

RECLAIMING HISTORY: THE ANTI-CASTE NARRATIVE AND DEMARGINALIZATION OF DALITS IN INDIA

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Cite This Article: Dr. Neeraj Kumar, "Reclaiming History: The Anti-Caste Narrative and Demarginalization of Dalits in India", *International Journal of Current Research and Modern Education*, Volume 9, Issue 2, July - December, Page Number 48-50, 2024.

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Abstract:

This paper examines the significance of anti-caste history writing, with a focus on preserving and documenting the experiences of Dalits in India. Through primary and secondary sources—including Dalit autobiographies, monuments, oral histories, newspapers, and folklore—the study analyzes the mechanisms employed to assert and preserve this marginalized history. Conducted in Uttar Pradesh, the research explores the roles of literature, cultural programs, and empirical data in constructing Dalit identity. Special emphasis is placed on the installation of Ambedkar's statues and the political symbolism they embody. Additionally, this study critically engages with Dalit literature, particularly autobiographies and pamphlets, as tools for social and cultural resistance. The findings suggest that Dalit narratives not only provide an alternative historiography but also confront dominant caste-based power structures. The paper concludes by arguing for the continued importance of these sources in understanding Dalit struggles and achievements.

Introduction:

The history of caste in India has long been dominated by the upper castes, leaving the experiences and contributions of Dalits marginalized and overlooked. Anti-caste history, as a counter-narrative, provides a means to document and preserve the voices of those who have historically been excluded from mainstream historiography. This paper seeks to explore how anti-caste history, primarily that of Dalits, is constructed, preserved, and asserted through various forms such as literature, monuments, oral traditions, and cultural practices. The study focuses on a state that has witnessed significant Dalit political mobilization, particularly under the leadership of figures like Dr. B.R. Ambedkar.¹ This research is based on both primary and secondary sources, including Dalit autobiographies, monuments, oral histories, and folklore. It is also informed by fieldwork conducted in Uttar Pradesh, with a particular focus on the ways in which Dalit history is institutionalized and memorialized through statues, parks, and other public symbols. These monuments and cultural artifacts not only commemorate the contributions of Dalit leaders but also serve as a means of asserting Dalit identity in the public sphere.²

The section examines the assertion and institutionalization of anti-caste history through physical monuments and public policies. The second section focuses on the role of Dalit literature, particularly autobiographies and journals, in documenting Dalit experiences.³ The third section explores how folklore and cultural programs contribute to the articulation of Dalit history. The fourth section presents empirical data from Uttar Pradesh, highlighting how oral history methods capture the motivations and perspectives of Dalit participants in social movements.⁴

Anti-caste history writing has evolved significantly over time. Prior to the emergence of Dalit literature, much of Dalit history was conveyed orally, often in the form of folklore and rhetoric. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar was among the first to advocate for the documentation of Dalit experiences as a form of resistance against caste oppression. Ambedkar believed that literature could serve as a powerful tool in the fight against caste-based discrimination. As a result, Dalit writers began to document their lived experiences, which not only revived their empirical world but also provided a means for collective empowerment.⁵

The installation of statues, particularly those of Ambedkar, has become a significant form of Dalit political expression. These statues symbolize the struggle against caste oppression and serve as a public assertion of Dalit identity. The repeated attacks on these statues underscore their political importance, as they challenge the caste-based hegemony that continues to dominate public spaces.⁶ The installation of these statues, especially in states like Uttar Pradesh, represents a radical claim to both public and private spaces by the Dalit community.

Dalit literature, particularly autobiographies, has gained recognition as a potent literary movement that challenges the dominant cultural narratives of Indian society. Dalit writers argue that Indian literature has long been shaped by high-caste perspectives, which often masquerade as universal ideals. Through their writings, Dalit authors offer a counter-narrative that reflects the experiences of marginalized communities.⁷ This literature not only critiques the caste system but also provides a new way of understanding Indian society from a Dalit perspective.

