

The Three S's of Being: Swayambhu, Skandhas, and Śūnyatā in Ambedkar's Deconstruction of Caste-Self

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Abstract

This article examines how B.R. Ambedkar deployed three interconnected Buddhist philosophical categories—*swayambhu* (self-becoming), *skandha* (aggregates), and *anattā* (selflessness)—to construct a systematic critique of caste as simultaneously a metaphysical, social, and *epistemological* formation. While Ambedkar's political and constitutional contributions are well studied, his philosophical engagement with Buddhist doctrine as a tool for dismantling caste ontology has received comparatively less rigorous analysis, and the epistemological dimension of his critique has been largely overlooked. This article addresses that gap by reading Ambedkar's writings, particularly *The Buddha and His Dhamma* (1957), *Annihilation of Caste* (1936), and *Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Ancient India*, alongside the Pali canonical doctrine of Dependent Origination (*paṭiccasamuppāda*), Aśvaghōṣa's *Vajrasūcī*, and the classical analysis of the five aggregates. The central argument is that Ambedkar identified a structural homology between the Brahmanical doctrine of an eternal, self-existent self (*ātman/swayambhu*) and the ideological foundation of caste: both posit fixed, inherent essences where Buddhist analysis reveals only conditioned processes. Crucially, this article introduces three interrelated concepts—*epistemic enclosure*, *epistemic caste*, and *epistemicide*—to name the mechanisms by which the caste system functions not only as a social hierarchy but as a knowledge hierarchy, one that denies Śūdras, untouchables, and women the very status of knowers. By systematically applying the Buddhist teaching that phenomena lack inherent self-nature (*svabhāva*), Ambedkar reframed caste not as a natural or divinely ordained category but as a contingent mental construction sustained by wrong view (*micchā-diṭṭhi*). Ambedkar's reading of the Bhagavad Gita as a “philosophic defence of counter-revolution” is shown to be integral to his deconstruction: the Gita's attempt to ground *caturvarṇa* in the theory of innate

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qualities (*guṇas*) represents, in Buddhist terms, a paradigmatic instance of wrong view (*pāpa-diṭṭhikam*)—the reification of contingent social categories into fixed ontological essences. The article traces how this philosophical deconstruction informed Ambedkar’s practical programme of conversion, culminating in the Navayāna movement and the twenty-two vows of 1956, and argues that the Navayāna denomination constitutes an act of epistemic liberation: the reclamation by formerly excluded communities of the right to know, to interpret, and to construct meaning.

Keywords

Swayambhu, Epistemic Caste, Atman, *Diṭṭi*, Ambedkar, Liberation

Introduction

The Problem of Caste as Ontology and Epistemology

The caste system has been analysed through sociological, economic, historical, and political lenses. What has received insufficient attention is caste as an *ontological* claim—that is, a claim about what kinds of beings exist and what properties they possess essentially rather than contingently. When the *Manusmṛiti* assigns occupations, rights, and spiritual capacities by birth, it does not merely prescribe a social arrangement; it asserts that persons belonging to different *varṇas* possess fundamentally different natures. The Brahmin is not simply someone who performs priestly functions but someone whose essential being is priestly. The Śūdra is not merely assigned menial labour but is held to be constituted for servitude and slavery. Caste, in this framework, is not a social convention but a metaphysical fact.

What has been even less adequately addressed is the *epistemological* dimension of this ontological claim. Caste does not merely rank persons by social function or ritual purity; it ranks them by their presumed capacity for knowledge. The Brahmanical system assigns to each *varṇa* not only different occupations but different cognitive endowments, with the Brahmin possessing full authority to know, interpret, and transmit sacred knowledge, and the Śūdra and the untouchable being defined as fundamentally incapable of receiving it. This article introduces the concept of *epistemic caste* to name this phenomenon: the hierarchical ordering of persons according to their presumed capacity for knowledge, where that ordering is grounded not in demonstrated ability but in birth.¹ Epistemic caste is the epistemological face of ontological caste: if persons

