

REVISITING MODERN INDIAN HISTORY THROUGH AN ANTI-CASTE LENS: SOCIETY, POWER, AND RESISTANCE

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Abstract

This study revisits the social history of modern India (late 18th century to mid-20th century) through an anti-caste analytical framework. Conventional historiography of modern India has often narrated the story of nation-making through the prisms of colonialism, nationalism, and secular reform, with caste appearing as a traditional social residue. This paper argues that caste was not a residue but a central axis around which modernity, colonial power, and social reform were negotiated. By centering the intellectual traditions and movements of Jyotirao Phule, Savitribai Phule, Periyar E.V. Ramasamy, Pandita Ramabai, and B.R. Ambedkar, the study examines how anti-caste thinkers exposed caste as a system of graded inequality, labour expropriation, and control of knowledge and gender. Using archival sources, anti-caste literature, and secondary historiography, the paper explores three dimensions: society - how caste was codified and hardened under colonial census and law; power - how dominant nationalist discourse accommodated caste hierarchies; and resistance - how Dalit-Bahujan movements articulated alternative visions of liberty, equality and fraternity. The research concludes that revisiting modern Indian history from an anti-caste perspective not only recovers marginalized agency but also offers a critical method to understand democracy and social justice in contemporary India.

Keywords-Anti-Caste Thought, Social History, Modern India, B.R. Ambedkar, Jyotirao Phule, Periyar, Dalit History, Caste and Colonialism, Resistance, Social Justice.

Introduction

The social history of caste in modern India cannot be understood without examining the transition from pre-colonial social formations to colonial modernity. British colonial rule introduced new instruments of governance - the census, ethnographic surveys, legal codes, and Western education - which redefined and in many cases rigidified caste identities. While nationalist historiography focused on anti-colonial struggle and socio-religious reform movements led by upper-caste reformers, it often underplayed the systemic nature of caste oppression. The anti-caste lens, pioneered by 19th and 20th century thinkers, offers a counter-history. It questions two dominant assumptions: first, that caste is a religious or cultural issue; and second, that its abolition would be an automatic outcome of modernization and nationalism. This study uses "anti-caste" not merely as a political stance but as a historiographical method - a way of reading history from below, from the standpoint of those who experienced untouchability, labour exclusion, and denial of education.

Revisiting modern Indian history through an anti-caste lens completely shifts our understanding of how power, nationhood, and resistance evolved. Traditional historical narratives often focus

heavily on elite-led nationalist movements against British rule. In contrast, an anti-caste framework reveals that the struggle for freedom was multi-layered—it was a battle against external colonial rule *and* an internal war against deep-seated social oppression and untouchability.

Re-evaluating the British Colonial Era

The colonial period is often viewed simply as a time of economic exploitation and political subjugation. An anti-caste perspective introduces a more complex reality:

- **The Paradox of Colonial Education:** While the British state served its own imperial interests, the introduction of English education and uniform legal codes inadvertently disrupted traditional Brahminical monopolies on knowledge. Subaltern thinkers seized these new tools to critique internal social structures.
- **The Bhima Koregaon Symbolism:** Events like the Battle of Bhima Koregaon (1818)—where Mahar soldiers fought alongside the British to defeat the Peshwa forces—are reframed. In traditional nationalist history, this might be seen as collaboration with a foreign power; in anti-caste history, it is celebrated as a decisive military strike against a highly oppressive caste regime.

The Core Thinkers and Ideological Shifts

An anti-caste lens centers the intellectual and activist contributions of marginalized leaders who argued that true independence was impossible without social democracy.

- **Jyotirao and Savitribai Phule:** Operating in 19th-century Maharashtra, they identified Brahminical patriarchy and knowledge monopolies as the root of lower-caste subjugation. By founding the Satyashodhak Samaj (1873) and opening schools for women and Shudra/Ati-Shudra children, they pioneered a grassroots intellectual revolution.
- **E.V. Ramasamy (Periyar):** In South India, Periyar's Self-Respect Movement targeted the cultural and religious roots of caste. He critiqued Sanskritization, rejected religious epics as tools of northern Aryan hegemony, and advocated for rationalism and gender equality.
- **Dr. B.R. Ambedkar:** Ambedkar fundamentally transformed the nationalist discourse by asserting that political liberty from the British meant nothing if millions remained socially enslaved. His debates with Mahatma Gandhi highlighted a crucial ideological rift: Gandhi advocated for the reform of the caste system from within (keeping the Varna ideal but removing untouchability), whereas Ambedkar demanded the total "annihilation of caste" through political representation, structural rights, and legal guarantees.

Redefining "Resistance" and Nationalism

When viewed through an anti-caste lens, the definition of historical resistance expands far beyond the Indian National Congress or armed revolutionary groups:

- **Cultural and Religious Revolt:** The mass conversions to Buddhism led by Ambedkar in 1956, or the social reform movements led by Narayana Guru in Kerala, are recognized as radical acts of political resistance.
- **The Struggle for Public Spaces:** Protests like the Mahad Satyagraha (1927) for water rights or the Vaikom Satyagraha (1924–25) for temple road access are elevated to the same historical significance as the Salt March. These were battles for fundamental human rights and spatial citizenship.
- **The Critique of Elite Nationalism:** Anti-caste leaders consistently cautioned that a hasty British transfer of power to an un-reformed Indian elite would simply replace foreign rulers with local oppressors. They argued that a nation cannot truly exist when its people are fractured into thousands of unequal, endogamous groups.

Ultimately, analyzing modern Indian history through an anti-caste lens exposes the cracks in a singular, monolithic nationalism. It demonstrates that the making of modern India was shaped just as much by internal civil rights struggles as it was by anti-colonialism, offering a more complete, democratic, and pluralistic view of the past.

