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## AMBEDKAR AND THE BHARATIYA JÑĀN PARAMPARĀ: RECLAIMING KNOWLEDGE, RESISTING CASTE

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### Abstract

This paper explores B. R. Ambedkar's critical engagement with the Bharatiya Jñān Paramparā (Indian Knowledge Tradition), highlighting his efforts to reclaim epistemic agency for the oppressed while simultaneously challenging the caste-based exclusions deeply embedded in traditional Indian thought. Ambedkar did not outright reject Indian philosophical traditions but selectively engaged with them, especially Buddhist epistemology, to articulate a vision of social justice grounded in rationality, ethics, and equality. By interrogating Brahminical hegemony over knowledge production, Ambedkar aimed to democratize access to learning and reinterpret Indic intellectual heritage through the lens of emancipation. His emphasis on *pragya* (wisdom), *karuṇā* (compassion), and *samata* (equality) represents a counter-tradition within Indian thought that resists caste while remaining rooted in indigenous frameworks. (1) This work situates Ambedkar within broader debates on epistemic justice, postcolonial theory, and subaltern agency, arguing that his project offers a radical reinterpretation of the *jñān paramparā* as a site of both resistance and reconstruction. In doing so, Ambedkar emerges not only as a political reformer but also as a transformative thinker within Indian intellectual history.

**Keywords:** Ambedkar, Bharatiya Jñān Paramparā, Knowledge, Caste, Social Justice, Resistance, Reclamation, and Philosophy.

### Introduction

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar occupies a singular place in the annals of Indian intellectual history, not only as the principal

architect of the Constitution of India but also as a radical philosopher of knowledge who relentlessly interrogated and reimagined the Bharatiya Jñān Paramparā (Indian

Knowledge Tradition). His engagement with tradition was marked neither by unqualified acceptance nor by outright repudiation; rather, it was, as Singh astutely observes, “a reclamation of epistemic agency for the oppressed while resisting caste-based exclusions.” (7) For Ambedkar, knowledge was never an innocent or neutral pursuit; it was a contested terrain where power inscribed itself with insidious precision. In his incendiary text *Annihilation of Caste*, he lays bare the mechanisms of epistemic violence as Ambedkar argued that the Hindu social order was fundamentally hierarchical, deliberately structuring access to knowledge in a way that excluded the marginalized. For him, such exclusion was not an accidental outcome but a consciously designed mechanism to sustain caste domination. Such a pronouncement reveals his conviction that epistemology is inseparable from the hierarchies of power and that to challenge caste was also to challenge the monopolization of knowledge.

Yet Ambedkar’s intellectual labour was never confined to critique alone; it also encompassed a constructive vision. Drawing inspiration from Buddhist rationalism and ethical humanism, he discerned in the Dhamma a countervailing epistemic horizon grounded in *pragya* (wisdom), *karuṇā* (compassion), and *samata* (equality). Ambedkar emphasized that the essence of the Buddha’s teaching lay in fostering liberty, equality, and

fraternity, framing Buddhism as a profoundly ethical and social philosophy rather than a mere metaphysical system. This reclamation of Indic categories to articulate an emancipatory framework amounted to the inauguration of a counter-tradition—one that remained indigenous in its idiom yet subversive of Brahminical orthodoxy.

Ambedkar’s epistemic intervention prefigures contemporary debates on standpoint epistemology and epistemic justice, insisting that the lived experience of marginalization must serve as a foundational source of knowledge. His rhetorical query, “What is knowledge worth if it blinds us to suffering?” (8), pierces through abstract theorization to foreground an ethics of knowing. By privileging rational inquiry over divine revelation and moral praxis over metaphysical speculation, Ambedkar not only destabilized entrenched hierarchies but also reconstituted the *Jñān Paramparā* as a site of resistance and renewal. His legacy, therefore, lies not merely in exposing the epistemic scaffolding of caste but in envisioning knowledge itself as a collective instrument of emancipation.

