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A STUDY ON THE SOCIAL HISTORY OF CASTE IN MODERN INDIA: EXAMINING THE INSULARISM OF ANTI-CASTE HISTORIOGRAPHY

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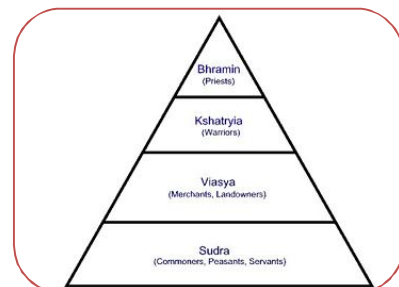
ABSTRACT

This study critically engages with the social history of caste in modern India, focusing particularly on the methodological and epistemological contours of anti-caste historiography. While anti-caste thought has played a transformative role in challenging Brahminical hegemony and articulating the lived realities of oppressed communities, this research problematizes the insular tendencies within its historiographical practices. The study explores how anti-caste narratives, while radical in intention, can sometimes reproduce forms of exclusion by marginalizing alternative experiences, regional variations, or intersections with class, gender, and religion. Drawing on a wide array of historical texts, Dalit autobiographies, subaltern studies, and critical theory, this work interrogates the limits of both nationalist and subaltern historiographies, proposing a more nuanced and pluralistic framework for understanding caste. The research argues for a historiography that not only resists caste-based oppression but also remains self-reflexive and inclusive of diverse social experiences within the anti-caste struggle. Ultimately, the study contributes to reimagining the historiography of caste as a dynamic, contested, and inclusive field of inquiry in modern India.

KEYWORDS: Caste, Anti-Caste Historiography, Social History, Modern India, Dalit Studies, Subaltern Studies, Epistemology, Historiographical Insularity, Brahminical Hegemony.

INTRODUCTION

Caste remains one of the most enduring and contentious structures of social hierarchy in India. While its origins are rooted in ancient religious and social practices, its evolution through colonial modernity and postcolonial nation-building has only deepened its entrenchment in everyday life. The study of caste, therefore, is not only an exploration of India's past but also an urgent interrogation of its present. Within this intellectual landscape, anti-caste historiography has emerged as a critical response to the dominant narratives shaped by Brahminical, colonial, and nationalist histories. Grounded in the lived experiences and struggles of oppressed communities—particularly Dalits—it has played a vital role in recovering subjugated voices, challenging hegemonic discourses, and demanding epistemic justice. However, this historiographical tradition, despite its radical ambitions, is not without limitations. As anti-caste thought gains academic legitimacy and institutional space, it risks becoming insular, often privileging specific



ideological lineages, regions, or identity formations while overlooking others. There is a tendency to center certain canonical figures—such as Dr. B.R. Ambedkar—without adequately engaging the multiplicity of anti-caste struggles that have unfolded across India's diverse socio-political terrains. Moreover, the interplay between caste and other axes of identity such as gender, class, religion, and region is frequently under-theorized, thereby narrowing the scope of what counts as anti-caste discourse.

This study seeks to critically examine this insularism within anti-caste historiography, questioning the ways in which certain histories are foregrounded while others are silenced or sidelined. It explores how narratives of resistance are constructed, who gets to speak within these frameworks, and what kinds of knowledge are legitimized or dismissed. By analyzing a range of sources—from historical records and Dalit autobiographies to subaltern scholarship and critical theory—the study attempts to reframe the historiography of caste as a dynamic, contested, and plural field. In doing so, the research neither dismisses the contributions of anti-caste historiography nor romanticizes the liberal or nationalist traditions it critiques. Instead, it calls for a self-reflexive, inclusive, and intersectional approach that can account for the diverse, and sometimes contradictory, realities of caste in modern India. Ultimately, this inquiry contributes to a deeper understanding of how history is written, for whom it is written, and what it means to engage in truly emancipatory historiographical practice.

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES:

Aims

The primary aim of this study is to critically examine the social history of caste in modern India by interrogating the limitations and insular tendencies of anti-caste historiography. The research seeks to explore how anti-caste narratives have been constructed, what socio-political forces shape them, and how they engage—or fail to engage—with broader historical, cultural, and regional contexts.

