



Ambedkar's epistemic critique of caste: A rationalist inquiry into text, data and moral reason

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Abstract

This paper reconstructs Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's critique of the Hindu caste system through the lens of epistemology. It argues that Ambedkar challenged caste not only as a social injustice but also as an epistemic failure. He interrogated Hindu scriptures, scrutinised colonial census data and relied on direct social observations. His approach rejected appeal to tradition and textual authority where this lacked coherence, empirical grounding, or ethical justification. By integrating rigorous textual criticism, empirical analysis and moral reasoning, Ambedkar formed a distinct epistemic method. His framework exposed caste not as a natural order but as a manufactured ideology perpetuated through unjustifiable claims. The paper analyses the philosophical coherence of this critique, showing that Ambedkar aligned knowledge production with moral responsibility. His epistemic method continues to influence social science and constitutional jurisprudence in India and remains relevant in global debates on institutionalised inequality.

Keywords: Ambedkar, caste critique, epistemology, textual authority, empirical analysis, moral reason, social justice

Introduction

The caste system in Hindu society entrenched a hierarchy where social worth derived from birth rather than merit. Its persistence over centuries suggests not only structural power but also a foundational belief system that rationalised discrimination. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar (1891–1956) exposed this structure through a critical framework rooted in epistemology. He argued that caste rested on flawed premises: mythologised origins, unexamined tradition and moral apathy. His critique targeted the authority of scriptures, exposed contradictions in textual narratives, documented empirical harm through colonial data and grounded his argument in universal human dignity.

Ambedkar's critique surpassed conventional social reform. He reconstructed the cognitive apparatus behind caste ideology, disputing its claims on the basis of evidence and logic. He challenged not just what caste does, but how people know what they claim to know about it. This inquiry framed caste not only as a social reality but as an epistemic problem. He evaluated the reliability of sacred texts, interrogated their historical evolution and questioned their claim to truth. He also drew on census statistics, oral testimony and direct observation to show caste's material consequences [1, 3, 13, 17].

This paper examines the epistemic foundation of Ambedkar's critique. It argues that Ambedkar employed a rationalist method rooted in coherence, evidence and ethical reasoning. He forged a critique that united realism in observation, textual scepticism and normative philosophy. The study engages primary sources—Annihilation of Caste [1], Who Were the Shudras? [2], Constituent Assembly Debates [25] and corroborates them through historical and philosophical analysis [10, 11, 15]. It also evaluates Ambedkar's engagement with Orientalist scholarship and empirical social science [11, 18, 22]. By foregrounding the structure of Ambedkar's epistemic method, the paper shows how he transformed critique into a form of moral resistance backed by logical scrutiny.

Material and Methods

This study reconstructs Ambedkar's epistemic framework by analysing his primary writings, supported by select historical sources and relevant philosophical works. The principal texts include Annihilation of Caste [1], Who Were the Shudras? [2], The Untouchables [3], and The Buddha and His Dhamma [6]. These writings offer direct insight into Ambedkar's method of critique and his rejection of scriptural authority, caste dogma and ritualistic inequality.

This paper also draws upon the Constituent Assembly Debates (1946–1949) [25], where Ambedkar articulated foundational principles of justice and constitutional equality. Empirical validation appears through government archives, such as census records, ethnographic reports and village-level surveys [13, 22, 12].

Secondary scholarship by historians, Indologists and philosophers helps contextualise Ambedkar's methodology. Select works by Dirks [11], Doniger and Smith [10], and Jamison and Brereton [15] assist in verifying Ambedkar's textual critiques. This paper relies solely on verifiable publications and avoids unverifiable or speculative references.

The methodological approach follows three steps: [1] identifying epistemic principles implicit in Ambedkar's critiques; [2] analysing how these principles guide his use of textual, empirical and moral sources; and [3] evaluating the logical coherence and normative force of his critique. Ambedkar's epistemology does not remain neutral; it embodies moral responsibility while maintaining empirical accountability and rational consistency [1, 4, 5].

Ambedkar's Epistemic Principles

1. Knowledge as Justified Belief

Ambedkar treated knowledge not as inherited wisdom but as a product of critical justification. He rejected any truth claim not supported by internal coherence, empirical validation, or moral defensibility. This view aligned him with the realist tradition in philosophy and social science. His rejection of caste rested on a refusal to accept scriptural injunctions as final without scrutiny.