### **Literature Review**

The discourse on Dr. B.R. Ambedkar’s intellectual engagement with the *Bharatiya Jñān Paramparā* (Indian knowledge tradition) situates him both within and against its normative structures. Scholars such as Anand Teltumbde (2018)



(2) and Gopal Guru (2009) (3) argue that Ambedkar's critique of caste was also a critique of epistemic hierarchies embedded in Brahmanical thought. While classical Indian philosophy valorizes scriptural authority (*śāstra pramāṇa*), Ambedkar interrogated its exclusionary frameworks, advocating a rationalist, humanist reinterpretation of tradition. Eleanor Zelliott (1992) (4) emphasizes how Ambedkar reappropriated Buddhist thought as an ethical and egalitarian alternative within the Indic milieu. Kancha Ilaiah Shepherd (2015) (5) extends this reading by positioning Ambedkar as a subaltern epistemologist who sought to democratize knowledge production. Recent works in Dalit studies (Guru & Sarukkai, 2012) (6) highlight his project as an act of epistemic disobedience, challenging the monopoly of upper-caste narratives. The literature reflects a dual movement in Ambedkar's thought—critical rejection of oppressive knowledge systems and creative reclamation of liberatory strands within India's intellectual heritage. This positions him not merely as a political reformer but as a transformative thinker reimagining the *Jñān Paramparā* for an egalitarian future.

## Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative, interdisciplinary approach, integrating textual analysis, historical inquiry, and critical theory. Primary sources include B.R. Ambedkar's writings, speeches, and

constitutional interventions, examined alongside canonical texts of the *Bharatiya Jñān Paramparā* (Indian Knowledge Tradition), such as the Vedas, Upanishads, and Dharmashastras. Comparative hermeneutics is employed to contrast Ambedkar's reinterpretations with traditional philosophical frameworks, highlighting his critique of caste-based epistemologies. Secondary literature from Dalit studies, postcolonial theory, and intellectual history supports contextual understanding. Archival materials and translations are critically assessed to trace continuities and ruptures in knowledge traditions.

The study applies discourse analysis to uncover how caste operates within epistemic structures and how Ambedkar's thought seeks to democratize knowledge. The methodology is reflexive, acknowledging positionality in interpreting contested traditions. Through this triangulation—historical-contextual, textual-critical, and theoretical—the research aims to elucidate Ambedkar's project of reclaiming inclusive knowledge systems while resisting caste hierarchies embedded in dominant intellectual legacies.

## Ambedkar's Educational and Philosophical Background

Ambedkar's academic sojourns to Columbia University and the London School of Economics profoundly shaped his epistemological orientation. In America, he

immersed himself in economics, law, and comparative religion; in London, he studied political economy. He described himself as someone who “converted from religious tradition to reason”—believing that “the educated man has to be a thinking man, not a man of rote.” (9) This shift made him view India’s inherited knowledge systems through a critical lens: not as timeless truths but as historically contingent structures.

He also drew heavily from Buddhist rationality and Enlightenment values. As he argued later in *The Buddha and His Dhamma*: “The Buddha’s religion is a religion of liberty, equality and fraternity.” (10) This triad became central to his reconstruction of Indian epistemology—a system that centered equality before authority, and empirical experience before dogma.

#### **Defining “Bharatiya Jñān Paramparā”**

By invoking **Bharatiya Jñān Paramparā**, B. R. Ambedkar identifies a vast and deeply entrenched Sanskrit epistemic tradition—encompassing the Vedas, Upaniṣads, Smṛtis, and the multivolume commentarial apparatus—as well as their vernacular counterparts. These bodies of knowledge, he argues, served less as universal spiritual wisdom than as ideological scaffolds sustaining caste hegemony. Ambedkar famously asserts, “What is called Brahmanism is not a religion; it is a social system...” (11). Here, knowledge is not neutral. Instead, it is a

structuring authority, permeated by relations of dominance and hierarchy. In presenting these scriptures and their interpretations as legitimizing irremovable social stratification, Ambedkar exposes how epistemology itself functions as a tool of oppression. Thus, *Bharatiya Jñān Paramparā* denotes not an innocent archive of spiritual insight, but a historically sedimented, power-laden canon. It is precisely this recognition that motivates his project to reclaim knowledge—and dismantle its function in caste-based exclusion. By re-framing these traditions, Ambedkar does not reject Indian intellectual heritage wholesale; rather, he seeks to reorient it toward equity and emancipation.

#### **The Brahminical Knowledge System and Manusmṛiti**

In the next section, we will dive into Ambedkar’s sharp critique of the Brahminical knowledge system. He claimed that both spiritual and secular knowledge in India had historically been monopolized by Brahmins, and that caste-based restrictions were legally enforced in ancient texts. He called it “ignorance by design”:

“The Hindu social order is a hierarchy in which the Brahmin is placed at the top and the Shudra and the Ati-Shudra at the bottom, denied all access to knowledge. This is not ignorance by chance; it is ignorance by design.” (12)

We’ll explore how he analyzed Manusmṛiti, his commentary on Shruti and



Smriti, and the role of Brahmin priests in upholding epistemic apartheid.