Objectives:

1. To trace the evolution of caste in modern Indian social history, particularly during the colonial and postcolonial periods, and identify the major historical forces that shaped caste identities and hierarchies.
2. To critically analyze the development of anti-caste historiography, focusing on key intellectual figures, movements, and texts (e.g., Ambedkarite thought, Dalit literature, and subaltern studies).
3. To investigate the insularism within anti-caste historiography, identifying how certain narratives may become isolated from broader historiographical debates, regional specificities, or interdisciplinary perspectives.
4. To examine the interplay between anti-caste historiography and dominant nationalist or Marxist historical traditions, exploring convergences, tensions, and omissions.
5. To assess the methodological approaches used in anti-caste historiography, evaluating the use of sources, oral histories, memory, and literature in constructing caste histories.
6. To explore how caste is represented in historical writing across regions, asking whether anti-caste narratives sufficiently reflect the diversity of caste experiences beyond dominant Dalit-Bahujan discourses.
7. To contribute to a more dialogic and inclusive framework for writing caste history, proposing ways in which anti-caste historiography can be enriched through greater interdisciplinarity, regional grounding, and engagement with critical theory.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The study of caste in modern Indian history has produced a rich and complex body of scholarship. Historians, sociologists, political theorists, and activists have all grappled with caste as both a structure of oppression and a terrain of resistance. While anti-caste historiography has played a pivotal role in centering the experiences of marginalized communities, it has also, at times, been critiqued for its insularity—that is, its tendency to operate within a limited framework of intellectual engagement, often neglecting broader

regional, ideological, or methodological connections. This review traces key strands of relevant literature, identifying both the strengths and limitations of existing scholarship.

1. Foundational Works on Caste and Anti-Caste Thought

The writings of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar are foundational to anti-caste historiography. Works such as *Annihilation of Caste* and *The Problem of the Rupee* not only critique the social and economic foundations of caste but also offer a philosophical and political roadmap for its dismantling. Ambedkar's historiography stands apart from dominant nationalist and Marxist narratives by foregrounding the experiences of Dalits and emphasizing the moral and ethical dimensions of justice. Jyotirao Phule, preceding Ambedkar, similarly critiqued Brahmanical hegemony and exposed the historical roots of caste inequality through texts like *Gulamgiri*. These early thinkers laid the groundwork for a distinct anti-caste intellectual tradition that challenged the erasures of dominant historiographies.

2. Subaltern Studies and Dalit Historiography

The Subaltern Studies Collective, especially in its early volumes, aimed to re-center the peasant, tribal, and subaltern voices that had been marginalized in elite nationalist histories. However, critiques—particularly by scholars like Gail Omvedt and Anand Teltumbde—have noted that Subaltern Studies often failed to adequately engage with caste, especially Dalit subjectivities. While figures like Ranajit Guha emphasized class and peasant insurgency, caste was often subsumed under broader class struggles. In contrast, Dalit historians and writers have developed their own historiographical methods. Scholars like Sharmila Rege, in *Writing Caste/Writing Gender*, combined oral history with feminist critique, pushing back against the academic invisibilization of Dalit voices. Rao's *The Caste Question* and Anupama Rao's broader body of work offer valuable insight into how legal, political, and discursive processes shape caste identities.

3. Marxist Historiography and Its Limitations

Marxist historians like D.D. Kosambi and R.S. Sharma provided important materialist analyses of caste, arguing that caste originated as a division of labor that later ossified into a hierarchical system. However, many anti-caste thinkers have argued that classical Marxist historiography underplays the cultural and religious dimensions of caste and often treats it as secondary to class. Anand Teltumbde, while drawing on Marxism, critiques its inability to fully grasp the specificity of caste as a social force in India.

4. Critiques of Insularity in Anti-Caste Historiography

A growing body of scholarship has begun to interrogate the limitations within anti-caste historiography itself. Critics argue that some strands of anti-caste writing focus predominantly on Ambedkarite narratives, often from a specific Mahar-Dalit perspective, without fully accounting for regional, tribal, or non-Dalit lower-caste experiences. Moreover, anti-caste historiography can sometimes exhibit disciplinary insularity, relying heavily on political or sociological frameworks while overlooking insights from anthropology, cultural studies, or regional histories. This has led to calls for more interdisciplinary and intersectional approaches—examining how caste interacts with gender, sexuality, religion, and region.