Power: The Conflict Over Representation and Sovereignty

An anti-caste reading of history redefines the concept of power, moving away from who controlled the state (British vs. Indian) to **who controlled society and resources**.

- **Nationalism vs. Social Emancipation:** For anti-caste leaders, political freedom from the British was meaningless without social freedom from Brahminical hegemony. Jyotirao Phule and B.R. Ambedkar argued that transferring power from British bureaucrats to upper-caste elites would simply replace one oppressor with another.
- **The Struggle for Franchise:** The battleground for power shifted significantly during the round-table conferences and the framing of electoral reforms. The demand for **separate electorates** for the Depressed Classes (led by Ambedkar) was a direct bid to secure independent political power, which culminated in the tense standoff with Mahatma Gandhi and the resulting **Poona Pact of 1932**.
- **Constitutionalism as Empowerment:** The drafting of the Indian Constitution, chaired by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, represents the ultimate institutional challenge to traditional power structures. It introduced universal adult suffrage, abolished untouchability (Article 17), and mandated affirmative action (reservations) to structurally redistribute state power.

Significance of the Study



Historiographical Significance: It challenges elite-centric history and brings Dalit-Bahujan sources - autobiographies, pamphlets, journals like Mooknayak, Kudi Arasu, Satyashodhak - into mainstream historical method.

Sociological Significance: It helps understand how modern institutions like education, law, and electoral politics were shaped by caste contestations.

Contemporary Relevance: Current debates on reservation, representation, caste census, and social discrimination have deep roots in modern history. An anti-caste reading provides historical context for these policies.

Pedagogical Value: It diversifies the syllabus of modern Indian history beyond a few canonical leaders and introduces students to alternative archives.

Objectives of the Study

To trace how caste was reconstituted as a social institution under colonial rule through census, law, and land settlements.

To analyze how mainstream social reform and nationalist movements addressed, accommodated, or ignored caste inequality.

To reconstruct the intellectual genealogy of anti-caste thought from Phule to Ambedkar and Periyar.

To examine forms of resistance - education initiatives, religious conversion, temple entry, labour organization, and political mobilization - adopted by anti-caste movements.

To evaluate how the anti-caste lens reshapes our understanding of concepts like modernity, nation, and democracy in India.

Research Methodology

This is a qualitative, historical study based on a critical historiographical approach.

Research Design: Historical-analytical and interpretive. The study does not use lab experiments but uses historical interpretation.

Sources

Primary Sources: Writings and speeches of Jyotiba Phule (Gulamgiri, 1873), B.R. Ambedkar (Annihilation of Caste, 1936, Who Were the Shudras?), Periyar's editorials in Kudi Arasu and Viduthalai, Census Reports of India (1871-1941), Proceedings of Depressed Classes conferences.

Secondary Sources: Works of Gail Omvedt, M.S.S. Pandian, Anupama Rao, Sharmila Rege, Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, and Nicholas Dirks.



Method of Analysis: Discourse analysis and subaltern studies method. It compares dominant narratives with counter-narratives from anti-caste archives.

Theoretical Framework: The study draws on Ambedkar's concept of graded inequality, Phule's critique of Brahmanism, and Gramscian idea of counter-hegemony.

Time Period: 1800-1950, with focus on 1848 (Phule's school) to 1956 (Ambedkar's conversion to Buddhism).

Limitations: Limited access to vernacular sources in all regional languages; focus is largely on Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu as epicenters of anti-caste movements.

Results and Discussion

A. Society: Colonial Codification of Caste

Findings show that colonial administration did not invent caste but it systematized it. The Census from 1871 onwards forced individuals to fit into fixed caste categories, ending earlier fluidities. Land revenue systems strengthened upper-caste landlordism. At the same time, colonial education, though limited, created a small educated class among Dalit communities who began to document their own history.

B. Power: Nationalism and the Caste Question

Mainstream nationalism, both moderate and extremist, prioritized political independence over social emancipation. While leaders like Gandhi addressed untouchability as a moral issue, anti-caste thinkers argued it was a structural issue of power and resource distribution. The Poona Pact (1932) debate between Gandhi and Ambedkar is discussed as a key moment where two visions of anti-caste futures collided - reform from within vs. political safeguards.

C. Resistance: The Anti-Caste Public Sphere

Anti-caste movements created their own public sphere: Satyashodhak Samaj schools (1848 onwards), Self-Respect Movement marriages, Dalit literary conferences, and conversion to Buddhism as political act. Three strategies emerge: Critique of knowledge - Phule exposing Brahmanical texts; Reclamation of identity - Adi-Dravida, Adi-Hindu movements; Demand for state power - Ambedkar's demand for separate electorates and later reservations. Discussion highlights that resistance was not only protest but also institution-building - hostels, libraries, cooperative societies.

Conclusion

Revisiting modern Indian history through an anti-caste lens demonstrates that the story of modern India is incomplete without the history of struggles against caste. Caste was not peripheral to modernity; it shaped how modernity was experienced and contested. The anti-caste perspective

shifts the narrative from victims waiting for reform to agents producing new ideas of justice. This lens shows that concepts of liberty and equality in India were not imported wholesale from the West but were deeply theorized by anti-caste intellectuals through their lived experience of oppression. For contemporary India, this history provides a crucial framework to understand why formal legal equality has not translated into substantive social equality, and why anti-caste politics continues to be central to democratic deepening. Future research should expand regional histories, especially from North-East, Central India and tribal perspectives, and explore digital archives of anti-caste periodicals.

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