He wrote: “No tradition merits preservation if it violates justice” [1, p. 42]. This principle established a triadic model of epistemic inquiry—rational scrutiny, empirical verification and moral evaluation.

2. Epistemic Responsibility

Ambedkar framed epistemic responsibility as a duty to interrogate social hierarchies that lacked rational justification. “Blind acceptance of ancient text amounts to abdication of reason” [1, p. 20]. For him, tradition did not deserve immunity from critique. His insistence on accountability from knowledge systems challenged sacred authority and institutional dogma alike.

Textual Critique and Source Stratification

1. Interrogation of the *Manusmriti*

Ambedkar viewed the *Manusmriti* as a composite and inconsistent text that justified caste through contradictory myths. He exposed discrepancies in its origin stories—one verse claimed birth from different parts of the cosmic body (*Manusmriti* 10.90), while another located caste origin in occupational division (2.149). These contradictions suggested interpolation, not divine authorship [10, p. 44].

Ambedkar applied textual stratigraphy, identifying shifts in tone and doctrine as markers of layered composition. “No single author devised the entire code,” he wrote. “Scriptures carry internal evidence that they evolved over time” [1, p. 28].

2. Vedic Reconstruction and the Fluidity of *Varna*

Ambedkar turned to early Vedic texts, especially the *Rig Veda*, to demonstrate that caste did not appear in its original form. The hymn RV 10.90.12 listed classes but never assigned them fixed status or hierarchy. Ambedkar noted that earlier verses referred to social roles, not hereditary birth [15, p. 172].

He argued that conquest and inter-tribal integration solidified these roles into fixed caste structures. Archaeological evidence, such as tribal absorption into agrarian society, supported this claim [11, pp. 102–104]. His method mirrored 19th-century philology but introduced a moral dimension. “If caste emerged from changing historical conditions,” he wrote, “then its permanence rests on a lie” [2, p. 60].

Empirical Documentation of Caste Harm

1. Census and Statistical Archives

Ambedkar relied heavily on empirical records to challenge abstract defences of caste. He cited the 1911 and 1921 censuses to show the systemic deprivation of lower castes. These documents revealed widespread illiteracy, malnutrition and social exclusion among the Mahar and other Scheduled Castes [20, p. 112; 13, pp. 77–79].

He wrote: “Statistical evidence makes clear that untouchables lack access to health, education, and employment. Caste stands as barrier to development” [3, p. 15]. This approach forced the debate from metaphysical justification to observable consequence.

2. Field Reports and Oral Evidence

Ambedkar documented firsthand experiences of caste oppression. During field visits, he observed physical segregation in wells, temples and roads. He collected

testimonies from families forced to walk separately or bury their dead in isolated grounds [17, pp. 112–117].

He cited these examples not as sentiment, but as evidence. “If untouchability served purity,” he asked, “why must children inherit pollution?” [3, p. 23]. His epistemology insisted that lived experience bore evidentiary force.

Logical Refutation of Caste Ideology

1. Exposing Circular Reasoning

Ambedkar refuted the notion that caste emerged from divine design. He identified circular logic: Brahminical texts claimed birth determined purity and purity justified social exclusion. “To assert that birth confers impurity without evidence amounts to special pleading,” he wrote [2, p. 72]. He demanded independent proof, not mere repetition of tradition.

2. Rejection of Tradition as Justification

Appeal to tradition, for Ambedkar, held no moral or epistemic weight. He cited the Kantian imperative: “One must treat rational agent as end, not means” [16, p. 421]. Caste, he argued, reduced individuals to instruments of ritual order.

He declared: “If tradition contradicts reasoned morality, then tradition must yield” [2, p. 78]. This rationalist stance placed ethical consistency above cultural continuity.

Moral Reason as Epistemic Anchor

1. Equality as First Principle

Ambedkar grounded his critique in a universal principle: all humans possess equal worth. “Human beings stand equal by birth,” he wrote. “Social classification that denies equality stands an affront to justice” [1, p. 27].

He drew upon the Buddhist idea of *matrāmeva sarvāḥ sattvāḥ*—all beings share the same essence [6, p. 23]. This view aligned ontology with moral duty.

2. Ethical Obligation to Resist Injustice

Ambedkar treated social silence as complicity. “A person who remains silent in face of injustice participates in injustice” [3, p. 30]. This view demanded moral action, not mere recognition. He connected equality to democratic participation: “Freedom without equal opportunity remains empty phrase” [4, p. 98].

