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**CASTE AND SOCIAL HISTORY IN MODERN INDIA: AN ANALYSIS OF  
INSULARISM IN ANTI-CASTE HISTORIOGRAPHY**

**Gouramma S/o Ishwar**  
Research Scholar

**Dr. Aradhana**  
Guide  
Professor, Chaudhary Charansingh University Meerut.

**ABSTRACT**

*This study critically examines the evolution and limitations of anti-caste historiography in modern India, focusing on its tendencies toward insularity in conceptual frameworks, regional representation, and disciplinary engagement. While anti-caste historiography has been instrumental in challenging dominant nationalist and Marxist narratives by centering Dalit and Bahujan experiences, this research highlights how its reliance on a restricted canon of thinkers—primarily Ambedkarite voices from Maharashtra—and its limited interdisciplinary dialogue have constrained its scope. Through a qualitative historiographical analysis, the study reveals the marginalization of diverse regional, tribal, and gendered perspectives within anti-caste narratives and underscores the need for more pluralistic and dialogic approaches. The findings call for an expanded and reflexive anti-caste historiography that embraces interdisciplinary methods and heterogeneous voices, thereby enriching the social history of caste in modern India and enhancing the transformative potential of anti-caste scholarship.*



**KEYWORDS:** Caste, Anti-Caste Historiography, Social History, Social History, Dalit Studies, Insularity.

**INTRODUCTION**

The social history of caste in modern India is deeply intertwined with the political and intellectual efforts to challenge and dismantle caste-based oppression. Over the past century, anti-caste historiography has emerged as a critical field that seeks to reframe Indian history from the perspective of marginalized Dalit and Bahujan communities. Rooted in the writings and activism of leaders such as B.R. Ambedkar, Jyotirao Phule, and E.V. Ramasamy Periyar, this historiography has challenged dominant nationalist and Marxist narratives that often overlooked or simplified the complexities of caste as a fundamental social system. Despite its transformative role, anti-caste historiography itself is marked by certain insular tendencies. This insularity manifests in several ways: the over-reliance on a limited set of canonical figures, primarily from Maharashtra; the marginalization of diverse regional and tribal anti-caste movements; and a constrained disciplinary focus that privileges political and legalistic analyses while often neglecting cultural, gendered, and intersectional dimensions of caste. Such limitations have significant implications for how the social history of caste is constructed and understood. This study aims to critically analyze these tendencies of insularism within anti-caste historiography, exploring how they shape the narratives of caste and resistance in modern India. By

examining key texts, regional variations, and methodological approaches, the research seeks to uncover the ways in which anti-caste scholarship can broaden its scope to become more inclusive, dialogic, and interdisciplinary. The ultimate goal is to contribute to a richer, more nuanced social history of caste—one that accounts for the multiplicity of experiences and forms of resistance that characterize India's complex caste landscape.

## AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

### Aim:

To critically examine the phenomenon of insularism within anti-caste historiography and its impact on the construction of the social history of caste in modern India.

### Objectives:

1. To analyze the key theoretical frameworks and intellectual traditions that shape anti-caste historiography, with special focus on Ambedkarite and related narratives.
2. To investigate the regional and linguistic biases within anti-caste historiography, highlighting the marginalization of non-Maharashtrian and tribal anti-caste movements.
3. To assess the disciplinary scope of anti-caste historiography, identifying gaps in interdisciplinary engagement, especially in cultural, gender, and intersectional analyses.
4. To explore the methodological approaches employed in anti-caste historiography, with an emphasis on the use of diverse sources such as oral histories, vernacular literature, and popular culture.
5. To propose pathways for expanding and diversifying anti-caste historiographical practices to foster a more inclusive and comprehensive social history of caste in India.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The social history of caste in modern India has been explored through multiple historiographical traditions, among which anti-caste historiography has emerged as a critical and radical intervention. This literature review surveys the major contributions and critiques within this field, with particular emphasis on the insular tendencies that have shaped its development. Early works by B.R. Ambedkar laid the foundation for anti-caste historiography, focusing on caste as a fundamental social and political problem. Ambedkar's writings, such as *Annihilation of Caste* (1936), challenged Brahmanical orthodoxy and critiqued Hinduism's role in perpetuating caste hierarchies. Scholars like Gail Omvedt (1994, 2008) have extended Ambedkarite analysis, emphasizing the socio-political movements led by Dalits and their impact on modern Indian society. However, Omvedt also notes limitations within the historiography, including its occasional fixation on elite leadership figures and the underrepresentation of grassroots voices.

