Buddhist Counter Traditions to Modern Emancipatory Thoughts

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Abstract

The renewed emphasis on Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) in contemporary academic and policy discourse often presents Indian civilization as a unified, harmonious, and continuous intellectual tradition. However, such representations tend to foreground Brahmanical epistemologies while marginalizing the knowledge traditions and lived experiences of historically oppressed communities, particularly Dalits. This paper critically examines the relationship between Indian knowledge systems and Dalit emancipation by situating Brahmanical and Buddhist traditions within their historical contexts. It argues that Brahmanical knowledge systems functioned as instruments of caste domination and social exclusion, while Buddhism offered an alternative ethical and philosophical framework rooted in equality and rationality. The paper further contends that meaningful Dalit emancipation became historically possible only with the advent of modern knowledge during the colonial period, which was creatively appropriated and transformed by thinkers such as Jotiba Phule and Dr. B. R. Ambedkar. By integrating modern rationality, constitutionalism, and ethical humanism with a critical engagement with India's past, Phule and Ambedkar developed an emancipatory epistemology that challenged both colonial domination and indigenous caste oppression. The paper concludes by arguing that any contemporary discourse on Indian Knowledge Systems must be re-conceptualized from the standpoint of social justice and Dalit emancipation.

Keywords: Indian Knowledge Systems, Dalit Emancipation, Buddhism, Brahmanical Tradition, Modernity, Jotiba Phule, B. R. Ambedkar

Introduction

In recent years, the concept of Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) has gained increasing prominence in academic institutions, public policy, and cultural discourse in India. Often presented as a civilizational repository of wisdom encompassing philosophy, science, ethics, and spirituality, IKS is frequently invoked to assert cultural pride and intellectual continuity. However, this renewed focus has largely remained uncritical of the social conditions under which knowledge in India was historically produced, preserved, and transmitted. Knowledge in Indian society has never been socially neutral. It has been deeply embedded within the caste structure, which regulated access to learning, language, and intellectual authority. For Dalits, the question of knowledge has always been inseparable from questions of power, exclusion, and dignity. The denial of education, criminalization of literacy, and stigmatization of intellectual aspiration formed the epistemic foundations of caste domination.

This paper argues that dominant articulations of Indian Knowledge Systems primarily reflect Brahmanical epistemologies that historically functioned to legitimize caste hierarchy. Against this backdrop, Buddhism emerged as a counter-knowledge tradition that rejected caste authority and emphasized ethical equality. However, the decline of Buddhism and the resurgence of Brahmanical dominance foreclosed this emancipatory possibility. It was only with the arrival of modern knowledge under colonial conditions—and its radical reinterpretation by anti-caste thinkers such as Jotiba Phule and Dr. B. R. Ambedkar—that Dalit emancipation acquired a concrete historical trajectory. By critically engaging both ancient traditions and modern epistemologies, these thinkers articulated a new framework of emancipatory knowledge.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, theoretical, and interpretive research methodology to examine the relationship between Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) and Dalit emancipation. The research adopts a qualitative approach because the core questions addressed in the paper concern ideas, meanings, values, and power relations rather than measurable variables. The study does not use surveys, experiments, or statistical data; instead, it analyzes texts, discourses, and intellectual traditions to understand how knowledge systems have historically functioned in relation to caste.

This paper adopts a qualitative, theoretical, and critical interpretive research methodology. Drawing on social theory, historical analysis, and critical caste studies, it examines Indian Knowledge Systems as epistemological formations shaped by power and caste hierarchy. Through textual interpretation of Brahmanical, Buddhist, and modern anti-caste writings particularly those of Jotiba Phule and B.R. Ambedkar the study evaluates knowledge systems from a normative standpoint of social justice and Dalit emancipation. The methodology is explicitly emancipatory, aiming not only to analyze but also to challenge epistemic structures that sustain caste oppression.

Knowledge, Power, and Caste: A Theoretical Framework
The relationship between knowledge and power has been a central concern in social theory. Michel Foucault (1980) argued that knowledge is not merely a reflection of reality but a productive force that shapes social relations. In the Indian context, caste operated as a knowledge regime that determined who could know, what could be known, and how knowledge could circulate.

Brahmanical dominance was sustained not only through material power but also through symbolic and epistemic control. Pierre Bourdieu's (1977) concept of symbolic violence is useful here, as it explains how domination becomes internalized and normalized through cultural and educational systems. Brahmanical knowledge naturalized caste inequality by presenting it as divinely ordained and morally justified.

Dalit exclusion from knowledge was therefore not accidental but structural. The prohibition on education, especially access to sacred texts and institutional learning, ensured the reproduction of caste hierarchy across generations. Understanding Dalit emancipation thus requires a critical interrogation of the epistemological foundations of Indian society.

Brahmanical Knowledge Systems: Structure and Function
Brahmanical knowledge systems were anchored in Sanskritic texts such as the Vedas, Upanishads, Puranas, and Dharmashastras. These texts established a hierarchical social order based on the varna system, assigning intellectual and ritual authority exclusively to Brahmins while relegating Shudras and Ati-Shudras to labor and servitude (Manu, trans. 1991).