¹The term “epistemic caste” designates the hierarchical ordering of persons according to their presumed capacity for knowledge, where that ordering is grounded not in demonstrated ability but in birth. It names the phenomenon whereby the social hierarchy of caste is simultaneously an epistemological hierarchy: each *varṇa* is assigned not merely different labor but different cognitive capacities, with the Brahmin possessing full epistemic authority and the Śūdra and untouchable being defined as epistemically null. The concept extends Miranda Fricker’s “testimonial injustice” and “hermeneutical injustice” (*Epistemic Injustice: Power and the*

possess fixed, inherent essences (the metaphysical claim), then those essences include fixed, inherent cognitive capacities (the epistemological claim). The Brahmin knows because it is the Brahmin's nature to know. The Śūdra does not know because it is the Śūdra's nature not to know. Knowledge, in this framework, is not an achievement but a birthright - or the permanent absence of one.

B.R. Ambedkar recognized that dismantling caste required engaging it at both the ontological and the epistemological level. His political and legal interventions—drafting constitutional protections, advocating reservation policies—addressed caste's institutional manifestations. But his turn to Buddhism, which occupied the last two decades of his life with increasing intensity, addressed what he understood to be caste's philosophical foundation: the doctrine of a fixed, eternal self. Ambedkar's central philosophical insight, developed across multiple works, was that the Brahmanical concept of *ātman*, the self-existent, unchanging self that the Upanishads identify with *Brahman*, provides the metaphysical architecture upon which both the social hierarchy and the knowledge hierarchy of caste are built. If persons possess eternal, immutable essences, then the hierarchical ordering of those essences, including their differential capacities for knowing, appears natural and unalterable. The Buddhist denial of *ātman*, in Ambedkar's reading, therefore constitutes not merely a soteriological teaching about liberation from suffering but a direct philosophical assault on the conceptual preconditions of caste in all its dimensions: social, ritual, and epistemic.

This article traces how Ambedkar constructed this argument through three interconnected Buddhist categories. The first, *swayambhu* (“self-becoming” or “self-existent”), is the Brahmanical concept Ambedkar identified as the ideological linchpin of caste. The second, the *skandhas* (five aggregates), provides the Buddhist analytical framework through which the illusion of a fixed self is deconstructed. The third, *anattā* (self-lessness or no-self), represents the positive philosophical position that Ambedkar drew from Buddhism to ground an emancipatory social and epistemological vision. These three categories correspond to what Ambedkar opposed, the method by which he opposed it, and the alternative he proposed. Running through the entire analysis are the three epistemological concepts—*epistemic enclosure*, *epistemic caste*, and *epistemocide*—that name the mechanisms by which caste functions as a regime of knowledge suppression, and that Ambedkar's Buddhist turn was designed to dismantle.

The argument proceeds in seven sections. Section I examines the concept of *ditṭhi* (view) in Buddhist philosophy and establishes how Ambedkar understood wrong view as the epistemological root of caste. Section II develops the concepts of

Ethics of Knowing, Oxford, 2007) into the domain of caste, where the injustice is not merely that certain testimony is discounted but that certain persons are categorically denied the status of knowers.

epistemic enclosure, epistemic caste, and epistemicide as an analytical framework for understanding the knowledge dimensions of caste oppression. Section III analyses the Brahmanical doctrine of *Swayambhu* and its relationship to caste ontology, drawing on both Upanishadic sources and Aśvaghōṣa's *Vajrasūcī*. Section IV reconstructs Ambedkar's use of the five *skandhas* to dismantle essentialist conceptions of personhood. Section V traces Ambedkar's application of Dependent Origination (*paṭiccasamuppāda*) to the specific question of caste. Section VI engages the Bhagavad Gita as the most sophisticated philosophical defence of the caste ontology that Ambedkar sought to dismantle. Section VII examines how this philosophical framework was translated into the practical programme of conversion, culminating in the Navayāna Buddhist movement as an act of epistemic liberation.

