

# Reclaiming "Othered" Epistemologies: Dalit Perspectives in Postcolonial Scholarship

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## Introduction and Context

Postcolonial scholarship and academia have traditionally been preoccupied with the binary opposition between colonisers and colonised (Bhandari 2022; Parry 1987). However, this focus often overlooks the internally (un)masked hierarchies and systems of oppression that persist within postcolonial states. South Asia, and particularly the Indian sub-continent, presents a striking case of such elision omissions when it comes to the pervasive issue of caste(s) and caste system<sup>1</sup> (Dhanda 2015).

The caste system, one of the most entrenched and oldest social hierarchies in the subcontinent - now influencing diaspora communities globally (Jodhka & Shah 2010) (Soundararajan 2022) - continues to shape the region's intellectual and social structures. Despite legal frameworks through the Indian Constitution and social progress achieved over the years, which guarantees rights and affirmative measures for Dalit's<sup>2</sup> (*formerly "untouchables"*) to counter systemic discrimination, caste-based

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<sup>1</sup> Caste systems are a form of social and economic governance that is based on principles and customary rules. It involves the division of people into social groups (castes) where assignments of rights are fixed by birth, often includes an occupation and are hereditary. In simpler terms, caste is where society is divided up into different groups, with those who have more power at the top and those who have little or no power at the bottom. You inherit your caste and it cannot be changed. Even worse are those deemed so inferior as to be out of the system altogether – previously known as outcasts or untouchables. In South Asia caste discrimination is traditionally rooted in the Hindu caste system. Supported by philosophical elements, the caste system constructs the moral, social and legal foundations of Hindu society. Dalits are 'outcastes' or people who fall outside the four-fold caste system consisting of the Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra. Dalits are also referred to as Panchamas or people of the fifth order. DSNUK Staff. n.d. "What Is Caste?" *Dalit Solidarity Network*.

<sup>2</sup> "Dalit" is a term of self-description that literally means "downtrodden" or "beaten down" (Teltumbde 2020). Inspired by civil rights activists in the United States self-identifying as Black, it gained popularity in India in the 1970s (Pawar 2018) to assert the political militancy and radicalism of groups of oppressed people formerly categorized as "untouchable" within the brahmanical (also spelled Brahmanical) Hindu caste system. For centuries, the socioeconomic phenomenon of untouchability has mediated Dalits' knowledge of their physical environment and their ability to survive in ways that mirror Black experiences of ecological discrimination based on race. Prasad, Indulata. 2022.

"Towards Dalit Ecologies." *Environment and Society* 13 (1): 98–120.  
<https://doi.org/10.3167/ares.2022.130107>.

exclusionary practices remain deeply embedded in both social, civil, formal-informal and here for our inquiry also in the “academic/academia”<sup>3</sup> spheres (Pal 2024).

Practices of casteism and caste-based exclusion and differential treatment have been abolished by law but still, shades of it remain in the ingrained attitudes nurtured by the caste system.<sup>4</sup>

The marginalisation of Dalits in India extends far beyond caste discrimination; it encompasses a systemic-institutional exclusion that spans social, economic, political, and psychological realms, creating a complex web of exclusion that reinforces their subjugation (Chandrachud 2022; Guru, 2000) (UN OHCHR Staff 2021). This systemic marginalisation is deeply intertwined with the caste hierarchy, which has perpetuated social stratification and economic deprivation, while simultaneously shaping political and psychological experiences. These stratifications and deprivations stem from casteist tendencies, which are ethnocentric in nature, favouring only the upper-castes, inflicting these discriminations.

Socially, Dalits have been historically relegated to the lowest status within the caste hierarchy, subjected to untouchability and exclusion from public and religious spaces (Guru 2000) - prohibiting Dalits entering temples, drawing water from public wells, or attending schools that served upper-caste groups. Such practices were deeply ingrained in the social fabric, with untouchability, notion of purity-pollution and physical segregation strictly enforced by both religious norms and upper-caste

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<sup>3</sup> In this paper, the terms "academic," "academia," and "academe" are used interchangeably to refer to scholars, scholarly work, academic spaces, institutions, and their legacies. This choice of terminology is intended to reflect the broad and interconnected nature of these concepts within the context of the discussion.

<sup>4</sup> K. R. Narayanan in his Presidential Speech during the Republic Day address of 2001.

community practices This segregation has entrenched a form of social ostracism that extends beyond physical boundaries, permeating into the collective consciousness and interactions within (postcolonial) society. The segregation manifests not only in physical spaces but also in social practices and cultural norms that continue to exclude Dalits from mainstream social engagement and prestige.

This social stratification translated into hereditary occupations deemed ‘polluting,’<sup>5</sup> such as manual scavenging, severely limiting Dalit communities’ access to economic mobility and upward class mobility (Human Rights Watch Staff 2014). The economic exclusion is further entrenched through limited access to land, resources, and capital, ensuring that Dalit communities remain impoverished and reliant on the informal labour market (Mehra 2023). This exclusion is not confined to any specific epoch but is a persistent feature of caste-based discrimination, continuing from historical practices into the present. Despite various legal protections, the systemic denial of economic opportunities to Dalits has perpetuated a cycle of poverty and marginalisation

Politically, the formal inclusion of Dalits through constitutional provisions such as affirmative action has yet to address the underlying power imbalances fully. While reservations in education and employment offer some level of representation, they are frequently undermined by entrenched caste biases and bureaucratic hurdles. For

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<sup>5</sup> See, Spears, Dean, and Amit Thorat. 2019. “The Puzzle of Open Defecation in Rural India: Evidence from a Novel Measure of Caste Attitudes in a Nationally Representative Survey.” *Economic Development and Cultural Change* 67 (4): 725–55. <https://doi.org/10.1086/698852>. The caste system is justified and enacted according to a cultural set of norms and beliefs surrounding ritual purity and pollution. According to Hindu religious belief, the untouchables are considered to be polluting to the other social groups in part because of the occupations carried out by them in the past, and in some cases still today. Characteristically Dalit occupations such as the manual removal of faeces from high-caste homes or the handling of animal corpses are seen to pollute those who undertake them both physically and spiritually.