The Manusmriti explicitly prohibited Shudras from acquiring knowledge, prescribing severe punishments for those who attempted to listen to or recite sacred texts. Such injunctions demonstrate that knowledge functioned as a mechanism of social closure rather than universal enlightenment. Importantly, Brahmanical epistemology conflated morality with ritual purity and birth status. Ethical worth was not based on conduct or reason but on lineage. This framework delegitimized any challenge to caste hierarchy by portraying dissent as sacrilege. From a Dalit perspective, Brahmanical knowledge represented not cultural heritage but an apparatus of exclusion. Dr. Ambedkar (1916/2014) argued that caste was sustained through religious ideology rather than economic necessity, making the critique of Brahmanical knowledge central to any emancipatory project.

Buddhism as an Ethical and Epistemic Counter-Tradition
Buddhism emerged in ancient India as a profound challenge to Brahmanical orthodoxy. Rejecting the authority of the Vedas and the ritual supremacy of Brahmins, the Buddha emphasized rational inquiry, ethical conduct, and compassion as the basis of human worth (Gombrich, 2006). Central to Buddhist epistemology was the principle of *ehipassiko (come and see yourself)*—the invitation to verify truth through experience and reason rather than blind faith. This approach directly undermined caste ideology, which relied on unquestioned scriptural authority. The Buddhist Sangha functioned as an inclusive institutional space where individuals from all social backgrounds could participate equally. Historical evidence suggests that many followers of Buddhism came from marginalized communities, including Shudras and women. Dr. Ambedkar viewed Buddhism not merely as a religion but as a social philosophy grounded in liberty, equality, and fraternity (Ambedkar, 2011). For him, Buddhism represented an indigenous tradition of social democracy that predated modern Western thought.
However, the eventual decline of Buddhism in India—due to political, economic, and ideological factors—allowed Brahmanical dominance to reassert itself. The marginalization of Buddhist knowledge meant the suppression of a potentially emancipatory epistemology.

Colonial Modernity and the Disruption of Epistemic Monopoly

The arrival of British colonial rule introduced new forms of knowledge rooted in Enlightenment rationality, scientific inquiry, and liberal political thought. While colonialism was fundamentally exploitative, it disrupted the Brahmanical monopoly over knowledge by introducing modern education, print culture, and legal institutions (Dirks, 2001). Colonial education systems, though limited and uneven, enabled sections of marginalized communities to access literacy and intellectual resources. Ideas of equality before law, individual rights, and rational governance provided conceptual tools to critique caste oppression. However, colonial knowledge was not inherently emancipatory. It often reinforced racial hierarchies and served imperial interests. Dalit emancipation required not passive acceptance of colonial modernity but its critical appropriation and transformation. This task was undertaken by anti-caste intellectuals who used modern knowledge to expose the injustices of both colonial rule and indigenous social structures.

Jotiba Phule: Education as Anti-Caste Praxis

Jotiba Phule was among the earliest modern thinkers to systematically critique Brahmanical knowledge by deploying rationality, historical inquiry, and ethical evaluation. He identified education as the central mechanism through which caste hierarchy was sustained, legitimized, and reproduced (Phule, 1991). In *Gulamgiri*, Phule radically reinterpreted Indian history as a narrative of conquest and enslavement, directly challenging the mythological and scriptural authority of Brahmanical texts. By portraying the Aryans as invaders who subjugated indigenous Bahujan communities, Phule inverted the moral and epistemic authority of Vedic knowledge and exposed its role in naturalizing domination.

Phule's writings—including *Shetkaryacha Asud* (Cultivator's Whipcord) and *Sarvajanik Satyadharma*—extended this critique to everyday social practices, religious rituals, and pedagogical institutions. He argued that Brahmanical knowledge functioned not as universal truth but as an ideological system designed to monopolize learning, restrict literacy, and exclude Shudras and Ati-Shudras from intellectual life. By demystifying scriptures and desacralizing ancient texts, Phule dismantled the claim that caste hierarchy was divinely ordained. Knowledge, for Phule, had to be judged by its social effects rather than its antiquity or ritual authority, marking a decisive break from the reverence for "tradition" that characterized Brahmanical epistemology.

Education, therefore, was not a means of cultural refinement or moral uplift but a political instrument of emancipation. Phule advocated mass education, vernacular instruction, and the inclusion of marginalized communities as a direct challenge to caste power. His insistence on women's education was particularly radical, as it struck at the patriarchal foundations of Brahmanical society. Phule recognized that without dismantling gendered exclusions, the caste order could not be fundamentally transformed.

Savitribai Phule played a foundational role in translating this anti-caste vision into pedagogical practice. As one of India's first women teachers, she not only co-founded the first schools for girls and lower-caste children but also developed a distinct educational philosophy that emphasized dignity, self-respect, and intellectual confidence. Savitribai viewed English education positively, recognizing it as a critical resource for accessing modern knowledge, legal rights, and global ideas of equality. Unlike Brahmanical education, which functioned through exclusion and ritual purity, English education offered a relatively non-caste-coded domain through which oppressed communities could acquire critical reason and social mobility.

