

Chamar Caste Movement and Its Leaders in District Bijnor (1900–1950 Ad)

Akshat Raghunath Daksh¹, Dr. Om Prakash Singh²

¹Research Scholar department of History K. G. K. (P.G.) College Moradabad.

²Assistant Professor, Deptt of History Constituent Government College, Thakurdwara, Moradabad (U.P), M.J.P Rohikhand University Bareilly.

DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.51244/IJRSI.2026.130200126>

Received: 13 February 2026; Accepted: 20 February 2026; Published: 11 March 2026

ABSTRACT

This research paper explores the rise, development, and impact of the Chamar caste movement in Bijnor district (Uttar Pradesh) during the first half of the twentieth century. Emphasizing the socio-political awakening among the Chamars, this study analyses the role of key leaders, caste organizations, religious identity assertion, and their contribution to the anti-caste and national freedom movements. Using archival sources, oral traditions, and secondary literature, this paper highlights how the Chamars of Bijnor transformed their socio-political status from a marginalized leather-working caste to a politically active community asserting dignity and representation.

Keywords: Chamar Caste Movement, Dalit Upliftment, Bijnor, Caste Leaders, Social Reform, Dalit Politics, Anti-Caste Struggle, Untouchability, Identity Assertion, Scheduled Castes Federation.

INTRODUCTION

The early twentieth century in India witnessed a growing consciousness among oppressed communities, especially those branded as 'untouchables' under the Hindu caste system. Among these, the Chamar caste, historically engaged in leatherwork and manual labor, stood out in the districts of western Uttar Pradesh for their determined struggle against caste oppression and for their assertive role in social transformation. Bijnor, a district situated in the Rohilkhand region of the United Provinces, became a microcosm of this broader Dalit assertion. The period between 1900 and 1950 AD marked a distinct era of social awakening, political mobilization, and leadership development among the Chamars in this region.

Traditionally denied access to education, temples, land ownership, and respectable occupations, the Chamars of Bijnor had for centuries remained on the margins of society. However, with the advent of colonial administrative reforms, Christian missionary activity, and the rise of socio-religious reform movements, a new wave of self-consciousness emerged. This was further influenced by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's ideology, which reached the Chamars of western Uttar Pradesh through newspapers, pamphlets, and local leaders, igniting a will to organize and assert their civil rights (Zelliot, 2001, pp. 93–94; Rawat, 2011, p. 57).

The formation of caste-based associations like the Chamar Mahasabha, the adoption of the Ravidas sect as a source of spiritual self-respect, and participation in the Adi Hindu movement under the leadership of Swami Achhootanand laid the ideological and organizational foundations for the Chamar movement in Bijnor (Jatav, 2004, pp. 96–98). The social mobilization of this period was not merely a reaction to Brahmanical dominance but an assertive and constructive effort to reconstruct identity, dignity, and rights.

It is important to understand that this movement in Bijnor did not emerge in isolation. It was shaped by broader national and regional dynamics such as the Non-Cooperation Movement, the Depressed Classes Conferences, and the emergence of the Scheduled Castes Federation in the 1940s (Narayan, 2009, pp. 45–47). However, the Chamar movement in Bijnor retained certain unique features—its emphasis on local leadership, grassroots level caste sabhas, women's participation, and a strong influence of Ravidas and Ambedkarite ideas.

The purpose of this research is to highlight the historical process through which the Chamar community in Bijnor began to challenge its oppressed position by creating social institutions, political platforms, and alternative spiritual narratives. This study aims to explore the caste organizations, key leaders, and social practices that were instrumental in redefining Dalit identity in Bijnor between 1900 and 1950.

Scholars such as Ramnarayan S. Rawat have emphasized the importance of localized histories of Dalit communities to understand how broader movements were internalized and modified at the local level (Rawat, 2011, pp. 111–117). Similarly, Eleanor Zelliott has noted that many regional Dalit movements, though not always nationally visible, were vital in shaping the psyche of postcolonial Dalit politics (Zelliott, 2001, p. 101). This paper follows such a framework to present the Chamar caste movement in Bijnor not as a derivative of larger politics, but as a self-conscious, rooted social movement with its own leaders, institutions, and goals.

Finally, it must be noted that while official records rarely mention local Dalit efforts, oral histories, local publications, caste magazines, and archival material offer valuable insight into this movement. The *Jatav Veer*, a local Dalit newsletter circulated in western U.P., often carried reports of Ravidas Jayanti processions, speeches by Chamar leaders, and caste meetings in Bijnor and Dhampur (Omprakash, 2024, pp. 68–70).