instance, despite reservations, Dalits constitute only 9.3% of teaching positions in higher education institutions (AISHE 2021-2022). This tokenistic approach to political empowerment often results in Dalits being marginalised within the very institutions designed to support them, leaving them with limited influence over policies that affect their lives. (Md Nurul Momen and Md Abu Shahen 2024; Majumdar, 2022). A prominent example is the continued underrepresentation of Dalit politicians in leadership roles within India's political parties, despite reserved seats in Parliament and local bodies. Dalit representatives are often sidelined from important decision-making processes, with upper-caste political leaders controlling key policy decisions. For instance, although Dalits have been elected in local panchayats (village councils) due to reservations, they frequently face interference from dominant castes who wield de facto power over community decisions (Mosse 2018)

This entrenched marginalisation has fostered a deep internalisation of inferiority psychologically. Dalits have historically been denied access to education, social capital, and intellectual spaces, limiting their ability to define themselves and their reality. This lack of access to the 'phenomenological psyche'—the ability to interpret and construct one's experience through knowledge and intellectual discourse frameworks—has been one of the most potent forms of marginalisation. upper-caste/ brahmin<sup>6</sup> scholars have traditionally appropriated or disregarded Dalit experiences,

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<sup>6</sup> The Brahmin caste is traditionally considered the highest varna in the Indian caste system. They are primarily priests, scholars, and teachers responsible for religious rituals and spiritual guidance. Their elevated status stems from ancient Hindu scriptures, which assigned them the role of preserving and interpreting sacred knowledge and performing religious duties. This position was historically reinforced by religious and societal norms, placing Brahmins at the top of the hierarchical social structure. Brahmins are colloquially called "upper castes" due to their historically privileged position within the Indian caste system - reflecting their elevated status and influence in the social hierarchy and dominance. Also see, Goghari, Vina M, and Mavis Kusi. 2023. "An Introduction to the Basic Elements of the Caste System of India." *Frontiers in Psychology* 14 (14). Here and after the paper uses the terms "upper-castes," "brahmin," and "Savarna" interchangeably to refer to the castes distinct from Dalits. While authoring, the first letters of these terms are intentionally written in

either rendering them invisible or co-opting them into narratives that serve hegemonic interests - Kancha Ilaiah and Braj Ranjan Mani have critiqued how brahmanical interpretations of Indian history and culture have historically excluded or misrepresented Dalit voices. Ilaiah, in *Why I Am Not a Hindu* (1996), discusses how brahmin scholars constructed narratives that either erased the contributions of Dalits or depicted them in stereotypical, dehumanising ways. Similarly, in *Debrahmanising History* (2005), Braj Ranjan Mani exposes how Indian historiography, dominated by upper-caste scholars, has long neglected Dalit perspectives, resulting in their continued marginalisation within academic discourse. The result has been a near-total domination of knowledge systems by upper-caste Savarnas, whose representations of Dalits are steeped in stereotypical imagery, perpetuating further psychological oppression. The appropriation of Dalit experiences by dominant caste scholars, along with the persistent duality of outsider-insider perspectives, has further exacerbated this issue, misrepresenting Dalit realities and reinforcing stereotypes that undermine their agency and autonomy. (Kumar 2007; Thiara and Misrahi-Barak 2017; Khanna 2021)

The interplay of these dimensions of marginalisation reveals how deeply entrenched and interrelated systems of oppression are, creating a cycle of exclusion that is difficult to break. The marginalisation is not a series of isolated issues but a complex, integrated experience that affects every aspect of Dalit life. Lacking access to education and institutional frameworks for generations, Dalit's have been historically denied the opportunity to develop and assert and write their own intellectual

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lowercase, following the framework inspired by bell hooks and Shailja Paik. This approach aims to demystify and decentralise the oppressive hegemonic language that perpetuates the notion of highest caste status, challenging its continued impact on marginalised caste groups, including Dalit, Bahujan, and Adivasi individuals.

frameworks for self-definition and self-representation ultimately also leading to the crisis of thought production and knowledge, and Dalit's being defined by non-Dalits.

While some Dalit scholars have emerged and produced critical theoretical work, they still face systemic marginalisation, with their contributions frequently omitted from academic curricula or deemed less progressive due to entrenched caste biases. This absence of intellectual and psychological autonomy has hindered their ability to challenge the social order effectively, reinforcing a cycle of oppression that remains persistent in postcolonial academe narration. This understanding highlights the urgent need to address these intertwined aspects of exclusion to engage with and genuinely incorporate Dalit scholarly work and authorship into mainstream discourse. Within this context, Dalit epistemologies—forms of knowledge derived from the lived experiences of caste-oppressed communities—have been systematically marginalised. The dominance of upper-caste scholars, especially those from Savarna/Brahmin backgrounds, within the Indian academic system, has reinforced the invisibility of Dalit perspectives.

This intellectual monopoly has significant ramifications for postcolonial academe, but more importantly, it has a direct impact on the lived experiences of Dalit communities. By framing discourses of resistance without acknowledging entrenched caste oppression, academic thought both mirrors and perpetuates the marginalisation of Dalit's. The exclusion of Dalit perspectives in intellectual frameworks results in the erasure of Dalit histories and experiences, reinforcing their social and political subjugation (Bhatia and Priya 2021). The Brahmanical control over academic spaces, highlighting how these scholars reproduce Brahmanical

knowledge structures even within supposedly radical discourses. Despite these efforts, Dalit scholars continue to struggle for recognition and inclusion in terms of their contributions to social and political thought and the legitimacy of their epistemological frameworks.

As a Dalit researcher, my engagement with the marginalisation of Dalit epistemologies is not only an academic pursuit but also deeply rooted in my lived experience within the caste system. This personal connection informs both the critical (auto-ethnographic) lens and the commitment I bring to this subject. My position allows me to bring an insider's perspective to the analysis, offering insights into the complexities and challenges faced by Dalits within postcolonial academia. Through this work, I aim to challenge dominant narratives and create dialogue for a more inclusive and self-reflective scholarly discourse.

Dalit epistemology, while grounded in the lived experience of caste-based discrimination, also offers a critical theoretical framework that challenges both colonialism and the postcolonial state. The intellectual traditions of Dalits contest the foundational assumptions of brahmanical knowledge production, questioning the purported universality of Savarna scholars' perspectives. Despite this intellectual richness, Dalit knowledge continues to be 'othered' within postcolonial academia, often dismissed as purely experiential or subjective, in contrast to the supposedly objective frameworks of dominant epistemologies.