5. Regional and Vernacular Histories of Caste

Recent works have sought to de-center the national and elite focus of anti-caste writing. Historians like Kancha Ilaiah Shepherd, through works such as *Why I Am Not a Hindu*, bring attention to non-Brahmin epistemologies and vernacular traditions of knowledge. Similarly, regional Dalit literatures—Marathi, Tamil, Kannada, Telugu—have emerged as important counter-histories, though they often remain under-integrated into pan-Indian academic narratives.

6. Towards a Dialogic Historiography

Emerging scholarship urges for dialogue between anti-caste thought and other critical traditions, including feminism, queer theory, decolonial studies, and global histories of race and marginality. Such dialogue can challenge the intellectual silos that sometimes characterize anti-caste writing, fostering more expansive and comparative understandings of caste.

Research Methodology

1. Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive, and critical historiographical approach. It aims to analyze how anti-caste historiography has been constructed, where it becomes insular or exclusionary, and how it can be expanded to incorporate more plural and dialogic perspectives. The research will involve close textual analysis, critical discourse analysis, and comparative historiographical methods.

2. Methodological Approach

• Historiographical Analysis:

The core method involves tracing the evolution of anti-caste historiography, situating it within broader Indian historical writing (nationalist, Marxist, subaltern). Key debates, frameworks, and thematic continuities/disruptions will be examined to assess how caste histories have been framed.

• Textual and Discourse Analysis:

Close reading of primary texts (e.g., works by B.R. Ambedkar, Phule, Periyar, Kancha Ilaiah) and secondary academic literature (e.g., Dalit studies, Subaltern Studies, feminist critiques) will be conducted to understand the language, categories, and epistemologies that shape anti-caste narratives.

• Comparative Framework:

The study will compare regional, linguistic, and ideological variations in anti-caste historiography (e.g., Marathi vs Tamil Dalit writing, Ambedkarite vs non-Ambedkarite perspectives), highlighting areas of convergence and dissonance.

• Interdisciplinary Engagement:

The research will integrate insights from sociology, political theory, literature, and cultural studies to transcend disciplinary silos and evaluate how caste has been approached across fields.

3. Data Collection

Primary Sources:

- Writings of anti-caste thinkers: Ambedkar, Phule, Periyar, Kancha Ilaiah, etc.
- Dalit autobiographies and regional literature.
- Speeches, pamphlets, legal documents, and political manifestos.

Secondary Sources:

- Scholarly works on caste and anti-caste historiography (e.g., Sharmila Rege, Anupama Rao, Anand Teltumbde, Gopal Guru).
- Academic critiques of mainstream historiographies (nationalist, Marxist, subaltern).
- Journal articles, conference proceedings, and edited volumes in Dalit and subaltern studies.

Archives and Libraries (as applicable):

- National Archives of India, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, regional archives.

- Online repositories such as JSTOR, Project MUSE, EPW Archive, Dalit Panther archives, Ambedkarite digital libraries.

4. Data Analysis:

The data will be analyzed thematically and critically using the following strategies:

- Thematic Coding: Key themes (e.g., insularity, resistance, erasure, regionality, interdisciplinarity) will be identified and tracked across texts.
- Genealogical Mapping: The development of anti-caste historiography will be mapped to identify intellectual lineages, shifts, and ruptures.
- Critical Engagement: The study will question implicit assumptions, omissions, and epistemic boundaries within anti-caste writing itself, rather than only critiquing dominant caste narratives.

5. Ethical Considerations:

As this research involves no direct human subjects, ethical concerns are minimal. However, the following will be observed:

- Respect for marginalized voices and the integrity of anti-caste intellectual traditions.
- Avoidance of extractive scholarship, particularly when using Dalit and regional texts.
- Proper citation and acknowledgment of intellectual contributions from activists, thinkers, and scholars from marginalized communities.

6. Scope and Limitations

Scope:

- Focus on modern India (19th century onwards).
- Primary emphasis on historiography, with some engagement in literature, politics, and cultural critique.

Limitations:

- The study may not cover all regional expressions of anti-caste thought in depth.
- Language limitations (e.g., availability of sources in translation) may affect access to certain vernacular materials.