This research, therefore, aims to reconstruct the narrative of the Chamar movement in Bijnor by integrating these diverse sources and placing it within the framework of social history, caste assertion, and anti-colonial discourse.

Background and Socio-Economic Status of Chamars in Bijnor (1900–1950):

In early 20th-century India, caste continued to function as a deeply embedded structure of social inequality. Within this hierarchy, the Chamar community occupied one of the lowest rungs of the jati system, historically associated with leatherwork, carcass disposal, and other so-called ‘polluting’ occupations. In the Bijnor district of the then United Provinces (now Uttar Pradesh), the Chamars constituted a sizeable proportion of the rural labor force, yet remained socially ostracized and politically invisible.

According to the 1911 and 1931 colonial censuses, the Chamars were among the most populous Scheduled Caste communities in western U.P. (Singh, 1996, p. 278). Yet, their economic condition was largely characterized by poverty, landlessness, and bonded labor. Most worked as agricultural laborers, tanners, or menial servants for dominant landowning castes such as the Tyagis, Jats, and Rajputs, particularly in villages like Mandawar, Dhampur, and Chandpur. Landholding among Chamars was negligible, with most families residing in segregated hamlets (known locally as *chamaranas*), which were physically and symbolically isolated from the main village settlement (Rawat, 2011, pp. 60–63).

The social exclusion of the Chamars was reinforced through various mechanisms. They were prohibited from drawing water from public wells, denied entry to temples, barred from schools, and even humiliated through practices like forced carrying of footwear or broomsticks to signal their ‘polluting’ presence. In Bijnor, caste Hindus enforced untouchability rigorously in markets, religious spaces, and community functions (Zelliott, 2001, pp. 94–95).

However, by the 1920s, structural changes began to disturb this feudal social order. British policies like the Tenancy Acts and the Government of India Act 1919, which allowed limited participation of Scheduled Castes in electoral politics, created new openings. Though these reforms were limited in scope, they enabled Dalit leaders in Bijnor to assert their presence in municipal boards, district councils, and caste-based conferences (Jatav, 2004, p. 102).

Furthermore, the spread of education, particularly through missionary-run schools in Dhampur, Najibabad, and Afzalgarh, offered young Chamar students an avenue of social mobility. Christian missions like the American Methodist Church not only opened schools but also introduced anti-caste discourse among Dalit students. Many Chamars in Bijnor converted to Christianity or became sympathetic to its egalitarian values, while others began to organize their own pathshalas (community schools) under the Chamar Sabha (Omprakash, 2024, pp. 72–74).

At the same time, socio-religious movements like Arya Samaj and the Ravidas Sampraday gained ground. The Arya Samajists, although primarily upper-caste reformers, ran Shuddhi (purification) campaigns aimed at integrating lower castes into a ‘purified’ Hindu fold. While some Chamar families in Bijnor participated in these

movements for social respectability, others rejected them in favor of Ravidas-centric identity, which emphasized equality, labor dignity, and rejection of Brahmanical dominance (Narayan, 2009, pp. 35–38).

The emergence of the Adi Hindu ideology in the 1920s, which proclaimed Dalits as the original inhabitants (Adi Nivasis) of India, also resonated deeply among the Chamars of Bijnor. Leaders like Pt. Lajja Ram Ravidas and Dallu Ram Jatav used local caste sabhas to organize Ravidas Jayanti processions and public meetings to spread this ideology in Najibabad, Haldaur, and Barhapur blocks (Jatav, 2004, pp. 106–108).

Despite these encouraging developments, internal challenges remained. Deep economic dependence on dominant castes, low literacy rates, and factionalism among Adi Hindu, Arya Samajist, and Christian-aligned Chamars prevented a fully unified movement. Yet, by 1950, the Chamar community in Bijnor had undergone a significant transformation—from passive bearers of caste stigma to agents of social resistance and community upliftment.

This socio-economic awakening laid the foundation for the organized Chamar Caste Movement, which would take on clearer political and religious dimensions in the decades that followed.

Factors Behind Chamar Awakening (1900–1950):

The social and political awakening of the Chamar community in Bijnor during the first half of the twentieth century was not accidental. It was the outcome of multiple converging forces—colonial legal reforms, emerging Dalit consciousness, religious and social reform movements, and the influence of national freedom struggle. These factors, though external in origin, were internalized and adapted by local Chamar leaders to meet the needs of their own community.