Incorporating Dalit perspectives into postcolonial scholarship is crucial for several reasons. Firstly, it challenges both the brahmanical dominance within Indian



academia and the Eurocentric narratives that marginalise non-western epistemologies globally. While upper-caste narratives have historically shaped Indian academic discourse, Eurocentrism has had a similar effect on a global scale, erasing or marginalising non-western ways of knowing. By integrating Dalit epistemologies, scholarship can more accurately reflect the diversity of global experiences and contest the intellectual monopolies of both brahmanical and Eurocentric knowledge systems. In contrast to Brahmanical knowledge production, which often reifies caste hierarchies by embedding upper-caste values into intellectual discourse, Dalit epistemology, grounded in lived experience, offers a radically different framework. While Brahmanical knowledge production tends to maintain the status quo through its selective representation of caste realities, Dalit epistemology actively challenges these structures by foregrounding the voices of the oppressed and critiquing the very systems that uphold caste dominance. For instance, Brahmanical theories of knowledge often portray caste as a 'divinely ordained' or 'natural' social order, whereas Dalit scholars like B.R. Ambedkar (1936) rejected this and instead framed caste as a system of oppression perpetuated through historical and institutional means. This dialogical contrast between these two epistemologies highlights the radical potential of Dalit thought in disrupting entrenched power structures.

Plural universality, as envisioned in this study, refers to the genuine inclusion of multiple epistemological frameworks, particularly those from historically marginalised groups, into academic discourse. Unlike token inclusion, which often co-opts marginalised voices to symbolically represent diversity without real engagement, plural universality calls for a fundamental rethinking of how knowledge is produced and validated. By integrating Dalit epistemologies into the core of academic inquiry,

plural universality challenges the hegemony of dominant caste and Eurocentric frameworks, ensuring that marginalised perspectives not only 'exist' in academic spaces but actively shape and transform them. This approach moves beyond mere representation and seeks to dismantle the power structures that have traditionally excluded these voices.

## **Literature Review**

Postcolonial scholarship emerged as a vibrant site for interrogating the after-lives of empire. With its critique of colonialism and its aftermath, this scholarship has often been critiqued for its failure to address the entrenched hierarchies within postcolonial societies themselves, especially caste in the Indian context. The critical horizon it celebrates—hybridity, mimicry, ambivalence—floats above ground that remains bruised by a millennia-old social cartography. Canonical postcolonial theorists—including, inter alia, Ranajit Guha, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Homi Bhabha, Gayatri Spivak, Ania Loomba, and Leela Gandhi—have expanded debates on colonial modernity; however, their frameworks seldom elucidate the structuring force of caste, leaving Dalit subalternity muted. This following review demonstrates that while there is a significant critique of Brahmanical dominance in Indian academia, there remains a need for a more robust engagement with Dalit epistemologies. The existing literature highlights the marginalisation of Dalit voices within both postcolonial and mainstream academic discourse but often needs to provide substantive pathways for incorporating these voices into the canon.

Braj Ranjan Mani's *Debrahmanising History: Dominance and Resistance in Indian Society* (2005) offers a pivotal critique of the dominance of Brahmanical intellectual traditions in India. Mani argues that the exclusion of Dalit-Bahujan voices from the academic and historical narratives is a deliberate outcome of the intellectual monopoly held by Brahmin scholars. His critique of the romanticisation of Indian history by upper-caste scholars reveals how Savarna's dominance in academia perpetuates caste hierarchies, even within progressive or nationalist narratives. Mani's work is central to understanding how caste is reproduced within intellectual spaces, where upper-caste scholars dominate historical and sociological accounts of India while simultaneously rendering Dalit perspectives invisible.

Kancha Ilaiah's *Why I Am Not a Hindu: A Sudra Critique of Hindutva Philosophy, Culture and Political Economy* (1996) further this critique by exposing the cultural hegemony of Brahminism in Indian society. Ilaiah's text is an ethnographic exploration of his Dalit-Bahujan identity, which critiques not only Brahmanical Hinduism but also the complicity of the Indian state and its institutions in perpetuating caste hierarchies. His work confronts the Brahmanical capture of academic spaces, where Dalit contributions are either sidelined or tokenised. Ilaiah's work is pivotal to this to our understanding here in this context as it challenges the very foundation of knowledge production within India, arguing that the Brahmanical domination of academia reflects broader structures of caste-based social exclusion.

Within the broader corpus of postcolonial literature, scholars like Ania Loomba (2005) and Leela Gandhi (2006) have engaged with the question of subalternity but often fail to recognise the unique dynamics of caste as a system of oppression that predates

and persists beyond colonialism.<sup>7</sup> While Spivak's foundational text, *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (1988) addresses issues of representation and voice within the colonial matrix of power, its application to the Indian context is often criticised for overlooking the specificity of caste as a mode of subalternity. As critics like Gopal Guru (2002; 2018) have noted, the theoretical apparatus of postcolonial studies, especially in its engagement with subaltern studies, often abstract the notion of subalternity to the detriment of Dalit-specific experiences.

In terms of Dalit epistemology, scholars like Gopal Guru (2002) and Sundar Sarukkai in *The Cracked Mirror* (2018) offer a philosophical engagement with the distinction between the "theoretical brahmin" and the "empirical Dalit". Guru's critique centres on the ways in which Dalit knowledge is delegitimised in academic spaces and often reduced to the experiential or the anecdotal. In contrast, Brahmanical knowledge is seen as universal and theoretical. This epistemological divide, according to Guru, perpetuates caste hierarchies within knowledge production and helps us understand how the academy's insistence on abstract theory marginalises Dalit ways of knowing, which are deeply rooted in lived experience and resistance.

Sarukkai furthers this discussion by questioning the validity of the "universal" in philosophy and theory. He argues that the universalising tendencies of Brahmanical knowledge obscure the particularities of caste oppression. Dalit epistemologies, by contrast, offer a grounded understanding of social structures, one that is attentive to the specificities of caste, gender, and region. Sarukkai's philosophical critique

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<sup>7</sup> Also see, Piermarco Piu. 2023. "The Journey of Subalternity in Gayatri Spivak's Work: Its Sociological Relevance." *The Sociological Review* 71 (6) <https://doi.org/10.1177/00380261231194495>.

highlights the limitations of applying abstract, universal theories to the lived realities of caste oppression, suggesting that Dalit epistemology offers a more grounded and inclusive approach to understanding power and resistance.