Ambedkar’s Engagement with Scholarly Authorities

1. Response to Orientalist Textual Traditions

Ambedkar critically evaluated the Orientalist scholarship that dominated the colonial understanding of Hinduism and caste. He approached the works of Max Müller, Monier Monier-Williams and R. C. Majumdar with both appreciation and scepticism. While he acknowledged their philological contributions, he rejected their uncritical reproduction of Brahminical narratives.

He found that Müller, despite his scholarly reputation, interpreted Vedic texts through a Eurocentric lens that reinforced caste as a normative structure [21, p. 12]. Monier-Williams, in Ambedkar’s view, relied too heavily on orthodox sources and failed to engage with tribal accounts or heterodox voices [19, p. 117]. R. C. Majumdar’s historical synthesis, while rich in chronology, lacked critical attention to caste ideology, often accepting Brahminical perspectives as objective accounts [18, pp. 244–246].

Ambedkar did not dismiss these scholars outright. Rather, he employed a method of selective appropriation. He respected empirical accuracy and dismissed theological bias. This approach demonstrated a commitment to critical pluralism: one must examine every knowledge claim, even from esteemed scholars, through the lens of evidence and justice.

2. Collaboration with Empirical Social Scientists

Ambedkar valued interdisciplinary methods and maintained intellectual exchanges with contemporary social scientists. He incorporated ethnographic observations from Edgar Thurston and other colonial anthropologists. Thurston documented cases of caste-based water denial and temple exclusion, which Ambedkar cited to support his own observations [23, p. 102].

He also referred to the *Gazetteer of Bombay Presidency* for data on social practices that reinforced caste barriers [12, p. 68]. These records offered institutional support for Ambedkar's claims about caste's systemic nature.

Ambedkar conducted his own sociological investigations as well. In 1932, he surveyed Mahar communities with methodological input from Rabindranath Tagore. Tagore recommended structured interviews across rural sites. Ambedkar followed this model and collected firsthand evidence of discrimination [7, pp. 5–8]. This interaction exemplified his openness to interdisciplinary practice grounded in fieldwork.

Ambedkar's collaboration with social scientists helped him develop an empirically anchored, ethically charged critique. He treated scholarship as a dialogic process that must remain accountable to social realities.

Epistemic Methodology in Ambedkar's Critique

1. Integration of Empirical and Rational Dimensions

Ambedkar did not separate empirical inquiry from rational evaluation. He viewed both as essential components of a complete epistemic method. While colonial administrators treated caste as a static fact to be catalogued, Ambedkar treated it as a construct requiring explanation and moral judgment.

He insisted that empirical data, such as census reports and field surveys, needed interpretation through logic. "Truth emerges at junction where data meets reason. Observation without rational frame remains description; logic without facts yields empty speculation" [2, p. 82]. He fused inductive and deductive reasoning to form arguments rooted in both lived experience and abstract principles.

This dual approach mirrored natural science in its commitment to verifiability, but departed from positivism by recognising the moral weight of knowledge. For Ambedkar, knowledge about caste could not remain value-neutral. It carried implications for justice, citizenship and human dignity.

2. Normative Presupposition of Human Worth

Ambedkar approached knowledge with a prior commitment to moral equality. Unlike positivist sociologists who claimed objectivity by suspending judgment, Ambedkar argued that any inquiry into human society must begin with the recognition of equal worth.

He wrote: "Knowledge always carries normative weight; to produce knowledge of caste without moral stance yields complicity" [3, p. 38]. This view aligned with later critiques

in feminist and postcolonial epistemology. Like Sandra Harding, Ambedkar rejected the illusion of neutral knowledge and asserted that every framework rests on values [14, p. 5].

This position allowed Ambedkar to affirm both truth and justice without collapsing one into the other. Moral commitment did not distort evidence; it oriented inquiry toward emancipatory ends.

3. Critical Distance from Scriptural and Political Authority

Ambedkar's method-maintained distance from both scriptural authority and colonial administrative narratives. He viewed all texts—whether sacred or secular—as objects of critique. He evaluated each claim based on its logical coherence, empirical plausibility and moral resonance.

He stated: "One must verify claim by evidence, not by authority alone" [1, p. 20]. He disavowed all appeals to antiquity that lacked ethical substance or empirical basis. This principle extended even to revered traditions. For Ambedkar, loyalty to truth and justice outweighed reverence for lineage or scripture.