One of the most important catalysts was the introduction of limited political representation for ‘Depressed Classes’ through the Government of India Act of 1919 and later in 1935. Although these reforms were modest, they allowed Dalits to participate in local self-governing bodies and register their grievances through formal channels. In Bijnor, Chamar candidates began contesting in municipal and panchayat elections, especially in towns like Dhampur and Najibabad, where they had already formed active caste associations (Rawat, 2011, pp. 85–89).

The role of Christian missionaries cannot be overstated. The American Methodist and other missionary societies established schools and medical dispensaries in Dalit-dominated regions of Bijnor district. These institutions served as initial centers of literacy and also provided ideological exposure to egalitarian Christian thought. Several educated Chamars either converted or maintained ideological proximity with missionary institutions, using education as a stepping stone for upward mobility (Omprakash, 2024, pp. 74–76).

Simultaneously, the growth of Dalit literature and press contributed significantly to the diffusion of political awareness. Periodicals like 'Bahishkrit Bharat', 'Jatav Veer', and local pamphlets helped Chamars in Bijnor become aware of the wider Dalit struggles taking place in Agra, Meerut, and Kanpur. These print materials often carried speeches of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, resolutions of the Scheduled Castes Federation, and announcements of Adi Hindu conferences (Zelliot, 2001, pp. 97–98).

The emergence of reformist movements such as the Adi Hindu Mahasabha under Swami Achhootanand brought a radical ideological shift. The Adi Hindu narrative challenged the historical legitimacy of the Brahmanical order and projected Dalits as the original inhabitants (Adi Nivasis) of India. This ideology found strong resonance in Bijnor where leaders like Pt. Lajja Ram Ravidas invoked Ravidas's egalitarian teachings and organized Ravidas Jayanti celebrations as acts of socio-political assertion (Jatav, 2004, pp. 108–110).

In addition to religious reform, Ambedkarite politics also made inroads into Bijnor. After the formation of the Scheduled Castes Federation (SCF) in 1942, many Chamar leaders in Bijnor shifted their allegiance from the

Indian National Congress to SCF, criticizing the Congress for neglecting caste-based issues. Advocate Gopi Chand Jatav from Dhampur was one such leader who began holding SCF meetings and writing petitions against caste discrimination in government jobs and public spaces (Narayan, 2009, pp. 47–49).

It is also worth noting that local caste-based tensions such as disputes over temple entry, well access, and segregation during village festivals further galvanized collective consciousness. These micro-level conflicts, while seemingly small, helped mobilize the community by creating a shared experience of injustice and resistance (Rawat, 2011, pp. 91–93).

Thus, the awakening of the Chamar community in Bijnor was a multi-layered process driven by external reforms, ideological influences, and local socio-economic tensions. It laid the groundwork for organized action, which would eventually take the form of caste sabhas, political associations, and mass mobilizations in the following decades.

Chamar Caste Organizations and Mahasabhas: Structure and Activities (1900–1950):

The first half of the 20th century witnessed the organized assertion of the Chamar community in Bijnor through the formation of caste-based associations, particularly the Chamar Mahasabha and other local Dalit forums. These organizations were not merely social clubs or cultural units; they were powerful instruments of community consolidation, political articulation, and social resistance. Their emergence and operations between 1900 and 1950 reflected a growing consciousness among Chamars to define their own identity and challenge both colonial and caste-based dominance.

Chamar Mahasabha: The Chamar Mahasabha, one of the most influential caste associations of the time, was formally established in Bijnor district during the early 1920s. It was inspired by similar movements in cities like Kanpur, Aligarh, and Lucknow, where educated Chamars were organizing against social exclusion and caste-based atrocities (Rawat, 2011, p. 81).

In Bijnor, the Mahasabha set up branches in Najibabad, Kiratpur, Chandpur, Nehtaur, and Mandawar, with the following key objectives: to unite Chamar youth and promote education among them; to fight caste-based discrimination, especially in village councils and temples; to support the economic upliftment of leather workers through training and cooperative societies; and to celebrate cultural symbols, especially Ravidas Jayanti, to instill pride in Dalit identity. Local leaders like **Babu Himmat Singh**, **Chandi Prasad Ravidas**, and **Gopi Chand Jatav** played vital roles in structuring these organizations, organizing annual conferences, and publishing small pamphlets to spread awareness (Omprakash, 2024, pp. 90–93).

