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Counter-Discourses of Religion in India: From Ashoka's Dhamma and Bhakti Praxis to Ambedkar's Navayana

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Abstract

This paper offers a historical and philosophical analysis of the discourse of religion and power in Indian history, as well as of the traditions of resistance that emerged against it. It argues that the devotional practices of Kabir, Ravidas, and Mirabai were not merely expressions of spiritual inwardness or mystical transcendence; rather, they were deeply embedded in social, cultural, and gendered struggles over dignity, identity, and emancipation. Their Bhakti functioned as a form of **praxis**, that is, a unity of theory and action, through which they challenged Brahmanical *varna*-based religious privilege and envisioned an alternative ethical and universal conception of religion.

By bringing together the theoretical insights of Karl Marx, Antonio Gramsci, Michel Foucault, Jean-François Lyotard, Judith Butler, and Kimberlé Crenshaw with Dr.B.R.Ambedkar's indigenous epistemological framework, this paper demonstrates that the discourse of equality in India is not derivative of Western liberal modernity. Rather, it possesses a long and autonomous intellectual genealogy within Indian history itself. Ambedkar is presented as a thinker who not only deconstructed Brahmanical meta-narratives but also reconstructed a new universal and emancipatory ethical order through constitutionalism and Navayana Buddhism. In addition, the paper highlights the feminist implications of Mirabai's performative defiance and Ambedkar's structural critique of caste and patriarchy. It concludes that Ashoka's *Dhamma*, medieval Bhakti traditions, and Ambedkar's *Navayana* together constitute a continuous and radical lineage of universal religion against hierarchy, exclusion, and domination.[1]

Key words: Ashoka's Dhamma, Bhakti Praxis, Anti-CasteThought, Universal Religion,Navayana Buddhism, Brahmanical Hegemony, Counter-Discourse, Social Justice, Constitutional Morality.

Introduction

Religion in Indian history has never been merely a private or spiritual category. It has also functioned as a powerful site of authority, social classification, and ideological regulation. It has shaped social structures, produced identities, and legitimized forms of power. This paper argues that the Bhakti traditions associated with Kabir, Ravidas, and Mirabai must not be reduced to emotional religiosity or devotional interiority. Rather, these traditions embodied a profound resistance to Brahmanical *varna*-ashrama order and articulated an alternative vision of universal religion grounded in equality and lived ethical experience.

The roots of this counter-tradition can be traced back to Ashoka's notion of *Dhamma*, and its most systematic modern articulation emerges in Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's theory and practice of Navayana Buddhism. In this long

[1] Ambedkar, B. R. *Annihilation of Caste* (1936), Section 4. In *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches* (BAWS), Vol. 1.

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historical arc, Bhakti becomes not merely a devotional mode but a social and philosophical praxis against caste, exclusion, and ritual hierarchy.[2]

Theoretical Framework: Western Theory and Ambedkarite Indigenous Social Thought

A recurring tendency in Indian social theory has been to read Indian realities solely through European categories. This paper resists such Eurocentric mapping. It does not reject Marx, Gramsci, or Foucault, but it insists that Dr. B. R. Ambedkar developed an independent and indigenous theoretical framework that often anticipated, paralleled, and in some respects exceeded these thinkers.

Ambedkar and Marx: Recasting Praxis

Marx famously argued that philosophers had only interpreted the world, whereas the point was to change it.[3]His theory located the economy as the "base" of social order. Ambedkar, however, fundamentally modified this approach in the Indian context. In *Annihilation of Caste*, he showed that religion and caste in India constitute a primary structure of power that regulates material relations rather than merely reflecting them. As he observed, political power is not the only form of power; religion, social status, and property also shape domination.[4] Thus, Ambedkar relocates the terrain of praxis from economic reductionism to the social and ideological structure of caste.

Ambedkar and Gramsci: Hegemony and Intellectual Authority

Antonio Gramsci emphasized that power is sustained not only through coercion but also through intellectual and moral leadership.[5]Ambedkar offered a comparable analysis of Brahmanism when he identified the Brahmin as the ideological leader of Hindu society and exposed the reverence accorded to Brahmins as "gods on earth".[6] In this context, Kabir and Ravidas may be understood as organic intellectuals who challenged Brahmanical hegemony through vernacular and ethical counter-discourses.

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[2] Gramsci, Antonio. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. Edited and translated by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith. New York: International Publishers, 1971, p. 57.

[3] Ambedkar, B. R. *Annihilation of Caste*, Section 18.

[4] Foucault, Michel. *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1980, p. 131.

[5] Ambedkar, B. R. *Annihilation of Caste*, Section 20.

[6] Ambedkar, B. R. *Annihilation of Caste*, Section 5; *Riddles in Hinduism*, BAWS, Vol. 4.