I

Wrong View as the Root of Caste: *Diṭṭhi* and Ambedkar's Epistemological Critique

The concept of *diṭṭhi* (Skt. *dr̥ṣṭi*), conventionally translated as “view,” occupies a foundational position in Buddhist soteriology. It appears as the first factor of the Noble Eightfold Path: *sammā-diṭṭhi*, Right View, defined in the canonical texts as understanding suffering, its origin, its cessation, and the path leading to cessation. The placement of Right View at the head of the path is doctrinally significant: in the Buddhist analysis, cognitive error precedes and generates all other forms of suffering. One does not merely *behave* wrongly; one *sees* wrongly, and wrong behaviour follows from wrong seeing.²

The Brahmajāla Sutta, the first discourse of the entire Pali Canon, enumerates sixty-two varieties of wrong view, demonstrating the Buddha's systematic concern with mapping the terrain of cognitive distortion. These views are not arbitrary errors but structured misapprehensions that arise, according to the sutta, from craving (*taṇhā*) and feeling (*vedanā*): speculative positions adopted because they serve the emotional needs of the self-concept rather than because they correspond to reality. The sutta's central teaching is that the Buddha has seen through all sixty-two views and is “liberated without remainder,” not by adopting a superior speculative position but by relinquishing the very compulsion to construct fixed views about the nature of reality.³

²The Pali formula is: *imasmiṃ sati idaṃ hoti, imass' uppādā idaṃ uppajjati; imasmiṃ asati idaṃ na hoti, imassa nirodhā idaṃ nirujjhati*. See Samyutta Nikāya 12.61, in Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans., *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2000), 575–577.

³Maurice Walshe, trans., *The Long Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Dīgha Nikāya* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1995), 73–74. The Brahmajāla Sutta enumerates sixty-two kinds of wrong view (*micchā-diṭṭhi*).

Ambedkar's engagement with this framework was not merely academic. His entire critique of Brahmanism can be understood as an application of the Buddhist analysis of wrong view to the specific domain of social organization. In *Annihilation of Caste*, Ambedkar argued that the caste system is sustained not primarily by economic exploitation or political coercion, though both are present, but by a set of beliefs about the nature of persons and their proper ordering. Caste, Ambedkar insisted, is "a notion; it is a state of the mind."⁴ This formulation is precise in its Buddhist resonance: caste is a *ditṭhi*, a view that has been mistaken for reality. It is not a feature of the natural or metaphysical order but a cognitive construction that has been reified through centuries of social practice and religious sanction.

The moral consequences of wrong view constitute, for Ambedkar, the decisive test of a philosophical or religious system. In the Buddhist framework, wrong views are not merely intellectually mistaken; they generate suffering because they distort one's relationship with reality. Ambedkar extended this principle to social analysis: a philosophical system that produces and validates a cruel, hierarchical social order thereby reveals itself as grounded in wrong view, regardless of its internal sophistication. The *Manusmṛiti*'s elaborate prescriptions for caste behaviour, including severe punishments for Śūdras who transgress caste boundaries, exemplify what Ambedkar understood as the social manifestation of metaphysical error. His public burning of the *Manusmṛiti* on 25 December 1927 was, in Buddhist terms, a symbolic act of rejecting wrong view, disposing of a text whose prescriptions revealed its foundational cognitive distortion.⁵

This epistemological critique distinguishes Ambedkar's approach from both liberal reformism and Marxist materialism. The liberal reformer seeks to modify caste behaviour without addressing its conceptual foundations; the Marxist reduces caste to economic relations. Ambedkar, reading through Buddhist philosophy, located the problem at the level of view itself: the fundamental assumptions about reality, particularly about the nature of the self, that make caste appear natural, inevitable, and divinely ordained. To dismantle caste, one must first dismantle the view of self upon which it rests. But Ambedkar perceived something further still: that wrong view about the self generates not only social hierarchy but a hierarchy of *knowing* – a system in which the capacity for knowledge is itself distributed according to caste. It is this insight that the following section elaborates.