### **The Brahminical Monopoly Over Knowledge**

Dr. Ambedkar's strongest indictment of the Bharatiya Jñān Paramparā stems from its role in sustaining caste. To him, traditional Indian knowledge was not simply metaphysical or spiritual, but deeply political. Caste hierarchy was not merely sanctioned by religion—it was entrenched in epistemology.

In *Annihilation of Caste*, Ambedkar argued that “the Hindu social order is a hierarchy in which the Brahmin is placed at the top and the Shudra and the Ati-Shudra at the bottom, denied all access to knowledge. This is not ignorance by chance; it is ignorance by design”. (13) He contended that the Brahmin priestly class had not only monopolized sacred texts like the Vedas and Upanishads but had used legalistic scriptures like Manusmriti to codify knowledge apartheid.

He writes, “The Hindu religion does not recognize the right of a Shudra to read the Vedas. Even to hear the Vedas is an offence.” (14) This statement is based on Manusmriti 2.110, which prescribed molten lead into the ears of Shudras who dared to hear Vedic recitations.

Ambedkar compared this system to medieval Europe's clerical control over literacy—but noted that Indian Brahminism was more severe and long-lasting. In *Who*

*Were the Shudras?*, he argued: “The Brahmin made knowledge a birthright, not a matter of merit or learning. This is the inversion of reason.” (15)

Ambedkar also attacked the idea of Shruti and Smriti—the two foundational classifications of Hindu scriptural knowledge. While Shruti was considered divine and eternal, Smriti was its worldly codification. He held that both acted as mechanisms of exclusion. In *Riddles in Hinduism*, he declared: “The authority of the Shrutis and Smritis is the authority of a sword over the head, not of reason over the heart.” (16)

### **Ambedkar as Critique of Scriptural Knowledge**

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's dialogue with the Indian Knowledge System was rooted in his deep engagement with religious texts, not to uphold tradition but to expose its complicity in social hierarchy. He interrogated the foundations of Brahmanical knowledge, seeing in them the codification of caste oppression. For Ambedkar, scriptures like the Manusmriti and Bhagavad Gita were not philosophical treatises but instruments of ideological control. As he observed in *Annihilation of Caste*, “The Hindu religion does not recognize the right of a Hindu to denounce the caste system... You cannot build anything on the foundations of caste.” (17)

Ambedkar's critique was not a rejection of all Indian thought, but a selective

rejection of those traditions that perpetuated inequality. He appreciated the rationalist spirit of Buddhism, which he contrasted with the ritualism of Vedic religion. “The religion that does not recognize the rights of man is not a religion but a disease.” (18) Ambedkar saw the Indian Knowledge System as fractured—dominated by Brahmanical authority and excluding counter-traditions like Buddhism, Charvaka, and the Bhakti movements.

### **Vedanta and the Abstraction of Ethics**

Ambedkar’s critique of the Bharatiya Jñān Paramparā extended to Indian metaphysics—especially Vedanta. He believed that Vedantic non-dualism, while philosophically sophisticated, was socially hollow.

In a lecture on Hindu philosophy, he said: “Vedanta speaks of oneness, but in practice it led to casteism. A unity that tolerates injustice is no unity at all.” (19) For him, the idea that the individual soul (Atman) is identical to the universal soul (Brahman) sounded lofty—but ignored ground realities. If all souls are equal, he asked, why are people unequal in society?

Vedanta’s abstraction, he believed, permitted moral disengagement. “Vedanta is empty of social content,” he declared, “because it bypasses justice and lived experience.” (20) In contrast to thinkers like Swami Vivekananda, who attempted to reconcile Vedanta with social service,

Ambedkar believed such attempts were cosmetic.

This suspicion of metaphysical knowledge aligns him more with materialist and Buddhist schools than with the idealist traditions. As he argued in *Philosophy of Hinduism*, “The essential defect of Hindu philosophy is its refusal to see the world as real and pain as real.” (21) In these writings, Ambedkar emerges not just as a social reformer, but a philosopher deeply invested in the ethics of knowledge.