Drawing from the broader literature on decolonial thought anti-colonial and anti-race scholars and academics like Robbie Shilliam and Walter Mignolo have foregrounded the importance of epistemic disobedience, arguing for the need to decolonise knowledge production by privileging subaltern epistemologies. Shilliam's (2021) work on global indigeneity, and epistemic violence and Walter Mignolo (2011) both argue that decolonial movements must engage with the epistemological violence perpetrated by western modernity. However, decolonial theory often fails to account for internal structures of oppression within postcolonial societies, particularly caste in South Asia and Brahmanical power structures. This research builds on these critiques by arguing for the centrality of Dalit epistemologies in rethinking postcolonial and decolonial thought.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework underpinning this research draws on Southern theory, Dalit theory, and decolonial thought, offering a critique of dominant intellectual traditions. As articulated by scholars like Raewyn Connell (2007), Southern theory challenges the global north's dominance over academic knowledge production. In the Indian context, Southern theory demands a (re)evaluation of how knowledge is constructed and validated, positioning subaltern perspectives at the heart of this

inquiry. Dalit theory, meanwhile, provides a critical lens through which to interrogate the epistemic violence inherent in both colonial and brahmanical structures of power.

Building from Gopal Guru (2002) and Sundar Sarukkai's (2018) further analysis. In the context of the paper, Dalit theory upholds that it is a vital framework that emphasises the moral right of Dalits to theorise about their own experiences, aiming to prevent their theoretical exploitation. This theory draws its strength from the lived experiences of Dalits, advocating for an authentic and nuanced perspective that fosters epistemic justice.<sup>8</sup> Here, it is utilised to make a case for Debrahmanisation<sup>9</sup> from the anti-caste scholars from marginalised Dalit scholars. It advocates for their representation in terms of authorship and scholarship of work they produced since Dalit communities have been pushed to the margins, and the majority disregarded their lived experiences. The critical scholarship of their work has been deemed unworthy to be read about (Das 2022). As seen recently in, Delhi University removed significant works of Dalit feminist literature, including Bama's *Sangati* and Sukirtharani's *Kaimaaru*, sparking national debates on identity and representation within academia (Imam 2023)

Dalit Theory also recognises the complexity of Dalit discrimination, which occurs at

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<sup>8</sup> Epistemic injustice, as theorised by Miranda Fricker (2007) and expanded by Guru (2002), refers to the systematic devaluation of knowledge produced by marginalised groups, whose lived experiences and intellectual contributions are often dismissed as inferior or non-theoretical

<sup>9</sup> Debrahminisation is not an attack on any particular caste nor a plea for token representation, but a process of increased critical engagement with radical egalitarian anti-caste movements, thoughts and thinkers from different parts of India to expand the curriculum of philosophy, political theory, history, sociology and other disciplines of the social sciences and humanities. It views Brahminism as an evolving hegemonic process in the subcontinent through a period of over two millennia and seeks to study Brahminism in its complexities and simultaneously discover and expand upon subversions, challenges, resistances to this process in the realms of thought, culture, politics and religion. Karthick Ram Manoharan, 'Debrahminizing Decolonization: Imagining a New Curriculum', *All about Ambedkar*, 2020.

the intersections of various societal categories. Dalit theory here emerges as a crucial component of this transformation.<sup>10</sup> This body of thought critically dissects the intersections of caste, power, and politics, dismantling Brahmin-Savarna hegemony and spotlighting the perpetuation of structural inequalities. Through Dalit theory, academia is encouraged to acknowledge and confront oppressive systems while advocating for the empowerment of marginalised communities. Its application will curate a pluralised perspective from their critical visions as they have sustained centuries of oppression from casteism, colonialism, classism and gendered discrimination.

Gopal Guru's (2002) work on the "theoretical brahmin" and the "empirical Shudra (Dalit)" is particularly instructive in understanding the epistemological divide in Indian academia. Guru argues that Brahmanical scholars are positioned as theorists, while Dalits are relegated to the role of empirical subjects whose knowledge is derived solely from their lived experience. This dichotomy reinforces the idea that Dalit knowledge is particular and local, whereas Brahmanical knowledge is universal and theoretical. The privileging of abstract theory over lived experience is not unique to caste discourse but is emblematic of the broader epistemic hierarchies that structure postcolonial scholarship.

Dalit epistemologies, however, challenge these hierarchies by insisting on the validity of experience as a source of knowledge. This challenge is both political and intellectual, as it seeks to disrupt the power structures that underlie the production of

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<sup>10</sup> It should be acknowledged that Dalit theory is a processual empirical development; given the new arena of ever-growing scholarship on Dalit Studies, it stands more on a perspective trajectory made through the work of Dalit scholars.

knowledge in postcolonial societies. Scholars, like W.E.B. Du Bois in the context of race, have sought to theorise their marginality as a source of critical insight, offering alternative frameworks for understanding subalternity. The interplay between caste and race, as theorised by scholars like Du Bois and Guru, highlights the potential for cross-border solidarity in decolonial movements as both Dalit and Black scholars seek to reclaim their intellectual traditions from the margins.

## **Methodology**

This research employs a combination of auto-ethnographic and hermeneutic analysis to explore the intersection of caste, knowledge production, and academic exclusion. This study engages with qualitative insights drawn from personal reflections, scholarly debates, and existing academic literature to critically examine how Dalit epistemologies are marginalised in Indian academia.

Auto-ethnography is utilised as a method to situate my own experiences as a Dalit scholar within the broader academic and intellectual discourses. This approach allows for a reflective analysis of how caste-based exclusion manifests within academic spaces, both personally and structurally. By drawing on my own experiences navigating academic environments as a Dalit scholar, this highlights how upper-caste dominance in intellectual spaces perpetuates exclusion, tokenism, and marginalisation. This auto-ethnographic method provides a unique vantage point from which to critically assess how Dalit scholars are often relegated to the margins of academic discourse despite the importance of their intellectual contributions.