The Adi Hindu movement, led by figures like Swami Achuthanand, marked a significant shift in Dalit politics during the early 20th century. This movement rejected Hindu caste hierarchy and sought to establish a separate political and social identity for Dalits.⁸ Achuthanand's writings, which portrayed Dalits as the original inhabitants of India, played a crucial role in mobilizing Dalit communities and challenging the dominance of upper-caste Hindus.⁹

"Anti-Caste History Project and Demarginalisation" delves into the evolving landscape of Dalit historiography in India. It highlights how Dalit scholars and communities, particularly in the Hindi belt, have been reimagining their histories to challenge the traditional Brahmanical historical narratives that have historically marginalized them.¹⁰ The primary focus of the research is the construction of a new historical narrative that serves to demarginalize Dalits by offering them alternative histories that recognize their contributions, dignity, and struggles against caste-based oppression. These narratives are framed through the lens of "counter-socio cultural history" and are designed not only to reclaim the past but also to serve as tools for empowerment, identity formation, and political mobilization.¹¹

The research critically examines the role of Badri Narayan's work in tracing how Dalits are reconstructing their past through folklore, myths, local heroes, and a distinct vernacular language. This process involves reinterpreting key figures like

Jhalkari Bai, Udadevi, and Chuhramal, who are now celebrated as Dalit heroes in popular literature, songs, and local traditions. These figures are woven into a new fabric of historical understanding that resists the Brahmanical framework, which traditionally positioned Dalits at the margins of Indian society.

A key argument is that these new Dalit histories are inherently political. While mainstream historians and Marxist frameworks may focus on economic and social class structures, Dalit history emphasizes cultural and sociopolitical narratives. The research describes how Dalit history, particularly in states like Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, is expressed through raw storytelling, offering an emotional and accessible mode of historical transmission that resonates with the masses. This approach is distinct from academic historiography, which often lacks the visceral immediacy of the Dalit experience.

The political aspect of Dalit historiography is especially significant in the context of movements like the Bahujan Samaj Party, where Dalit history and local myths were used to mobilize political participation. The research discusses how cultural symbols and historical figures became central to the BSP's strategy of broadening its appeal and strengthening Dalit solidarity.¹² Furthermore, the role of autobiography in Dalit literature is explored as a crucial genre through which Dalits assert their lived experiences. Writers like Valmiki emphasize the authenticity of Dalit autobiographies as vehicles for preserving their histories, critiquing the upper-caste hegemony, and motivating future generations. The research draws a contrast between mainstream views that consider Dalit autobiographies as formless or repetitive, and the Dalit perspective that sees them as powerful tools for documenting oppression and resistance.

Overall, the text provides a detailed account of how Dalit communities have engaged in rewriting their histories as a form of social, political, and cultural resistance. By doing so, they are not only reclaiming their place in the historical narrative but also shaping the future of their communities in contemporary India. The research underscores the importance of alternative histories in the broader project of demarginalization and the preservation of Dalit identity in the face of entrenched caste hierarchies.

- **Monuments as Symbols of Assertion:** The installation of statues, parks, and other memorials, particularly of Ambedkar, serves as a public assertion of Dalit identity. These monuments not only commemorate Dalit leaders but also challenge the caste-based power structures that have historically marginalized Dalits. The repeated vandalization of these statues highlights their political significance.
- **Dalit Literature as a Tool for Resistance:** Dalit autobiographies, pamphlets, and literary criticism have become powerful tools for resisting caste oppression. These writings offer an alternative narrative that critiques the dominant cultural representation of Indian society. Dalit literature not only documents the experiences of marginalized communities but also challenges the notion of "art for art's sake," arguing that all literature is shaped by the power structures of society.
- **Cultural Programs and Folklore as Historical Narratives:** Cultural programs, such as Ambedkarite and Buddhist mission songs, have played a significant role in articulating Dalit history. These performances, often rooted in local folklore traditions like Bhojpuri and Birha, provide a means for Dalits to express their political aspirations and challenge caste-based oppression.
- **Oral Histories and Empirical Data:** Fieldwork conducted in Uttar Pradesh reveals that many Dalit participants in social movements view mainstream history as exclusionary. Oral history methods have proven crucial in capturing the motivations behind Dalit participation in these movements. These narratives highlight the importance of preserving anti-caste history, particularly in oral forms, as a means of countering dominant historical narratives.

Conclusion:

The preservation and documentation of anti-caste history are crucial for understanding the struggles and achievements of Dalit communities in India. Through monuments, literature, cultural programs, and oral histories, Dalits have created a rich body of work that challenges the dominant caste-based power structures. These efforts not only assert Dalit identity but also provide a means for collective empowerment. The installation of Ambedkar's statues, the proliferation of Dalit literature, and the continued articulation of Dalit history through folklore and oral narratives underscore the importance of preserving these narratives for future generations.

In conclusion, anti-caste history writing is not just a means of documenting the past but also a powerful tool for social and political resistance. By reclaiming their history, Dalits are challenging the structures that have oppressed them for centuries and asserting their place in both public and private spheres. This study underscores the need for continued efforts to preserve and promote these alternative narratives in the face of ongoing caste-based discrimination.

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