DISCUSSION

The historical study of caste in modern India has undergone a significant transformation, primarily due to the rise of anti-caste historiography. Emerging from the intellectual legacy of figures like B.R. Ambedkar, Jyotirao Phule, and E.V. Ramasamy Periyar, this body of work has acted as a necessary counter to dominant nationalist, orientalist, and Marxist historiographies that either marginalized or inadequately addressed caste as a central axis of Indian society. The anti-caste intellectual tradition has foregrounded the lived experiences of Dalits and Bahujans and redefined the historical narrative by shifting focus from elite political events to the structures of oppression rooted in everyday social and cultural practices. Despite its critical contributions, this study reveals that anti-caste historiography exhibits tendencies of insularity that constrain its potential as a transformative historiographical force. The insularity is first evident in its conceptual rigidity. Much of the scholarship, especially that grounded in Ambedkarite frameworks, often privileges a singular interpretation of caste based on the Varna-Jati model dominant in western India. This results in the replication of certain theoretical positions without adequate contextualization or regional diversification. For instance, while the Ambedkarite framework remains powerful in Maharashtra and parts of North India, it does not always resonate with the socio-political realities of caste in regions like Tamil Nadu, where non-Brahmin movements, shaped more by Periyarist and Dravidian ideologies, have articulated anti-caste politics differently. This conceptual narrowing is compounded by a regional imbalance in the historiography itself. There is a marked overrepresentation of Dalit experiences from Maharashtra, with key

figures such as Ambedkar, Namdeo Dhasal, and the Dalit Panthers being at the center of most narratives. While their contributions are undeniable, the result is the marginalization of other regional and linguistic anti-caste traditions, such as the writings of Ayothee Thass in Tamil Nadu, K. G. Satyamurthy in Andhra Pradesh, and tribal leaders like Birsa Munda in Jharkhand. These figures have challenged caste and social hierarchies from different epistemological locations, often blending anti-caste resistance with critiques of colonialism, land alienation, and indigeneity. Yet, they are rarely integrated into mainstream anti-caste historiographical frameworks.

In addition to regional and conceptual limitations, the disciplinary orientation of anti-caste historiography remains narrow. Much of the scholarship is rooted in political theory and historical sociology, with limited engagement with cultural studies, anthropology, or gender and sexuality studies. This lack of interdisciplinarity restricts the understanding of caste to predominantly structural and legal-political frameworks, sidelining symbolic, affective, and performative dimensions of caste oppression and resistance. Even within gendered analyses, the majority of anti-caste histories continue to prioritize male voices, and though scholars like Sharmila Rege, Gopal Guru, and Anupama Rao have made critical interventions, the intersection of caste with gender and sexuality remains underdeveloped in the broader historiographical field. Methodologically, the reliance on textual analysis of canonical anti-caste thinkers and limited use of oral histories, vernacular narratives, and everyday practices suggests a need to diversify the sources and methods employed. Many anti-caste narratives are preserved not only in writing but in folklore, performance, community memory, and religious practice. The neglect of these cultural forms creates a historical narrative that privileges literacy and elite modes of political articulation, thereby excluding vast segments of Dalit and lower-caste populations whose resistance has been embodied in non-textual forms.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to critically explore the social history of caste in modern India through a close examination of anti-caste historiography and its internal limitations, particularly its tendencies toward insularity. Anti-caste historiography has played a crucial role in challenging dominant historical narratives that have marginalized the voices and experiences of Dalits, Bahujans, and other oppressed caste groups. It has foregrounded caste as a central structure of inequality and as a lived social reality that cannot be reduced to class, religion, or colonial influence alone. However, this research demonstrates that despite its radical foundations and political urgency, anti-caste historiography is not immune to critique. It often displays conceptual, regional, and disciplinary insularity that limits its capacity to fully represent the diversity and complexity of caste experiences in India. The overemphasis on certain intellectual lineages—particularly Ambedkarite thought from Maharashtra—has led to the marginalization of other regional, tribal, and non-Dalit anti-caste movements. Similarly, the lack of engagement with interdisciplinary methods and alternative epistemologies—such as oral traditions, cultural practices, and affective histories—has created a narrative framework that risks becoming narrow and repetitive.

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