In tandem, this study employs hermeneutic analysis to interpret and understand the broader cultural and intellectual contexts in which Dalit epistemologies are situated. Hermeneutics allows for a deep, interpretative analysis of how caste operates as both a social and intellectual construct in Indian academia. Drawing from Foucault's concept of power/knowledge, I interpret the ways in which upper-caste scholars frame academic discourse to maintain intellectual hegemony. This method enables a critical reading of academic discussions and public intellectual debates to reveal how Dalit contributions are frequently marginalised or dismissed as 'experiential' rather than theoretical.

Finally, the integration of feminist epistemology and standpoint theory, Patricia Hill Collins (1997) further grounds this research in the argument that all knowledge is situated. The experiences and perspectives of Dalit scholars provide a critical lens through which to challenge the intellectual hierarchies upheld by upper-caste scholars. This approach not only challenges the idea of upper-caste knowledge as neutral or universal but also advocates for the inclusion of Dalit epistemologies as essential to achieving epistemic justice in academia.

## **Analysis and Findings**

The interpretive analysis conducted reveals a persistent marginalisation of Dalit epistemologies within both academic and public intellectual spaces. Despite the significant presence and contributions of Dalit scholars and thinkers, their work is frequently relegated to the periphery of postcolonial and decolonial studies, often framed as particular or anecdotal rather than engaging with the more abstract,

universalising theories of upper-caste scholars. This marginalisation is not merely a matter of exclusion but is maintained through institutional and discursive practices that delegitimise Dalit ways of knowing and therefore cornered as minor knowledge.

Drawing on a combination of hermeneutic analysis and reflections based on personal experience as a Dalit scholar, this identifies how upper-caste intellectuals often employ the language of pluralism and inclusivity to obscure the continued marginalisation of Dalit perspectives. In public debates on caste, for example, there is frequently a tokenistic inclusion of Dalit viewpoints, which are subsequently subordinated to the supposedly neutral and objective analyses of upper-caste scholars. This mirrors what Spivak (2010) refers to as “strategic essentialism,” where marginalised voices are included in discourse but only to reinforce the dominant narrative. This tokenism creates the illusion of inclusivity, but it ultimately serves to maintain upper-caste dominance in intellectual spaces.

A significant finding of this research is the role that academic institutions play in perpetuating caste hierarchies within knowledge production. Through interpretive analysis of existing academic literature and institutional structures, it becomes clear that Dalit scholars are often underrepresented on panels, editorial boards, and academic publications. This underrepresentation is not merely accidental but reflects a deeper, structural exclusion reinforced by both formal academic practices and informal cultural norms. This institutional exclusion perpetuates what can be described as epistemic violence, wherein Dalit knowledge is systematically devalued or dismissed as peripheral to the dominant academic frameworks.

The hermeneutic interpretation of these broader patterns points to how upper-caste scholars continue to shape the discourse around caste in ways that exclude Dalit contributions. By controlling access to key platforms of knowledge production, upper-caste academics reinforce a hierarchical order in which their own work is positioned as neutral or universal, while Dalit perspectives are relegated to the margins as particularistic or experiential.

Through this research I critically examine how power structures within academic institutions and public intellectual spaces continue to marginalise Dalit epistemologies. By analysing the broader cultural and intellectual contexts in which these dynamics operate, I argue that the marginalisation of Dalit voices is not just an issue of representation but reflects a deeper systemic failure to engage meaningfully with non-dominant knowledge systems.

### **Problematizing Caste Representation in Postcolonial Academia**

The representation of caste within postcolonial scholarship has long been fraught with contentious issues that reflect broader biases and limitations in the field. Historically, postcolonial academe, with its focus on colonial encounters and resistance, has frequently sidestepped the intricacies of internal hierarchies such as the caste system but now attempts were made to introspect own caste-structure and hierarchies which further estranges the marginalised caste perspective and representation. This oversight is not incidental but reveals the conceptual constraints of postcolonial academe in addressing the specificities of caste and the inability to acknowledge from the position of conceptualisation, thought-knowledge (re)production and epistemic values.

Theorists like Homi Bhabha, known for his concept of “hybridity,” often address the fluidity of identities formed through colonialism (Acheraou 2014) - but such frameworks can inadvertently obscure the entrenched realities of caste. The rigidity of caste hierarchies, unlike the more fluid categories of race or nationality, often remains unchallenged in these theoretical constructs. Thus, postcolonial theory’s focus on cultural exchanges and identity formation can, at times, marginalise the lived experiences of Dalits, whose position in society is marked by deeply institutionalised discrimination. In this context, the caste system operates much like what W.E.B. Du Bois termed the “colour line,” except that the “caste line” runs internally within the nation-state, drawing boundaries that persist despite the collapse of colonial rule (Keenan 2021).

Scholars such as M.S.S. Pandian (1990) have critiqued this blind spot in postcolonial academe, pointing to the exclusionary practices of (academic) institutions that perpetuate dominant caste narratives (Nair 2014; Nigam 2024). Pandian’s analysis when further applied reveals how these biases marginalise Dalit epistemologies, limiting their inclusion in the canon of postcolonial thought.

In addition to these conceptual gaps, the phenomenon of *bluewashing*<sup>11</sup>—where institutions and individuals superficially align themselves with Dalit causes to gain

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<sup>11</sup> Siddharth, J. [@JyotsnaSiddharth]. (2023) Retrieved from [https://www.linkedin.com/posts/jyotsnasiddharth\\_dalithistorymonth-activity-7049634147362910208-nx1Q?utm\\_source=share&utm\\_medium=member\\_android](https://www.linkedin.com/posts/jyotsnasiddharth_dalithistorymonth-activity-7049634147362910208-nx1Q?utm_source=share&utm_medium=member_android). The term 'bluewashing,' referenced by activist and scholar Jyotsna Siddharth in their public commentary/social media engagement, reflects the superficial engagement with Dalit issues by dominant institutions and scholars. While symbolically supporting Dalit causes, these actors often fail to meaningfully address the structural realities of caste oppression. Although not yet widely explored in academic circles, the term encapsulates a growing concern among activists regarding the symbolic support of Dalit causes without addressing the deep structural inequalities tied to caste.