Through her poems and speeches, Savitribai articulated education as a weapon against ignorance, superstition, and social slavery. She understood literacy as a means of cultivating critical consciousness, particularly among women, who were doubly oppressed by caste and patriarchy. Together, Jotiba and Savitribai Phule forged an alternative epistemic framework—one that rejected the romanticization of ancient Indian knowledge and instead evaluated all knowledge systems based on their capacity to produce social justice, equality, and human freedom. This framework laid the intellectual groundwork for a critical Dalit–Bahujan epistemology that would later influence thinkers such as B.R. Ambedkar.

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar and the Epistemology of Emancipation

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar represents the most comprehensive articulation of Dalit emancipation through knowledge in modern India. Educated at some of the world's leading institutions, Ambedkar

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combined rigorous scholarship with sustained political activism. His analysis of caste emphasized its ideological and social foundations rather than treating it as a mere economic arrangement. Ambedkar argued that caste endured because it was sanctified by religious texts, rituals, and everyday social practices that regulated marriage, commensality, occupation, and social interaction (Ambedkar, 2014). Caste structured the social domain by enforcing graded inequality, restricting social mobility, and normalizing practices of exclusion and humiliation. Through mechanisms such as endogamy, untouchability, and social segregation, caste operated as a total social system that governed both public and private life.

Ambedkar confronted this system through multiple strategies. He exposed the moral bankruptcy of Hindu social order by critically interrogating scriptures such as the *Manusmriti*, demonstrating how religious authority functioned as an instrument of domination. Simultaneously, he mobilized legal, political, and institutional frameworks to counter caste oppression. His interventions ranged from leading mass movements against untouchability to securing constitutional safeguards, civil rights, and political representation for marginalized communities. By insisting on social democracy alongside political democracy, Ambedkar emphasized that formal equality without social transformation would remain hollow.

Ambedkar's turn to Buddhism was a conscious epistemological and ethical choice. He rejected Hinduism not merely as a religion but as a moral system fundamentally incompatible with human dignity, liberty, and equality. Buddhism, in contrast, offered an ethical framework grounded in reason, compassion, and social equality. Through his reinterpretation of Buddhism as *Navayana*, Ambedkar emphasized its relevance to modern society, presenting it as a rational and socially engaged philosophy rather than a metaphysical doctrine. Navayana Buddhism foregrounded values of justice, ethical conduct, and collective responsibility, aligning spiritual practice with social transformation.

Central to Ambedkar's emancipatory philosophy were the principles of liberty, equality, and fraternity. He viewed these values as inseparable foundations of social development and democratic life. Liberty ensured freedom from social tyranny and caste-based coercion; equality challenged hierarchical social relations; and fraternity fostered social solidarity and moral responsibility among citizens. Ambedkar incorporated these principles into the Indian Constitution, translating ethical ideals into enforceable rights and institutional mechanisms. For Dalit emancipation, these values provided both a moral vocabulary and a practical framework for resisting oppression and rebuilding social relations on egalitarian grounds.

Education, for Ambedkar, was the cornerstone of liberation. His famous call to "educate, agitate, and organize" reflected a profound understanding of knowledge as a transformative force capable of dismantling internalized oppression and enabling collective action. Education enabled critical consciousness, legal awareness, and political participation, allowing marginalized communities to challenge dominant epistemologies and claim their rightful place within society. Through this synthesis of education, ethics, and constitutionalism, Ambedkar articulated an epistemology of emancipation that continues to shape struggles for social justice in contemporary India.

Rethinking Indian Knowledge Systems from a Dalit Standpoint

The contemporary revival of Indian Knowledge Systems often risks reproducing Brahmanical dominance by privileging ancient texts without critical scrutiny. From a Dalit standpoint, knowledge cannot be evaluated solely on the basis of antiquity or cultural continuity. An emancipatory conception of Indian knowledge must foreground ethical universality, social justice, and historical accountability. Buddhism and Ambedkarite thought provide valuable resources for such a reconfiguration. Dalit emancipation requires not a return to tradition but a critical synthesis of ethical traditions and modern rationality. Any discourse on IKS that ignores caste risks becoming complicit in epistemic injustice.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that Indian knowledge systems have historically been structured by caste power relations. Brahmanical epistemologies functioned as instruments of exclusion, while Buddhism offered an alternative ethical framework that challenged social hierarchy. The arrival of modern knowledge under colonial conditions created new emancipatory possibilities, which were creatively harnessed by Jotiba Phule and Dr. B. R. Ambedkar. Dalit emancipation, therefore, cannot be located within an uncritical revival of ancient Indian knowledge. It emerges through a critical, ethical, and

modern epistemology that confronts caste and affirms human dignity. Reimagining Indian Knowledge Systems from this perspective is essential for building a just and inclusive society.

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