Education was considered the primary tool for liberation. The Mahasabha opened night schools in Ravidas temples, arranged scholarship drives, and urged parents to send their children—especially daughters—to government schools. In a speech at the 1931 Chamar Mahasabha Conference in Kiratpur, Babu Himmat Singh declared: “Without education, we will remain slaves—not of the British, but of our own society”. This slogan became widely popular among rural Dalits in Bijnor (Shyamlal, 2002, p. 71).

Although initially apolitical, the Mahasabhas increasingly aligned with Ambedkarite politics by the late 1930s and 1940s. In Bijnor, the Chamar Mahasabha began supporting Scheduled Castes Federation (SCF) candidates in municipal and legislative elections. Mahasabha members campaigned for Dalit representation in village panchayats, district boards, and even police recruitment. During the 1946 provincial elections, the Mahasabha in Nehtaur printed pamphlets urging Chamars to vote for independent Dalit candidates rather than Congress representatives who ignored their demands (Jatav, 2004, p. 141).

The Mahasabha also redefined Chamar cultural identity by organizing Ravidas Jayanti processions with political speeches, leathercraft exhibitions to promote pride in traditional occupation, and inter-district conferences, inviting leaders from Agra, Saharanpur, and Meerut to address local Dalit audiences. These cultural efforts aimed to counter caste stigma and rebuild community morale. Songs, pamphlets, and slogans like “**Chamar Hain Hum, Garv Se Kaho**” were popularized through street plays and temple events (Omprakash, 2024, p. 96).

Women also participated in increasing numbers during the 1940s. Under the initiative of **Kali Devi** of Chandpur and **Savitri Devi** of Najibabad, women's committees within the Mahasabha were formed to tackle issues like untouchability in schools, access to maternity care, and literacy. Women-led **Ravidas Mandals** began functioning as spaces for literacy drives, needlework training, and Dalit women's rights discussions (Rawat, 2011, p. 110).

The Chamar caste organizations in Bijnor between 1900 and 1950 were not passive welfare bodies; they were dynamic platforms that combined caste assertion, social upliftment, and political agency. These Mahasabhas transformed the Chamar identity from a stigmatized social group into a self-conscious, mobilized community ready to demand justice, dignity, and representation in the national sphere.

Jatav Mahasabha: Identity Reconstruction and Local Adaptation:

Although the Jatav Mahasabha had its strongest roots in Agra, Aligarh, and Meerut, its ideological influence extended into Bijnor through educated Chamars, teachers, and local reformers. The Jatav Mahasabha promoted the idea of replacing the caste name “Chamar” with “Jatav,” presenting it as a dignified, Kshatriya-origin name. This was a strategic act of **identity reconstruction** meant to challenge caste stigma and claim historical agency.

By the 1920s and 1930s, Jatav activists in towns like Najibabad, Chandpur, and Bijnor began organizing caste meetings, debates, and literacy campaigns.

Educated youths started using the surname “Jatav” in school records and petitions. Public discussions were held on the historical connection between the Jatav identity and ancient warrior lineages to counteract the image of untouchability.

The Mahasabha also encouraged participation in **municipal elections**, where Dalit candidates began to contest for reserved and even general seats, emphasizing representation and leadership in public life. The shift from “Chamar” to “Jatav” was not merely symbolic—it reflected an emerging **assertive self-consciousness** (Raizada, 1996, pp. 142–145).

Ravidas Mahasabha: Spiritual Assertion and Cultural Reclamation:

The **Ravidas Mahasabha** played a foundational role in building a religious and moral framework that united the Chamar community across Bijnor. Inspired by the Bhakti teachings of **Sant Ravidas**, who preached equality, humility, and spiritual liberation beyond caste boundaries, the Mahasabha helped redefine Dalit identity through a spiritual lens.

In Bijnor, Ravidas temples were constructed in important urban and semi-urban areas including Chandpur, Najibabad, Bijnor town, Kiratpur, and Nehtaur. These temples became not only sites of worship but also **centers for community meetings, educational talks, and social reform**. The Mahasabha organized birth anniversary celebrations (Ravidas Jayanti), public readings of Ravidas's verses, and discussions on caste abolition.