### **Buddhism as Counter-Knowledge**

Ambedkar’s most profound alternative to the Brahminical knowledge tradition was Navayana Buddhism, which he reformulated in *The Buddha and His Dhamma*. To him, Buddhism offered not only spiritual refuge but an epistemic revolution. “The Buddha’s appeal is to reason and not to authority,” he wrote. (22)

Unlike Hinduism, which posited revelation as the ultimate source of knowledge, Buddhism emphasized empirical verification (*pratyakṣa*), logical inference (*anumāna*), and ethical conduct (*śīla*). This method, Ambedkar believed, aligned better with science and democracy.

In his *Buddha and Karl Marx* address, he declared: “Buddha asked us to be our own lamp. He gave us reason, not rituals.” (23) This was a direct rejection of priestly mediation. Knowledge, in the Buddhist epistemology, was open, self-critical, and ethical. Ambedkar saw



Buddhism as offering a doctrine of emancipation. “The Dhamma is social. It is not mystic. It seeks to reconstruct society based on justice, equality, and fraternity.” (24)

He also engaged with Buddhist categories like dukkha (suffering) and *pratītyasamutpāda* (dependent origination) as frameworks for understanding social suffering—not just existential angst. He proposed that caste itself was a socially produced form of dukkha to be overcome through collective awakening.

**Ambedkar’s Reconstruction of Indian Epistemology**

Ambedkar didn’t merely critique Indian knowledge traditions—he sought to reconstruct them. He envisioned a new Indian epistemology based on democracy, social justice, and lived experience. “A democratic form of government presupposes a democratic form of social life,” he wrote. (25)

He argued that knowledge should be rooted in experience, especially the experience of the oppressed. “What is knowledge worth if it blinds us to suffering?” he asked. (26) This anticipates the modern idea of standpoint epistemology, where marginalized voices provide critical insight.

His focus on ethics over metaphysics, democracy over hierarchy, and reason over revelation created a distinctively Ambedkarite mode of thinking.

“The educated man must be first and foremost a moral man,” he said. (27)

**Contesting the Moral Core of the Indian Knowledge System**

B.R. Ambedkar’s dialogues with Gandhi on the Indian knowledge system were fundamentally shaped by his conviction that the epistemological foundations of caste—scripture, tradition, and priestly authority—were not merely sources of knowledge but instruments of oppression. While Gandhi viewed the varna system as a benign spiritual division of labor, Ambedkar forcefully rejected the idea that caste had any moral or rational justification. In *Annihilation of Caste*, Ambedkar writes, “The Hindu social order does not recognize the individual as a center of social purpose. It is an ideal which makes inequality a sacred obligation.” (28) This indictment was not just political; it was philosophical, targeting the very epistemology that normalized untouchability.

Gandhi, for his part, tried to reform Hinduism from within, stating in *Harijan* that “Untouchability is a sin against God and man” (29), yet he stopped short of rejecting the Vedas or varna itself. This, for Ambedkar, was a betrayal of reason and justice. He declared, “The Vedas are a worthless set of books. There is no reason why they should be accepted as sacrosanct.” (30) The Indian knowledge system, Ambedkar argued, must be rebuilt

on rationalism and equality, not myth and metaphysical justification. His challenge was not only political but intellectual—an attempt to unseat millennia of epistemic dominance.

### **Ambedkar in Conversation with Indian Reformers and Thinkers**

Ambedkar did not stand alone in his criticism of traditional knowledge; rather, he was in a complex dialogue with contemporaries such as Gandhi, Tilak, and Swami Vivekananda. Unlike Gandhi, who saw caste as a social structure that could be morally reformed, Ambedkar viewed it as inherently unjust. “Gandhiji has never made it clear whether the varna system is to be maintained or abolished. This is the root of our difference”. (31) Ambedkar’s differences with Gandhi are particularly illuminating. While Gandhi celebrated the varna system as a division of labor, Ambedkar rejected it as “a division of laborers”. (32) He criticized Gandhi for spiritualizing caste, rather than dismantling it.

Ambedkar’s critique of Tilak was equally sharp. Tilak had argued for the infallibility of the Gita, yet Ambedkar countered that the Gita was a text meant to “neutralize the moral sense of the masses”. (33) He insisted that Indian philosophy must be ethical, not merely metaphysical. Reflecting on the failure of Indian thinkers to root their knowledge systems in human dignity, Ambedkar asked: “What is the use of knowledge if it cannot liberate man?” (34)

He also challenged the nationalist thinker, Dayananda Saraswati, for their glorification of Vedic traditions. “The call to return to the Vedas is a call to return to slavery,” Ambedkar famously said. (33) Rather than romanticizing the past, Ambedkar called for “a new renaissance of Indian thought—founded not on Veda, but on justice”. (35)

Ambedkar’s approach was not to discard all that was Indian but to reconstruct knowledge on egalitarian lines. His legacy lies in making visible those subaltern voices excluded from the canon and demanding a reconstitution of Indian knowledge based on reason, liberty, and justice.