In the original context Jyotsna mentions it as “It’s when you identify Dalit folks especially artists, actors, writers, speakers and activists to speak on caste or do active emotional labour without any

social capital—further complicates caste representation in academia. Bluewashing is often performed by dominant caste scholars and institutions who symbolically support Dalit issues without meaningfully engaging with or challenging the structures that perpetuate caste oppression. This performative allyship undermines genuine efforts to centre Dalit perspectives, as it allows for the appropriation of Dalit struggles without addressing the deeper, systemic violence that caste enforces. Critiquing these practices is essential to foster a more substantive engagement with anti-casteism and Dalit scholarship within postcolonial academic discourse.

W.E.B. Du Bois's seminal concept of the "colour line" serves as a foundational analytical tool for understanding systemic discrimination, particularly racial stratification in the Western context. It illuminates how race functions as a primary demarcation, structuring access to resources, power, and knowledge. In a parallel vein, and as a critical new intervention, this research introduces the "caste line." This conceptual framework posits that analogous to the "colour line," a pervasive "caste line" operates internally within the Indian nation-state, delineating profound social, economic, and epistemic divisions. This internal demarcation, often subtly reinforced through institutional and discursive practices, rigorously separates the privileged upper castes from the oppressed Dalit communities. The "caste line" not only restricts social mobility and economic opportunities but also fundamentally shapes who produces knowledge, whose voices are validated, and which epistemologies are

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real respect, compensation or visibility. It's a practice of using Dalit folks as a token without being really invested in their lives. Blue washing is primarily done by dominant castes individuals, corporations and institutions of/in power to receive brownie points for their diversity and inclusion mandates. On some occasions Bahujan's have also been observed in Bluewashing." This idea resonates with broader critiques of postcolonial scholarship's failure to meaningfully engage with caste oppression. Just as corporate entities have been accused of 'greenwashing' environmental concerns, Siddharth's 'bluewashing' calls attention to symbolic yet hollow gestures toward Dalit inclusion, without addressing caste hierarchies

deemed legitimate within academic spheres. Therefore, unlike traditional postcolonial critiques predominantly focused on externally imposed racial and imperial structures, this conceptualisation highlights caste as an equally fundamental and internally perpetuated axis of power. Addressing this pervasive reality necessitates not merely the tokenistic inclusion of Dalit perspectives but a profound reconfiguration of postcolonial academic thought. This reorientation must centre anti-casteism as a core principle, recognising caste not as a peripheral or regional issue but as a crucial structuring force that profoundly informs the very production, validation, and dissemination of knowledge within intellectual spaces. This conceptual intervention underscores the urgency of dismantling caste-based epistemic hierarchies for genuine scholarly equity.

Contemporary scholarship must, therefore, go beyond the tokenistic inclusion of Dalit voices and actively engage with Dalit epistemologies as fundamental to reshaping the field of postcolonial studies. By incorporating anti-casteist thought postcolonial academia can move towards a more inclusive and rigorous understanding of how caste operates as a system of oppression that predates and outlives colonialism. The integration of Dalit perspectives, alongside a critical engagement with the “caste line,” offers a path forward for postcolonial theory to more effectively address the complexities of internal hierarchies and their impact on knowledge production.

### **Reclaiming Epistemologies and Challenging the Crisis of Knowledge**

The reclamation of "othered" epistemologies, particularly those emerging from Dalit (or that of Bahujan and Adivasi) perspectives, disrupts the entrenched hegemonies in

knowledge production that have long marginalised these voices, a key feature to a perceived crisis of knowledge in thought production (see the rest of this volume). This act of reclamation is not just a matter of inclusion but a radical restructuring of academic discourse(s). Scholars like Gopal Guru and Sundar Sarukkai (2018; 2012), and Ingole (2020) argue that Dalit epistemology offers a unique counter to Brahmanical forms of knowledge, demanding recognition of the deeply embodied nature of Dalit experiences. Guru suggests that Dalit agency is best understood not just as an assertion of identity but as an active critique of epistemic violence, embedded within both colonial and caste-based structures. The process of reclaiming these epistemologies is thus inherently political, as it seeks to dismantle long-standing systems of exclusion and elevate perspectives that have been silenced, ignored and appropriated.

Marginalised epistemologies, as articulated and used in referents by Rege (1998), highlight the importance of lived experience in the formulation of knowledge. Rege emphasises that Dalit women have historically been positioned as doubly marginalised, both within caste and gender hierarchies. Their experiences and perspectives are crucial in understanding the full scope of subalternity in South Asia. Rege's argument aligns with the broader critique offered by scholars of Southern epistemologies, such as Connell (2007), who contend that global scholarship remains predominantly shaped by Northern epistemic frameworks that marginalise or exoticize non-western and subaltern perspectives. The reclamation of Dalit epistemologies, therefore, is not only a matter of addressing historical wrongs but also an urgent intervention in the global reconfiguration of knowledge systems.

The crisis in postcolonial discourse becomes evident in its failure to fully engage with Dalit history and the unique forms of subaltern oppression that Dalit communities experience. Postcolonial theory, which has often celebrated the "plurality" of lifeworlds, inadequately captures the specificity of caste oppression. Scholars such as Rao (2009) argue that postcolonial studies have historically neglected caste as a central axis of subalternity,<sup>12</sup> focusing instead on colonialism's impacts on race and nationality. Despite its progressive aims, Rao's critique reflects how postcolonialism replicates forms of exclusion by ignoring the specificity of Dalit struggles. This failure, however, transcends irony, as it reveals a deep epistemic gap in how postcolonial theory/academia engagement with non-western forms of knowledge, particularly those grounded in the experiences of subaltern castes within the Indian context.

This oversight exposes a broader crisis of epistemic injustice within academic institutions. This crisis persists due to the dominance of upper-caste/ Brahmin scholars in defining the contours of the Indian subcontinent and global (South Asian) scholarship. As Sukumar (2022) articulates, the control of upper-caste intellectuals over academic discourse perpetuates the exclusion of Dalit voices, reinforcing caste hierarchies within knowledge production. Sukumar's critique draws attention to how

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<sup>12</sup> See, Gramsci, Antonio. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. Edited and translated by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith, Lawrence and Wishart, 1971.; Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. "Can the Subaltern Speak?" In *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, edited by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, University of Illinois Press, 1988, pp. 271–313. Subalternity refers to the condition of being subordinated or marginalised, often without a voice in dominant power structures. The term originates from Antonio Gramsci's work on cultural hegemony, where "subaltern" refers to groups excluded from mainstream social, political, and cultural institutions. In postcolonial studies, this concept was expanded by the Subaltern Studies collective to analyse the ways colonial and postcolonial power hierarchies suppress the histories, voices, and identities of marginalised groups, particularly in the Global South.