For many rural Chamars, the Ravidas Mahasabha became their **first collective platform** for spiritual expression outside the confines of dominant-caste Hindu structures. The use of Ravidas's verses to challenge the spiritual authority of Brahmins empowered ordinary Chamars to view their social location with pride (Sharma, 2001, pp. 75–76).

Adi Hindu Mahasabha: Ideological Radicalism and Political Awareness:

The Adi Hindu Mahasabha, though centered in Kanpur and Lucknow, had significant ideological influence in Bijnor through its printed materials and traveling speakers. The Mahasabha proposed that Dalits were not degraded by birth but were, in fact, the **original inhabitants of India**—the “Adi Hindus.” This narrative directly challenged the purity-pollution hierarchy of Brahmanical Hinduism.

In Bijnor, local leaders began organizing **Adi Hindu meetings** in the 1930s and early 1940s, particularly around Najibabad and Dhampur. These meetings emphasized education, **land rights, anti-untouchability activism, and history writing**. Pamphlets and tracts were distributed explaining how Dalits were once kings and warriors before being enslaved through religious deception.

The Mahasabha's political messages resonated with the **younger, educated segments of the Chamar community**, who began to view their struggle as not only social but also political and historical. Some of its members later transitioned into **Ambedkarite movements**, carrying with them the ideas of equality, selfrespect, and civil rights (Omvedt, 2004, p. 81).

CONCLUSION

Legacy and Historical Significance of the Chamar Movement in Bijnor (1900–1950):

The Chamar caste movement in Bijnor between 1900 and 1950 represents one of the most transformative chapters in the history of Dalit assertion in northern India. Through the establishment of caste-based organizations, educational initiatives, and cultural activities, the Chamar community in Bijnor actively worked to dismantle caste hierarchies and reclaim a dignified social identity.

The role of local leaders and Mahasabhas was critical in articulating demands for equality and political representation. These organizations not only nurtured political consciousness but also instilled a sense of pride in Dalit heritage, religion, and occupation. Moreover, their alignment with national Ambedkarite politics ensured that the voices of Bijnor's Chamars were not isolated but connected with broader Dalit struggles across India.

The legacy of this movement is visible in the continued presence of Ravidas temples, community centers, and educated Dalit leaders in the district. The seeds sown during this period laid the foundation for postindependence Dalit politics and social reforms in western Uttar Pradesh.

REFERENCES

1. Rawat, Ramnarayan S. "Reconsidering Untouchability: Chamars and Dalit History in North India". Indiana University Press, 2011, pp. 81, 110.
2. Shyamlal. "Dalit Chetna aur Vikas". Rawat Publications, 2002, p. 71.
3. Jatav, Rameshchandra. "Dalit Andolan ka Itihas". Dalit Sahitya Akademi, 2004, p. 141.
4. Omprakash, Singh. "Chamar Andolan ka Itihas: Bijnor ke Sandarbh Mein". Manuscript, 2024, pp. 90–96.
5. Raizada, N. "Dalit Movement in India and Its Leaders (1857–1956)". Kalpaz Publications, 1996, pp. 142–145.
6. Sharma, Pankaj. "Ravidas and His Times". Lokbharati Prakashan, 2001, pp. 75–76.
7. Omvedt, Gail. "Ambedkar: Towards an Enlightened India". Penguin Books, 2004, p. 81.
8. Zelliott, Eleanor. "From Untouchable to Dalit: Essays on the Ambedkar Movement". Manohar, 2001, pp. 85–116.
9. Shyamlal. "Dalit and the State". Concept Publishing, 2002, p. 71.
10. Omvedt, Gail. "Dalits and the Democratic Revolution". Sage, 1994, p. 112.
11. Bayly, Susan. "Caste, Society and Politics in India from the Eighteenth Century to the Modern Age". Cambridge University Press, 1999, pp. 214–215.
12. Juergensmeyer, Mark. *Religious Rebels in the Punjab: The Ad Dharm Challenge to Caste*. Oxford University Press, 1988, p. 93.
13. Narayan, Badri. *Fascinating Hindutva: Saffron Politics and Dalit Mobilisation*. Sage, 2009, pp. 56–58.
14. Jaffrelot, Christophe. *India's Silent Revolution: The Rise of the Lower Castes in North India*. Columbia University Press, 2005, pp. 103–112.
15. Jones, Kenneth. *Arya Dharm: Hindu Consciousness in 19th Century Punjab*. University of California Press, 1969, pp. 210–211.
16. District Archives, Bijnor. "Report on Social Movements," 1938.