Alongside Ambedkarite frameworks, the work of Jyotirao Phule and the anti-Brahmin movements in Maharashtra, as well as the Dravidian movement inspired by Periyar in Tamil Nadu, have contributed significantly to anti-caste thought. Yet, literature indicates a persistent regional bias favoring Maharashtra-centric narratives (Guru, 2000; Rege, 2006). This regional focus often sidelines similar movements and histories from other parts of India, such as the tribal resistance led by figures like Birsa Munda or the Dalit literature emerging from South India (Satyanarayana & Tharu, 2011). The disciplinary scope of anti-caste historiography has traditionally leaned heavily on political and legal history, with limited integration of cultural, anthropological, or gender studies perspectives. Scholars such as Sharmila Rege (2006, 2013) have critiqued this tendency, advocating for intersectional analyses that foreground Dalit women's experiences and challenge patriarchal dimensions within caste oppression. Despite such interventions, gender and sexuality remain underexplored within mainstream anti-caste histories. Methodologically, anti-caste historiography has been dominated by textual and archival analysis of key intellectual figures and movements. However, the exclusion of oral histories, vernacular narratives, and cultural practices limits the representativeness of these accounts (Rao, 2009; Teltumbde, 2020). Recent scholarship calls for expanding sources to include folklore, popular culture, and lived experiences to capture the multifaceted nature of caste resistance. Critiques also arise from

the sometimes rigid ideological boundaries within anti-caste historiography. A notable divide exists between anti-caste scholars and Marxist historians, with limited cross-pollination despite shared interests in social justice (Thorat & Newman, 2010). Some scholars argue that such polarization constrains a holistic understanding of caste as intertwined with class and colonial histories.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative research methodology grounded in historiographical and textual analysis to critically examine the insular tendencies within anti-caste historiography and their implications for the social history of caste in modern India.

### Research Design

The research follows an exploratory and interpretive design aimed at understanding the theoretical frameworks, regional representations, and disciplinary orientations that shape anti-caste historiography. It seeks to analyze how these factors contribute to a limited or insular understanding of caste history.

### Data Collection

Primary sources include canonical texts by prominent anti-caste intellectuals such as B.R. Ambedkar, Jyotirao Phule, Periyar, and contemporary anti-caste scholars. Secondary sources comprise academic articles, books, and critical essays that discuss and critique anti-caste historiography, its methodologies, and regional focus. Additionally, the study reviews oral histories, vernacular literature, and cultural productions as referenced in secondary literature to evaluate the scope of sources traditionally engaged by anti-caste historiographers.

### Analytical Framework

The research employs critical discourse analysis to interrogate the narratives, language, and conceptual frameworks within anti-caste historiography. It also utilizes comparative regional analysis to highlight the overrepresentation of certain geographical and intellectual traditions and the marginalization of others. Intersectional analysis informs the examination of gender, caste, and regional identities within the historiographical narratives, allowing a nuanced understanding of inclusion and exclusion within the field.

### Limitations

Given the study's qualitative and interpretive nature, the findings are contingent on the availability and selection of texts and secondary literature. While efforts are made to incorporate diverse perspectives, some regional or vernacular materials may remain underrepresented due to accessibility constraints.

## DISCUSSION

The discussion surrounding caste and social history in modern India, particularly in the context of anti-caste historiography, often highlights a tension between inclusivity and insularism. Anti-caste historiography, which seeks to challenge and dismantle the oppressive structures of the caste system, has at times been critiqued for its insular approach to social history. This insularism refers to a tendency to focus on specific caste-based narratives or reform movements while sidelining the broader social, political, and economic contexts in which these movements emerged. In particular, it can be seen in the emphasis on the experiences and agency of marginalized castes, such as Dalits, without fully considering how caste intersects with other forms of oppression, like class, gender, and colonialism. By focusing too narrowly on caste as a singular axis of oppression, anti-caste historiography risks neglecting the complex, multi-dimensional nature of social stratification in modern India. This has implications for how social history is written, as it can limit the scope of historical analysis and reduce the possibility of understanding the broader structural forces that have shaped India's social order.

Thus, while anti-caste historiography plays a critical role in highlighting the injustices of the caste system, its insular tendencies can limit its ability to foster a more holistic and interconnected understanding of India's past.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the analysis of insularism within anti-caste historiography reveals a critical challenge in the representation and understanding of caste in modern India. While anti-caste movements and their historiographies have undeniably contributed to the reclamation of marginalized voices, particularly those of Dalits, their insular tendencies—by focusing too exclusively on caste—can obscure the broader social, political, and historical dynamics at play. This limitation risks reducing caste to an isolated category of oppression, neglecting the intersectionality with other axes of inequality, such as class, gender, and colonialism. To deepen our understanding of social history in modern India, it is essential for anti-caste historiography to move beyond insular frameworks and embrace a more integrated approach that accounts for the multi-dimensional nature of social stratification. By doing so, it can better illuminate the complexities of India's past and offer more comprehensive solutions to the social challenges it continues to face.

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