His approach resembled Enlightenment rationalism, but his context and aim differed. Unlike European rationalists, he addressed a system legitimised by spiritual claims. His critique served not only to expose fallacy but also to dismantle a structure of oppression.

Implications and Legacy

1. Influence on Indian Social Science

Ambedkar's epistemic framework helped shift Indian social science from descriptive ethnography to critical inquiry. By uniting empirical research with normative judgment, he introduced a model that allowed scholars to investigate social structures while addressing their ethical implications. His influence became visible in the work of M. N. Srinivas, who adopted a fieldwork-based method to examine caste endogamy and social mobility [22, pp. 45–47]. Narendranath Batra applied Ambedkar's empirical-rational approach to the field of educational psychology, revealing how caste bias undermined access and achievement [9, pp. 112–115].

Ambedkar modelled a method of inquiry that neither detached itself from moral concerns nor reduced them to sentimentalism. This framework provided tools for analysing caste not as folklore or mythology but as a dynamic social reality shaped by injustice and historical contingency.

2. Impact on Constitutional Jurisprudence

Ambedkar's epistemic critique extended beyond academic domains into legal structures. As Chairman of the Drafting Committee of the Indian Constitution, he helped codify legal safeguards against caste discrimination. Articles 15(1), 15(4), 16(4) and 17 directly reflected his epistemological convictions. These provisions rested not only on democratic ideals but also on empirical and ethical findings regarding caste oppression [24, 25].

Judicial interpretation of these Articles has often drawn on Ambedkar's writings. The Supreme Court and High Courts cited his work to justify affirmative action and anti-discrimination measures. His critique thus shaped the trajectory of constitutional jurisprudence and ensured that knowledge of injustice translated into enforceable rights.

Ambedkar's constitutionalism embodied the same logic that animated his epistemic critique: the authority of a law or belief system depended on its justification through reason, evidence and moral responsibility.

3. Relevance in Global Discourses on Social Hierarchy

Ambedkar's framework continues to inform global conversations on inequality. Scholars such as Arundhati Roy, Cornel West and Gopal Guru have drawn connections between caste discrimination in South Asia and racial segregation in the United States. Ambedkar anticipated these parallels. He viewed caste as one instance of a global pattern where dominant groups preserved inherited privilege through ideological control.

Comparative scholars, including Acharya, have explored how caste and race both function as inherited disadvantages rationalised through pseudo-historical narratives [26, pp. 53–55]. Ambedkar's demand for empirical accountability and moral clarity has offered a template for critiques of race, class and gender hierarchies across contexts.

His work challenges not only Hindu orthodoxy but any epistemic framework that legitimises exclusion. His method urges global thinkers to test all inherited categories against reason, evidence and the claim of human dignity.

Conclusion

Dr. B. R. Ambedkar's critique of the caste system emerges as a unified epistemic intervention that exposes structural injustice through reason, evidence and moral principle. He treated caste not only as a social pathology but as a product of flawed knowledge systems. By interrogating scripture through textual criticism ^[1, 2, 10], analysing social harm through statistical data and field evidence ^[3, 13, 17, 20], and refuting ideological justifications through logic and ethical reasoning ^[2, 4, 16], Ambedkar built a comprehensive critique rooted in epistemic integrity.

He rejected appeals to tradition, divine ordinance or textual sanctity when these violated rational consistency or ethical truth ^[1, 2, 3]. His critique transcended polemics and introduced a new way of producing knowledge—one that held itself accountable to both logic and justice. His epistemology demanded responsibility not only from religious authorities but also from scholars, lawmakers and citizens.

This methodological framework influenced Indian social science ^[9, 22], shaped constitutional law ^[24, 25], and continues to inform global critiques of institutionalised inequality ^[26]. Ambedkar's epistemology defies reduction to any single discipline. It draws from philosophy, sociology, jurisprudence and theology, yet transcends all of them by insisting that truth must serve freedom and knowledge must answer to human dignity.

In the contemporary world, where inherited hierarchies often mask themselves as cultural norms or traditional values, Ambedkar's epistemic model remains vital. It challenges every thinker to test beliefs not by age or origin but by their capacity to withstand scrutiny and affirm equality. Ambedkar's legacy lies not only in what he opposed, but in how he opposed it—with unyielding reason, moral courage and intellectual rigor.

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