⁴B.R. Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste* (1936), in *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar: Writings and Speeches* [hereafter BAWs], vol. 1, ed. Vasant Moon (New Delhi: Dr. Ambedkar Foundation, 2014), 47.

⁵On Ambedkar's burning of the *Manusmṛiti* on 25 December 1927, see Jaffrelot, *Dr Ambedkar and Untouchability*, 34–36; Anand Teltumbde, *Mahad: The Making of the First Dalit Revolt* (New Delhi: Navayana, 2016).

II

Epistemic Enclosure, Epistemic Caste, and Epistemocide: The Knowledge Dimension of Caste Oppression

The caste system has been analysed extensively as a system of social stratification, economic exploitation, and ritual pollution. What has not been adequately theorized is the degree to which caste operates as a *knowledge regime*—a system that produces, controls, restricts, and destroys knowledge along caste lines. This section introduces three interrelated concepts that together name the epistemological architecture of caste: *epistemic enclosure*, *epistemic caste*, and *epistemocide*. These concepts are not merely supplementary to the ontological analysis of caste developed elsewhere in this article; they identify a dimension of caste oppression that is, in certain respects, more fundamental than the social and economic dimensions, because it concerns the very conditions under which social and economic reality can be understood, interpreted, and challenged.

Epistemic Enclosure

By *epistemic enclosure*, I mean a structural arrangement in which access to knowledge is restricted by the same authority that produces and interprets that knowledge, creating a self-sealing system impervious to external challenge.⁶ The term is deliberately drawn from the history of land enclosure in early modern Europe, where common lands were fenced off and placed under private control, dispossessing those who had previously enjoyed rights of access. Epistemic enclosure operates analogously: knowledge that might in principle be available to all is fenced off by institutional and ideological barriers, and placed under the exclusive control of a designated group. The concept shares certain features with Gramsci's notion of cultural hegemony and Foucault's analysis of the power/knowledge nexus, but it names something more specific than either: a system in which the restriction of knowledge is grounded not in class position or institutional gatekeeping alone but in the metaphysical claim that certain categories of persons are *inherently incapable* of receiving knowledge. This is the distinctive Brahmanical contribution to the technology of epistemic control.

The Brahmanical system constitutes perhaps the most thoroughgoing epistemic enclosure in the history of human civilization. The *Muṇḍaka Upanishad*'s restriction,

⁶I use the term "epistemic enclosure" to describe a structural arrangement in which access to knowledge is restricted by the same authority that produces and interprets that knowledge, creating a self-sealing system impervious to external challenge. The concept draws on but is distinct from Gramsci's notion of hegemony and Foucault's power/knowledge nexus, as it foregrounds the specifically *caste-based* mechanism of restriction: knowledge is enclosed not by class position or institutional gatekeeping alone but by the metaphysical claim that certain bodies are inherently incapable of receiving it.

“This knowledge may be taught only to those who perform rites, only to those who are learned in the scripture,”⁷ establishes the formal boundary of the enclosure. But the *Manusmṛiti* specifies its enforcement with chilling precision: a Śūdra who recites the Vedas is to have molten lead poured into his mouth; a Śūdra who merely *hears* the Vedas is to have his ears filled with lac.⁸ The punishment targets the sensory organs of knowledge acquisition—the mouth that speaks, the ears that hear—making explicit what the system implies: the subordinated body is to be physically sealed against the entry of sacred knowledge. The body of the Śūdra and the untouchable is, in the logic of epistemic enclosure, a body that must be kept epistemically closed.

