourdieu, 1986; Tilly, 2004).

Second, the study contributes to comparative scholarship by examining Gandhi, Ambedkar, and Ayyankali within a unified conceptual framework. Existing research has largely analysed these leaders separately or within competing ideological traditions (Rodrigues, 2002; Zelliot, 2004). By demonstrating the complementarity of their approaches, this study offers a more integrated interpretation of anti-caste reform and welfare.

Third, the study broadens conventional understandings of welfare. It argues that welfare extends beyond material redistribution to encompass dignity, recognition, citizenship, democratic participation, and access to opportunities (Sen, 1999; Fraser, 2008). This broader conceptualisation strengthens contemporary debates on inclusive development by linking welfare to substantive social justice.

5.2.Policy Implications

The findings carry important implications for contemporary social policy. While Kerala has achieved notable progress in education, healthcare, and social development, caste-based inequalities continue to influence access to opportunities and social mobility (Thorat & Newman, 2010). Policies aimed at reducing these inequalities should therefore move beyond economic redistribution and incorporate recognition, representation, and participatory governance.

Education remains central to this process. Expanding equitable access to quality education, strengthening constitutional values within educational institutions, and addressing discriminatory practices can enhance

both social mobility and democratic citizenship (Ambedkar, 1936; Sen, 1999). Likewise, welfare policies should prioritise empowerment by ensuring meaningful participation of historically marginalised communities in policy formulation and implementation rather than treating them solely as beneficiaries (Fraser, 2008). The findings also underscore the continuing importance of community-based organisations and grassroots leadership in translating formal rights into substantive inclusion, reaffirming the relevance of participatory approaches to democratic governance.

5.3.Limitations and Future Research

The study has several limitations. It is based primarily on documentary and historical sources, which, while appropriate for analysing long-term social transformation, may not fully capture the diversity of lived experiences among marginalised communities. In addition, the analysis is confined to Kerala, whose distinctive historical trajectory may limit the generalisability of the findings beyond Kerala. Finally, the interpretive nature of qualitative historical analysis allows for alternative readings of historical evidence.

Future research could extend this framework through comparative analyses of anti-caste movements across Indian states or other societies characterised by entrenched social hierarchies. Greater attention should also be paid to the intersections of caste with gender, class, religion, and ethnicity to develop a more nuanced understanding of multidimensional exclusion (Crenshaw, 1991; Guru, 2009). Empirical studies examining the continuing influence of Gandhian, Ambedkarite, and Ayyankali traditions on contemporary welfare policies, social movements, and democratic institutions would further strengthen the literature. Additionally, emerging forms of exclusion associated with digital technologies, urbanisation, and changing labour markets warrant systematic investigation.

5.4.Concluding Remarks

Kerala's experience shows that lasting social change does not come from just one reform tradition or institution. Instead, it results from the combination of ethical inclusion, structural justice, and participatory empowerment. Comparing Gandhi, Ambedkar, and Ayyankali reveals that these approaches support one another and, together, offer a comprehensive framework for understanding caste emancipation and welfare. This perspective is not only important historically but also helps inform current debates on social justice, inclusive development, and democracy in societies facing ongoing structural inequality.

References

- Ambedkar, B. R. (1936). *Annihilation of caste*. Self-published. (Various reprint editions available.)
- Béteille, A. (1965). *Caste, class, and power: Changing patterns of stratification in a Tanjore village*—University of California Press.
- Bourdieu, P. (1986). The forms of capital. In J. Richardson (Ed.), *Handbook of theory and research for the sociology of education* (pp. 241–258). Greenwood Press.
- Bowen, G. A. (2009). Document analysis as a qualitative research method. *Qualitative Research Journal*, 9(2), 27–40. <https://doi.org/10.3316/QRJ0902027>
- Chandramohan, K. (1987). *Social transformation in Kerala*. Mittal Publications.
- Chentharassery, T. H. P. (2000). *Ayyankali: A study*. Other Books.
- Deshpande, S. (2011). *Contemporary India: A sociological view*. Penguin Books India.
- Fraser, N. (2008). *Scales of justice: Reimagining political space in a globalising world*. Polity Press.
- Gandhi, M. K. (2004). *An autobiography: The story of my experiments with truth*. Dover Publications. (Original work published 1927)
- Gandhi, M. K. (2009). *Constructive programme: Its meaning and place*. Navajivan Publishing House. (Original work published 1941)
- Guru, G., & Sarukkai, S. (2012). *The cracked mirror: An Indian debate on experience and theory*. Oxford University Press.
- Heller, P. (1999). *The labour of development: Workers and the transformation of capitalism in Kerala, India*. Cornell University Press.
- Jaffrelot, C. (2005). *Dr Ambedkar and untouchability: Analysing and fighting caste*. Permanent Black.
- Jeffrey, R. (1976). *The decline of Nair dominance: Society and politics in Travancore, 1847–1908*. Holmes & Meier.
- Jeffrey, R. (1992). *Politics, women and well-being: How Kerala became "a model"*. Oxford University Press.

- Mahoney, J., & Rueschemeyer, D. (Eds.). (2003). *Comparative historical analysis in the social sciences*. Cambridge University Press.
- Menon, A. S. (1994). *A survey of Kerala history*. DC Books.
- Mohan, S. (2015). *Modernity of slavery: Struggles against caste inequality in colonial Kerala*. Oxford University Press.
- Omvedt, G. (1994). *Dalits and the democratic revolution: Dr Ambedkar and the Dalit movement in colonial India*. Sage.
- Omvedt, G. (2008). *Seeking begumpura: The social vision of anticaste intellectuals*. Navayana.
- Oommen, T. K. (2014). *Social inclusion in independent India: Dimensions and approaches*. Orient BlackSwan.
- Parekh, B. (1997). *Gandhi*. Oxford University Press.
- Parel, A. J. (Ed.). (2006). *Gandhi, freedom, and self-rule*. Lexington Books.
- Ragin, C. C. (2014). *The comparative method: Moving beyond qualitative and quantitative strategies*. University of California Press. (Original work published 1987)
- Ramachandran, V. K. (Ed.). (1997). *On Kerala's development achievements*. Oxford University Press.
- Rawls, J. (1971). *A theory of justice*. Harvard University Press.
- Scott, J. (1990). *A matter of record: Documentary sources in social research*. Polity Press.
- Sen, A. (1999). *Development as freedom*. Oxford University Press.
- Thomas, P. J. (2018). *Ayyankali: The great king of the Dalits*. Kerala Bhasha Institute.
- Thorat, S., & Newman, K. S. (Eds.). (2010). *Blocked by caste: Economic discrimination in modern India*. Oxford University Press.
- Zelliot, E. (2004). *From untouchable to Dalit: Essays on the Ambedkar movement*. Manohar Publishers.