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Ambedkar and Foucault: Discourse, Knowledge, and Social Control: **Michel Foucault showed that truth is historically produced through discourse and that power regulates bodies and subjectivities.[7] Ambedkar had already recognized, in his early writing on caste, that caste is not merely a material barrier but a state of mind. It is an ideological and psychological structure that persists through belief, internalization, and ritual sanction.[8] This insight places Ambedkar very close to what would later be called the nexus of power and knowledge.**

Ambedkar Beyond Modernity and Postmodernity

Ambedkar should not be read only as a social reformer or constitutional thinker. He must also be understood as a major philosophical critic of both oppressive tradition and incomplete modernity.

Deconstruction and Reconstruction

Like postmodern thinkers, Ambedkar undertook the deconstruction of hegemonic meta-narratives. He challenged the idea of a unified Hindu society and exposed it as a fragmented order of graded inequality.[9] Yet unlike Lyotard or Foucault, Ambedkar did not stop with critique. He did not leave society in an interpretive vacuum. Instead, he created a new moral and political architecture through constitutional democracy and Navayana Buddhism.[10]

Transformative Use of State Institutions

Unlike orthodox Marxist suspicion toward the state, Ambedkar recognized that in India civil society itself was deeply structured by caste oppression. Therefore, emancipatory transformation required legal and constitutional intervention from above. He deployed the state, law, and constitutional institutions as instruments of justice and social reconstruction.

From Deconstruction to Reconstruction: The End of Sacred Authority and the Creation of New Norms

Ambedkar's call to destroy the authority of the Shastras was not a call for physical destruction of texts but for the end of their sacred legitimacy in social life. Once oppressive texts lose their unquestioned sanctity, society can be reconstructed on alternative ethical foundations. In this sense, Ambedkar's intellectual project worked

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7 Ambedkar, B. R. *States and Minorities* (1947). BAWS, Vol. 1.

8 Ambedkar, B. R. *The Buddha and His Dhamma*. BAWS, Vol. 11.

9 Ibid., Introduction / Book I.

10 *Shrimad Bhagavad Gita*, Chapter 3, Verse 35.

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on two levels. First, the **Constitution of India** functioned as a new normative text for the state. Second, *The Buddha and His Dhamma* functioned as a new ethical and spiritual text for society. These were not merely literary interventions. They were instruments of social transformation.

Indian Conceptions of Religion: Brahmanical Discourse versus Shramanic Counter-Discourse

The Brahmanical conception of religion, as developed through *varna*-ashrama ideology, organized society through hierarchy, exclusion, and inherited privilege. Texts such as the *Bhagavad Gita* legitimized role-bound duty and unequal social order.[11] In Foucauldian terms, this was an exclusionary discourse.In contrast, Buddhist and Jain traditions articulated universal moral principles that were not dependent on birth. The *Dhammapada* rejects the idea that Brahminhood is determined by lineage and instead places ethical conduct at the center of spiritual worth.[12] This marks one of the earliest and clearest counter-discourses to Brahmanical monopoly over truth.

Ashoka's Dhamma as Political Universalism

Ashoka's *Dhamma* emerged from this wider Shramanic ethical background. It was not merely a personal creed but a political and social doctrine aimed at sustaining coexistence, moral discipline, and welfare across a vast empire. Romila Thapar has shown that Ashoka's *Dhamma* was an instrument of social and political integration rather than sectarian faith.[13]D. D. Kosambi similarly suggests that this ethical shift responded to changing social and material conditions that required a universalized morality rather than sacrificial ritualism.[14]Thus, Ashoka's project may be seen as one of the earliest political articulations of universal religion in India.**Historical Transformation of Discourse: From Vedic Order to Contemporary "Sanatan" Assertions**

Brahmanical discourse has not remained static. It has historically reinvented itself. In the Vedic period, it relied on exclusion from sacred knowledge. In later periods, it incorporated and subordinated challenges by assimilating rivals, including even the Buddha as an avatar of Vishnu. R. S. Sharma and Suvira Jaiswal have shown how caste ideology adapted itself within changing social and economic contexts.[15] Under colonialism,

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[11] *Dhammapada*, Brahmana Vagga, Chapter 26, Verse 393.

[12] Sharma, R. S. *Indian Feudalism (c. AD 300-1200)*. New Delhi: Macmillan, 1965.

[13] Jaiswal, Suvira. *The Origin and Development of Caste*. Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1981.

[14] Dirks, Nicholas B. *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001.

[15] Habib, Irfan. *Medieval India: The Study of a Civilization*. New Delhi: National Book Trust.

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the category of "Hinduism" itself was systematized and homogenized in ways that elevated upper-caste scriptural traditions as the representative essence of India.[16]

In the present, such processes continue through digital media, ideological production, and revived claims about "Sanatan Dharma." These assertions often mask caste hierarchy behind the language of civilizational authenticity. Against such pseudo-universalism, the ethical universality of Bhakti and Navayana acquires renewed significance.