What makes epistemic enclosure so effective as a mechanism of domination is its self-sealing character. Those who possess exclusive access to knowledge also possess exclusive authority to interpret and validate claims about that knowledge. The Brahmin is both the producer and the gatekeeper of sacred knowledge, both the source and the arbiter of truth. Any challenge to the enclosure must be articulated in terms that the enclosure itself controls: to argue that the Vedas should be accessible to all, one would need to demonstrate familiarity with the Vedas, which is precisely what the enclosure prohibits. The result is a closed hermeneutical circle: the authority of the knowledge justifies the authority of its guardians, and the authority of the guardians justifies the restriction of the knowledge. Ambedkar saw this circularity with penetrating clarity. His solution was not to argue for admission into the enclosure—to demand that Śūdras be granted access to the Vedas—but to reject the authority of the enclosed knowledge altogether, turning instead to the Buddhist tradition, which, as Bronkhorst observes, “did not start out with any identifiable implicit or explicit convictions about language” and spread its message “in local languages, being adjusted or translated where necessary.”⁹

Epistemic Caste

Epistemic caste names the next layer of the system: the hierarchical ordering of persons according to their presumed capacity for knowledge, where that ordering is grounded not in demonstrated ability but in birth. The concept extends Miranda Fricker’s influential analysis of “testimonial injustice” and “hermeneutical injustice”

⁷A. Shearer and P. Russel (trans.), *Mundaka Upanishad, The Upanishads*, Harper Colophon Books, New York, p. 41.

⁸On the prohibition against Śūdras hearing the Vedas, see *Manusmṛiti* IV.99, VIII.270–272. Patrick Olivelle, trans., *Manu’s Code of Law: A Critical Edition and Translation of the Mānava-Dharmaśāstra* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 130, 193. The punishment for a Śūdra who recites the Vedas is specified as having molten lead poured into the ears; for hearing the Vedas, having the ears filled with lac.

⁹Johannes Bronkhorst, *A Śabda Reader: Language in Classical Indian Thought* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019), 4–5.

into the domain of caste.¹⁰ For Fricker, testimonial injustice occurs when a speaker receives a deflated level of credibility due to prejudice; hermeneutical injustice occurs when a structural gap in collective interpretive resources disadvantages certain groups in making sense of their own experience. Epistemic caste involves both forms of injustice but exceeds them in a crucial respect. In Fricker's analysis, the epistemic subject remains a subject, a knower whose knowledge is discounted or whose interpretive resources are impoverished. In the Brahmanical system, the Śūdra and the untouchable are not merely discounted as knowers; they are categorically *denied the status of knowers*. Their exclusion from knowledge is not a contingent social fact that might be remedied by reducing prejudice or enriching interpretive resources; it is an ontological determination, grounded in the metaphysical claim that their essential nature precludes the capacity for sacred knowledge.

This is why the concept of epistemic caste is needed alongside, not merely as a subset of Fricker's framework. Testimonial injustice presupposes that the subject has testimony to offer, which is then unfairly discounted. Hermeneutical injustice presupposes that the subject has experiences to interpret, but lacks the conceptual resources to do so. Epistemic caste operates at a more fundamental level: it denies that the subject is the *kind of being* that can know. The Śūdra's exclusion from knowledge is not an accident of social circumstance but an expression of the Śūdra's *svabhāva*—inherent nature. This is why caste-based epistemic exclusion cannot be addressed by the liberal solution of "equal access to education" alone (though Ambedkar fought strenuously for that access). The deeper problem is the view that different persons possess different capacities for knowledge *by nature*—a view that persists, often unconsciously, long after formal restrictions have been removed.

Ambedkar experienced epistemic caste personally and theorized it philosophically. As a Mahar, he was among the first untouchables to gain access to higher education in British India, yet his own account of his school years testifies to the persistence of epistemic caste even within nominally open institutions: he was forbidden from touching the water pitcher, made to sit apart from other students, and treated as cognitively deficient by default. As Gopal Guru and Sundar Sarukkai have argued, the relationship between caste and the capacity for theoretical reflection is not incidental but structural: the caste system produces a distribution of "who can think" that

¹⁰Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 1–7, 147–175. Fricker's framework distinguishes testimonial injustice (a deflated level of credibility given to a speaker due to prejudice) from hermeneutical injustice (a structural gap in collective interpretive resources that disadvantages certain groups). Caste epistemicide involves both but exceeds them: it does not merely discount testimony or deprive groups of interpretive resources but categorically denies the capacity for knowledge on ontological grounds.

mirrors its distribution of social rank.¹¹ Ambedkar's own intellectual achievements, his doctorates from Columbia and the London School of Economics, his drafting of India's constitution, were thus not merely personal accomplishments but existential refutations of epistemic caste: living proof that the Brahmanical mapping of cognitive capacity onto birth was false.