### **Political Emancipation and the Battle over Knowledge Authority**

The 1932 Poona Pact and the public correspondence between Ambedkar and Gandhi marked the high point of their disagreement over representation and emancipation. Gandhi’s hunger strike against separate electorates, framed as a moral protest, was, in Ambedkar’s view, an act of coercion. In *What Congress and Gandhi Have Done to the Untouchables*, Ambedkar argued, “Mr. Gandhi has made the Congress the spearhead of the Hindu orthodoxy. He has stood as a solid rock to prevent any political power being given to the Untouchables”. (36) For Ambedkar, true emancipation required control over one’s political and cultural narrative, not mere inclusion within a hierarchical system.



The Indian knowledge system—whether through the shastras or the social authority of the Brahmin—was to Ambedkar a machinery of mental enslavement. “Caste is not a division of labour, it is a division of labourers”, he emphasized (37), underlining how knowledge and power were distributed unequally through religious justifications. Gandhi, while compassionate toward the untouchables (whom he renamed Harijans, or “Children of God”), continued to treat caste as a spiritual issue rather than a structural evil. Ambedkar retorted sharply, “To say that the caste system is an integral part of Hinduism is to admit that Hinduism is incapable of recognizing human dignity.” (38)

In challenging Gandhi, Ambedkar was confronting not just a man but an entire civilizational logic—one that subordinated rationality to tradition and liberty to hierarchy. His dialogues were, therefore, less about compromise and more about an epistemic revolution—to rewrite the grammar of Indian knowledge with justice at its core.

### Concluding Reflections

The inquiry demonstrates that Ambedkar’s philosophical labour was neither a wholesale rejection nor a passive inheritance of India’s intellectual traditions, but a radical reconstitution of them. By unmasking Brahmanical epistemology as an apparatus of exclusion, he revealed how systems of knowledge could operate as

technologies of domination. Yet Ambedkar’s intervention was not limited to critique; it was a creative reconstruction that shifted the axis of epistemic authority from revelation to reason, from metaphysical speculation to ethical praxis. His turn to Buddhism was not antiquarian revivalism but a deliberate epistemic reorientation, where wisdom (pragya), compassion (karuṇā), and equality (samata) furnished a grammar for emancipatory thought.

In this, Ambedkar anticipated later debates in critical theory, feminist standpoint epistemology, and postcolonial philosophy, insisting that truth cannot be divorced from the standpoint of the marginalized. His disagreements with contemporaries such as Gandhi revealed an uncompromising refusal to accommodate epistemologies tethered to caste privilege. For Ambedkar, democratizing knowledge was inseparable from dismantling structural inequities; the pursuit of truth was bound to the pursuit of justice. Thus, his intellectual legacy endures not merely as a Dalit critique but as a universal call to reimagine knowledge itself as a shared, ethical, and liberatory enterprise.

### Conclusion: Knowledge as Liberation

Ambedkar’s intellectual odyssey with the Bharatiya Jñān Paramparā was neither an uncritical rejection nor a passive assimilation, but a radical hermeneutic of liberation. By dismantling the “machinery of

mental enslavement” (39) embedded in caste-bound epistemologies, he replaced scriptural infallibility with empirical reasoning and priestly monopoly with democratic accessibility. His assertion that “cultivation of mind should be the ultimate aim of human existence” (40) reframed learning from an exclusive Brahminical privilege into a universal human right. Equally, his incisive declaration that ‘caste is not a division of labour, it is a division of labourers’ exposed the structural anatomy of knowledge as a mechanism of exclusion.

Drawing on Buddhist *prajñā* (wisdom), *karuṇā* (compassion), and *samatā* (equality), Ambedkar forged an indigenous yet revolutionary counter-tradition that redefined *jñān* as an instrument of emancipation rather than domination. This epistemic disobedience did not merely critique the hegemonic canon; it inaugurated a new sovereignty of knowledge grounded in justice, lived experience, and ethical responsibility. In doing so, Ambedkar inscribed himself indelibly into the intellectual history of resistance—offering a luminous blueprint for an egalitarian order in which the democratization of truth remains inseparable from the liberation of the oppressed.

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