Bhakti as Praxis: Identity, Resistance, and Universal Religion

The Bhakti movement should be understood as a historical rupture within Brahmanical hegemony. Kabir rejected textual authority and privileged lived experience. His declaration that truth lies in what is seen and lived rather than what is merely written marks a profound challenge to scriptural domination.[17]His Bhakti was therefore epistemological rebellion as much as devotional practice.Ravidas brought untouchable identity into the very center of spiritual discourse. His vision of *Begumpura*, the city without sorrow, is not only mystical but also political. It imagines a casteless, exploitation-free social order. Gail Omvedt rightly interprets this as an anti-caste social vision of radical equality.[18] Mirabai's Bhakti was simultaneously spiritual and gendered dissent. By singing and dancing publicly, by refusing the codes of elite widowhood and domestic patriarchy, she subverted prescribed gender roles. Her devotional body became a site of resistance.[19]

Feminist Epistemology: From Mirabai's Performativity to Ambedkar's Intersectional Insight

Mirabai and Judith Butler: Judith Butler argues that gender is not a natural essence but a performative effect of repeated acts.[20] Mirabai's public devotional acts destabilized the expected performance of aristocratic femininity. In refusing "family honor" and conventional decorum, she transformed Bhakti into embodied feminist resistance.

16 Guru Ravidas, verses included in the *Guru Granth Sahib*.

17 Omvedt, Gail. *Seeking Begumpura: The Social Vision of Anticaste Intellectuals*. New Delhi: Navayana, 2008.

18 Mukta, Parita. *Upholding the Common Life: The Community of Mirabai*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994.

19 Crenshaw, Kimberlé. "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics." *University of Chicago Legal Forum* (1989).

20 Ambedkar, B. R. *Castes in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis and Development* (1916). BAWS, Vol. 1.

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Ambedkar and Kimberlé Crenshaw

Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality emphasizes that women located at multiple axes of oppression experience compounded forms of domination. Ambedkar had already anticipated this insight in his analysis of caste. In *Castes in India*, he showed that caste survives through endogamy and through the regulation of women's sexuality, marriage, widowhood, and reproduction. In other words, caste and patriarchy are inseparable.

Hindu Code Bill and Structural Praxis

Where Mirabai's resistance was symbolic and existential, Ambedkar's was legislative and structural. Through the Hindu Code Bill, he sought to undermine patriarchal family structures by extending rights to women in matters of property, marriage, and divorce. This was not a secondary issue in his thought. It was central to his democratic and anti-caste vision.

Ambedkar's Navayana: The Logical Fulfilment of Universal Religion: The universal ethical religion that begins with Ashoka's *Dhamma* and survives through Bhakti counter-traditions receives its most mature formulation in Ambedkar's Navayana Buddhism.

In *Annihilation of Caste*, Ambedkar identifies the Shastras as the source of caste authority and insists that their normative power must be destroyed. In *Buddha or Karl Marx*, he recognizes the need for social transformation but rejects violent revolution in favor of ethical and rational emancipation. Navayana thus emerges as a new universal religion grounded in liberty, equality, and fraternity. It is not a return to tradition, nor merely a religious conversion. It is a reconstruction of religion itself as an ethical, democratic, and socially transformative force.

Contemporary Relevance in the Present Political Scenario

This paper is strikingly relevant to the contemporary political climate. Present-day India is marked by intense struggles over nationalism, caste, religious identity, constitutional morality, and the meaning of social justice. In this context, the paper offers several critical interventions.

First, it demonstrates that equality, anti-caste critique, and ethical universalism are not alien imports but deeply rooted currents within Indian intellectual history. This is crucial in an era when emancipatory values are often dismissed as Western or anti-traditional.

Second, the paper helps distinguish between **religion as ethical universality** and **religion as hegemonic exclusion**. This distinction is urgently needed today, when public discourse often conflates spirituality with majoritarian nationalism.

Third, the paper restores Ambedkar to his full stature. He was not merely a constitutional draftsman or a Dalit leader in a narrow sense. He was a profound theorist of religion, society, democracy, and moral reconstruction.

Fourth, the paper is directly relevant to debates on caste discrimination, women's rights, representation, and social justice. Ambedkar's thought remains indispensable because he saw that democracy without social equality is only a formal shell.

Finally, the paper challenges contemporary attempts to homogenize Indian tradition under the label of "Sanatan." It reminds us that Indian history contains powerful anti-hierarchical traditions, and that the democratic future of India depends not on reviving sacred hierarchy but on deepening constitutional morality, fraternity, and justice.

Conclusion

This paper establishes that the discourse of equality and identity in Indian history is not imported but indigenous, continuous, and intellectually rich. Kabir, Ravidas, and Mirabai were not merely saints of devotion; they were critics of domination, creators of counter-discourses, and embodiments of alternative moral worlds. Through them, Bhakti became a social praxis of dignity and resistance.

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar brought this tradition to its most rigorous philosophical and institutional form. He challenged sacred authority, exposed caste as a system of social power, linked caste to patriarchy, and offered both constitutionalism and Navayana as foundations for a just society. The continuity between Ashoka's *Dhamma*, Bhakti praxis, and Ambedkar's *Navayana* reveals an enduring Indian tradition of universal religion rooted in humanity rather than hierarchy.

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