The gendered dimension of epistemic caste must be emphasized. The *Manusmriti* excludes women from Vedic study alongside Śūdras, and the logic is identical: women, like Śūdras, are held to lack the essential nature required for sacred knowledge. This means that epistemic caste operates along *two* axes simultaneously—caste and gender—producing a compounded exclusion for women of subordinated castes who are denied epistemic standing on both grounds. Ambedkar was attentive to this intersection. In *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, he devoted specific attention to the Buddha's conversion of women, and he specified that Śūdras and women were the “two classes most oppressed by Brahmanism.”¹² The Buddhist dissolution of fixed selfhood dismantles the metaphysical ground of both forms of exclusion simultaneously: if there is no *svabhāva*, there is no essential nature that could make any person inherently incapable of knowledge.

Epistemicide

The most severe operation of the caste-knowledge regime is what may be called *epistemicide*: the systematic destruction of knowledge systems and the suppression of the capacity for knowledge among subordinated groups.¹³ The term was developed by the Portuguese sociologist Boaventura de Sousa Santos to describe how European colonialism destroyed indigenous knowledge traditions across the colonized world,

¹¹Gopal Guru and Sundar Sarukkai, *The Cracked Mirror: An Indian Debate on Experience and Theory* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2012), especially chapters 1–3 on the relationship between caste and the capacity for theoretical reflection. See also Sharmila Rege, *Writing Caste/Writing Gender: Narrating Dalit Women's Testimonios* (New Delhi: Zubaan, 2006), on the intersection of caste and gender in epistemic exclusion.

¹²Ambedkar, *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, BAWs, vol. 11, Book I, Part III (“Brahmanas”), §§32–46.

¹³I adopt “epistemicide” from Boaventura de Sousa Santos, who defines it as the systematic destruction of knowledge systems by dominant powers (*Epistemologies of the South: Justice against Epistemicide*, Boulder: Paradigm, 2014). Santos develops the concept primarily in relation to European colonialism's erasure of indigenous knowledge traditions. I extend the term here to the Brahmanical suppression of non-Brahmanical knowledge, which involves not only the destruction of rival knowledge systems (such as Buddhist philosophical traditions) but the more fundamental denial that subordinated castes possess the capacity for knowledge at all. Where colonial epistemicide destroys existing knowledge, Brahmanical epistemicide operates through a prior move: it denies that the subordinated subject could have been a knower in the first place.

not merely displacing local knowledge with Western knowledge but actively annihilating the epistemological frameworks through which colonized peoples understood their worlds.¹⁴ Santos's concept is illuminating for the study of caste, but it requires significant modification. Colonial epistemicide, as Santos describes it, operates primarily by destroying existing knowledge: burning libraries, suppressing languages, delegitimizing traditional practices. Brahmanical epistemicide operates through a more fundamental move: it denies that the subordinated subject could have been a knower in the first place. Where colonial epistemicide destroys knowledge that was once possessed, Brahmanical epistemicide forecloses the very possibility of knowledge by ontological fiat.

This distinction between colonial and Brahmanical epistemicide is not merely analytical but has practical consequences. Colonial epistemicide leaves traces: the colonized can remember what was lost, can point to the ruins of destroyed institutions, can reconstruct suppressed traditions. Brahmanical epistemicide, in its most thoroughgoing form, leaves no traces at all, because it denies that there was ever anything to destroy. If the Śūdra is inherently incapable of knowledge, then the Śūdra has never possessed knowledge, and there is nothing to mourn or recover. The violence of this erasure is so total that it becomes invisible: it does not appear as suppression because it presents itself as nature.