A key figure in subaltern studies, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, famously posed the question, *Can the Subaltern Speak?* Highlighting the immense challenges of representing subaltern voices within dominant academic discourses. The concept broadly encompasses groups marginalised by class, caste, gender, race, and colonial power dynamics, emphasising their exclusion from the historical narratives written by the ruling classes.



the systemic marginalisation of Dalit scholars is not merely a historical injustice but an ongoing structural issue in academia, one that requires urgent redress through the active inclusion of Dalit epistemologies in the scholarly canon.

Critically engaging with the dominant systems that sustain this exclusion necessitates a rethinking of how knowledge is produced, valued, validated and circulated. The works of scholars like Bhabra (2021) advocate for a decolonial approach that does not merely seek to add marginalised perspectives but restructures the very foundation of epistemological inquiry. Bhabra's vision aligns with the broader call for Southern theory, as articulated by Connell (2007), which urges scholars to de-centre western epistemologies and recognise the multiplicity of knowledge emerging from the Global South. For Dalit epistemologies, this involves reclaiming a space within academia and challenging the foundational premises of what constitutes "legitimate" knowledge.

Postcolonial scholarship, while addressing colonial legacies, frequently overlooks the entrenched caste hierarchies that shape social and intellectual structures within postcolonial societies. This omission marginalises Dalit perspectives, which are vital for interrogating the lived realities of caste oppression. Dalit intellectuals have consistently challenged the brahmanical dominance in knowledge production, critiquing how mainstream academic discourses perpetuate epistemic violence by excluding subaltern voices. Meena Kandasamy's exploration of caste-based violence and gender intersections, for instance, exposes the silencing mechanisms employed by hegemonic structures, revealing how Dalit women bear a double burden of both caste and gender oppression (None Karthika S 2024; Sharma 2022). Similarly,

Bama's narratives shed light on the deeply gendered dimensions of caste, particularly how Dalit women navigate spaces of exclusion within both caste and feminist frameworks (Thenmozhi A 2024). Yogesh Maitreya's focus on Dalit literature as a mode of resistance portraying how narrative forms serve as critical sites for reclaiming agency, challenging the stereotypical depictions of Dalit experiences often seen in upper-caste academic work (Gurawa and Kujur 2024). Gajendran Ayyathurai's interventions critique the brahmanical hold on intellectual spaces, advocating for a more inclusive historiography that foregrounds the contributions and epistemologies of marginalised communities (Ayyathurai 2021). Collectively, these scholars illuminate the multifaceted ways in which caste structures permeate knowledge production, social practices, and intellectual traditions. Their work calls for a radical rethinking of how caste, knowledge, and social structures are represented, urging postcolonial academia to address its complicity in sustaining caste-based epistemic hierarchies.

The reclamation of these epistemologies is also an act of agency, as Dalit scholars and activists assert their right to define their own narratives and theoretical frameworks. Dalit scholar Kancha Ilaiah (2010; 2019) emphasises the importance of this self-determination, arguing that Dalit thought must not be subsumed under brahmanical or colonial frameworks but must be understood on its own terms. Kancha Ilaiah's work is pivotal in articulating the need for a Dalit-centred philosophy that critiques both colonial and Indigenous structures of oppression. His call for a radical rethinking of knowledge production resonates with other scholars who have highlighted the importance of subaltern agency in reclaiming spaces for marginalised epistemologies.

In this context, the inclusion of Dalit epistemologies into global thought is not a mere academic exercise but a vital political project. As theorised by Guru and Sarukkai (2018), this reclamation seeks to challenge the hegemonies of both western and brahmanical epistemic traditions, positioning Dalit knowledge as essential for understanding broader global struggles for justice and universality. The crisis in global thought and knowledge production, as revealed by the exclusion of caste and other forms of subaltern oppression, presents itself with an urgency of this task. Incorporating these diverse epistemologies is not just a corrective to historical wrongs but a necessary reconstitution of the ways we understand the world. Thus, the reclamation of Dalit epistemologies, viewed through the lens of both agency and systemic critique, serves as a foundational intervention in the global intellectual landscape.

## **Discussion**

The exclusionary dynamics of current academia reflect a more significant issue of epistemic violence and crisis in thought/ knowledge production that marginalised groups, especially Dalits, face in both local and global contexts. The structural dominance of upper-caste/ brahmanical scholars within academic institutions reinforces the social hierarchies present in broader Indian society, perpetuating the marginalisation of Dalit voices as minor knowledge(s). This evidences two significant mechanisms that sustain this exclusion: the devaluation of Dalit epistemologies and the hegemonic nature of postcolonial and decolonial frameworks that fail to adequately address caste and anti-production in thought and knowledge production.

First, the devaluation of Dalit epistemologies is reflective of epistemic injustice, where the lived experiences and intellectual contributions of marginalised groups are routinely dismissed as inferior or non-theoretical. Dalit scholars, who have consistently contributed to debates on identity, caste, society and politics, are often pigeonholed into frameworks of "experience" rather than being recognised for their theoretical rigour. This phenomenon not only relegates Dalit intellectuals to the margins of scholarly discourse but also reinforces the notion that knowledge can only be validated through Brahmanical or Savarna lenses. The dominance of this canon restricts the space for alternative epistemologies to emerge, ensuring that Dalit contributions remain peripheral.

Moreover, this marginalisation is maintained through institutional mechanisms that regulate access to academic resources and platforms. Research opportunities, funding, and scholarly recognition are often restricted to upper-caste academics, who dominate the positions of authority in Indian universities/South Asian Academia (Paliwal 2021; Zaffar and Abdulla 2021). This control over knowledge production extends to what topics are considered "worthy" of academic inquiry, leaving caste-based scholarship at the margins or, worse, entirely unaddressed. The politics of citation, as explored in the works of Sara Ahmed (2013), further entrenches these dynamics, where Dalit scholars are seldom cited or engaged with, thereby erasing their intellectual legacies from the academic record.