Yet Brahmanical epistemicide also operated in the material sense that Santos describes. Ambedkar's account of the decline of Buddhism in India documents the physical destruction of Buddhist institutions of learning, the monasteries and universities such as Nālandā, Takshashila, and Vikramaśīla that constituted the material infrastructure of non-Brahmanical knowledge production.¹⁵ When Ambedkar argued that the Buddhist priesthood "perished by the sword of Islam and could not be resuscitated," while "it was not possible for Islam to annihilate the Brahmanic priesthood," he was identifying an asymmetry rooted in epistemicide: Brahmanism survived because its knowledge was distributed across a hereditary social group embedded in every village, while Buddhism's knowledge was concentrated in monastic centres that could be physically destroyed.¹⁶ The destruction of the monasteries was an act of epistemicide in the most literal sense, the annihilation of institutions where

¹⁴Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *Epistemologies of the South: Justice against Epistemicide* (Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2014), 92–100.

¹⁵Ambedkar, *The Decline and Fall of Buddhism*, BAWs, vol. 3, 229–232. For the argument that the destruction of Nālandā and Vikramaśīla constituted epistemicide in the material sense—the physical annihilation of institutions of non-Brahmanical learning—see Kancha Ilaiah Shepherd, *God as Political Philosopher: Buddha's Challenge to Brahminism* (New Delhi: Sage, 2018), 156–172.

¹⁶Ambedkar, *The Decline and Fall of Buddhism*, BAWs, vol. 3, 229–232.

subordinated communities had access to philosophical training and knowledge production outside the Brahmanical enclosure.

Together, these three concepts—epistemic enclosure, epistemic caste, and epistemocide—constitute the epistemological architecture of the caste system: enclosure restricts knowledge, epistemic caste naturalizes that restriction by grounding it in ontology, and epistemocide destroys the conditions under which alternative knowledge could be produced. Ambedkar's turn to Buddhism was a response to all three. By rejecting the authority of the Vedas, he broke the enclosure. By denying *ātman* and *svabhāva*, he dismantled the ontological foundation of epistemic caste. And by reviving the Buddhist tradition in India through the Navayāna Buddhist movement, he undertook what may be called *epistemic reconstruction*, namely, the rebuilding of a knowledge tradition that had been subjected to centuries of epistemocide.

III

Swayambhu and the Metaphysics of Caste: Fixed Self as Ideological Foundation

The Upanishadic tradition posits *ātman* as the essential, unchanging core of personhood. The *Īśā Upanishad* declares that “all that exists is nothing but the self” and characterizes this self as *swayambhu*—self-existent, self-sufficient, uncaused by anything external to itself. The *Muṇḍaka Upanishad* reinforces that the self is “unchanging.”¹⁷ This raises two serious limitations: first, the self is posited as eternal, unchanging, and fixed, thus unquestionable; and second, this contradicts the notion of Brahman as all-inclusive and universal when only one caste—Brahmins—has exclusive access to knowledge (*Brahma-jnana*).¹⁸ This metaphysical claim carries immediate implications for both social and epistemological ontology. If the self possesses a fixed, essential nature, then that nature can be classified, ranked, and assigned differential worth and differential cognitive capacity, which is precisely what the *varṇa* system does. The fourfold division of society in the *Purusha Sūkta* (Ṛg Veda 10.90), where different castes emerge from different parts of the cosmic being's body (*Brahma*), makes the connection between metaphysics and social hierarchy explicit:

¹⁷A. Shearer and P. Russel (trans.), *Mundaka Upanishad, The Upanishads*, Harper Colophon Books, New York, p. 41.

¹⁸A. Shearer and P. Russel (trans.), *The Upanishads*, Harper Colophon Books, New York. *Aham Brahmasmi* (I am Brahman: knowledge that the essence of self is none other than the infinite reality of Brahman), 1.4.10, *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*. Also, in, *Brahmavid apnoti param, Brahmiva san brahmapayeti* (the knower of Brahman attains the supreme - only being Brahman, he attains Brahman); *atama-brahma* - this self is Brahman: 3.2.9., *Mundaka Upanishad*.

ontological difference grounds both social difference and epistemic difference. The mouth (Brahmin) speaks and knows; the feet (Śūdra) bear weight in silence.