Second, while postcolonial and decolonial frameworks —particularly those shaped by Brahmin/Savarna scholars— have sought to critique colonial structures of power and

knowledge, they (motivating) too often fall short of engaging with caste. As noted in previous sections, there is an inherent irony in how both frameworks espouse the "plurality" of lifeworlds yet fail to integrate Dalit perspectives meaningfully. This omission highlights a structural issue in Indian academia, where caste remains underexplored compared to other categories like race, ethnicity, or gender. This limitation is partly due to the global nature of decolonial frameworks, which, in their effort to resist Eurocentrism, have overlooked and underexplored caste as a structure of oppression unique to the Indian subcontinent. Dalit epistemologies, therefore, remain inadequately theorised within these frameworks, with their radical potential for decoloniality untapped.

Furthermore, the insights gained from comparing Dalit epistemologies to Black epistemologies to Abolitionist frameworks highlight the universal nature of epistemic violence while simultaneously pointing to the distinctiveness of caste-based oppression. Black epistemologies, especially those from the African American tradition, have long been integrated into critical race theory and decolonial studies, offering a critique of racism and colonialism from within western frameworks (Hossein 2019). Dalit epistemologies, however, remain marginal (knowledge) even within decolonial discourse due to the complex layers of caste discrimination that operate both locally and globally, which further rendered the larger goal for establishing Critical Caste Studies (Ayyathurai 2021).

The theoretical analysis suggests that Dalit epistemologies have the potential to transform not only the field of postcolonial thought and knowledge production but also to offer critical interventions into broader debates on knowledge production,

identity, and power - rethinking identity and subjectivity, and critiquing power dynamics. By furthering drawing and embracing the works of Anti-caste and Dalit Scholars,<sup>13</sup> this study illustrates the potential that Dalit thought provides a radical alternative to both western and brahmanical epistemologies, rooted in lived experiences of oppression and fully capable of engaging with global theories of decolonisation.<sup>14</sup> This hybridisation of theory and experience builds on the decolonial critique of the theory-practice divide, but it further emphasises the particularities of caste within the Indian context. Dalit epistemologies challenge the notion of universality often assumed in postcolonial and decolonial frameworks by asserting that any global intellectual tradition must incorporate the lived experiences of caste-based oppressions, emphasising instead the particularities of caste and the necessity of recognising these particularities within global intellectual traditions.

At the core of our discussion is the ongoing struggle for representation, both within and outside academia. Representation, as this study reveals, is not merely about inclusion but about challenging the very structures that regulate who get to produce knowledge and how that knowledge is disseminated. Dalit scholars, through their contributions, do not merely seek to "add" their voices to existing debates; they seek to reshape the debates themselves, offering new frameworks for understanding caste, power, and knowledge and when their critical potential met with that of experiences co-produces original and universal insights.

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<sup>13</sup> See B.R. Ambedkar, Iyothee Das, Jyotiba Phule, Kancha Ilaiah, Suraj Yengde, Gajendran Ayyathurai for an inexhaustive list.

<sup>14</sup> Also see Guru, Gopal, and V Geetha. 2000. "New Phase of Dalit-Bahujan Intellectual Activity." JSTOR. 2000. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4408822>.

This also brings our attention to the dual role of the academic institution as both a site of exclusion and potential resistance. While there are efforts within the Dalit community to reclaim academic spaces, the institutionalisation of Dalit epistemologies raises complex questions. Many Dalit scholars are cautious about how institutionalisation might dilute or co-opt their subaltern knowledge within frameworks still dominated by upper-caste elites. However, the institutionalisation of Dalit epistemologies remains an ongoing challenge, requiring sustained efforts both within and outside academic settings.

In light of these insights, the marginalisation of Dalit voices within academic discourse reflects broader social and structural inequalities. While postcolonial and decolonial studies have made strides in dismantling Eurocentric frameworks, they must treat the inclusion of Dalit perspectives and epistemological intervention as an independent form of scholarship that challenges both brahmanical and colonial structures of power. Without this deeper engagement with caste as a critical axis of oppression, these fields risk perpetuating the very exclusions they aim to address. The inclusion of Dalit perspectives will then ensure that marginalised voices contribute meaningfully to global thought and dismantling this systemic crisis.

This brings us to fundamental questions that we should constantly introspect ourselves with, that being how knowledge/thought is produced and validated, challenging scholars to reflect on their own positionality within these hierarchies. There is an urgent need for an intellectual praxis that actively works towards creating spaces of epistemic resistance and alternative knowledge production within academic institutions, particularly focusing on the inclusion of marginalised Dalit

epistemologies. The legacy of Dalit scholars or that of anti-caste scholars, who have long resisted epistemic violence through both their lived experiences and intellectual contributions, offers a pathway for such praxis. By centring these voices, the academe can begin to address and confront its own complicity in perpetuating caste-based hierarchies and move towards a more inclusive knowledge and thought production.

## **Conclusion**

This research brings forth the deeply entrenched perverted nature of caste hierarchies within South Asian academia, particularly in the ways that Brahmanical/upper-caste dominance shapes knowledge (re)production, representation, and inclusion. Dalit epistemologies continue to be marginalised, with their voices often relegated to the realm of “minor knowledge” - lived experience rather than being recognised as contributors to theoretical frameworks. Despite the rise of postcolonial and decolonial thought, both frameworks remain primarily silent and ignorant of caste, highlighting a gap that must be addressed for a genuinely inclusive discourse.

By foregrounding the works of Dalit scholars and engaging with their critical interventions, this study has illuminated the ways in which epistemic violence is perpetuated and reproduced in academic spaces. Juxtaposing Dalit epistemologies and Black epistemologies evidences the possibilities for intellectual solidarity across marginalised groups globally, offering new ways to resist and dismantle hegemonic structures of knowledge.



The findings compel a radical restructuring of knowledge production. Dalit epistemologies must be recognised as indispensable to understanding caste, power, and social structures in India. Academics, pedagogical innovators, and curriculum designers should prioritise citing Dalit scholars, integrate their frameworks into theoretical and methodological training, and consciously de-centre the brahmanical canon while challenging the global dominance of western intellectual traditions. Such reorientation will cultivate more inclusive, plural, and globally rooted scholarship by exposing and countering the structural inequalities that underpin academic discourse.

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