Ambedkar identified this connection with characteristic precision. In *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, he traced how the Brahmanical doctrine of *caturvarṇa* fixes the social order on the basis of birth, assigning occupations, rights, and spiritual capacities as immutable properties of persons. What Ambedkar termed “graded inequality,” a hierarchy in which each caste oppresses the one below it, is simultaneously a graded *epistemology*: each caste possesses a diminishing share of the right to know. At the bottommost of this graded system, the untouchable possesses no epistemic rights at all, a condition that is not merely an effect of social exclusion but its ontological justification. Ambedkar specified that Śūdras and women were the classes most oppressed by this system, denied both the right to knowledge and the right to bear arms. The denial of knowledge and the denial of physical self-defence together constitute a comprehensive disempowerment: the subordinated subject can neither understand the system that oppresses them nor resist it by force.¹⁹

The rhetorical structure of Ambedkar’s narrative in *The Buddha and His Dhamma* is significant: Buddha’s voice and Ambedkar’s voice blend as the text asks whether caste can be amended and concludes that, as a “divinely ordained social order,... it could not be. It could only be ended.”²⁰ The deliberate fusion of voices performs the argument: Ambedkar’s rejection of caste is presented as continuous with the Buddha’s original rejection of Brahmanism. The word “ended” is important. Ambedkar does not propose reform of the enclosure, wider access to the enclosed knowledge, but abolition of the system that makes enclosure possible: the metaphysical doctrine of fixed selfhood.

It is important to acknowledge that the Upanishadic corpus is not monolithic. Different Upanishads develop the concept of *ātman* in different ways, and later Advaita Vedānta offers a reading of *ātman* as universal and non-differentiated that, at least in principle, might seem to undercut caste distinctions. Ambedkar was aware of such readings but regarded them as practically irrelevant, because the social system that actually developed under Brahmanical authority was one of rigid hierarchy, and rigid epistemic enclosure, regardless of any theoretical universalism. The crucial point is not whether a philosophically charitable reading of the Upanishads *could* produce an egalitarian metaphysics, but whether the metaphysical framework *as historically deployed* served to justify caste. On this point, the historical record is unambiguous.

¹⁹Ambedkar, BAWS, vol. 11, Book I, Part III (“Brahmanas”), §§32–46. Ambedkar’s concept of “graded inequality” is elaborated in *Annihilation of Caste*, BAWS, vol. 1, 47–57.

²⁰Ambedkar, *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, BAWS, vol. 11, Book I, Part V (“The Brahmanas”), §3. p. 92

Aśvaghōṣa's *Vajrasūcī* ("The Diamond Needle"), composed in the first or second century CE, provides the classical Buddhist counterargument to caste essentialism that Ambedkar drew upon extensively. The text subjects the concept of caste to systematic logical deconstruction, asking what constitutes a Brahmin: is it the *jīva* (life force), the body, birth, knowledge, or conduct? Aśvaghōṣa demonstrates that none of these criteria can sustain the claim that Brahmin-hood is an inherent property of certain persons. If caste resides in the *jīva*, then all *jīvas* are of the same nature and no distinction holds. If it resides in the body, then all bodies are composed of the same elements. If in birth, then the mythological origins of great sages contradict the claim of pure lineage. Aśvaghōṣa's conclusion is that caste is a "mere mental construction, empty of any objective reality"²¹—a position that, as Vincent Eltschinger has shown, represents a sustained Buddhist philosophical tradition of critiquing the "realist interpretation of social denominations."²² Crucially, the *Vajrasūcī*'s deconstruction targets epistemic caste directly: if there is no ontological basis for distinguishing a Brahmin from a Śūdra, then there is no ontological basis for distinguishing their capacities for knowledge. The epistemic hierarchy dissolves alongside the social one.

IV

The Skandhas and the Deconstruction of Essentialist Personhood

The Buddha's teaching on the five aggregates (*pañca khandha*) provides the analytical method by which the illusion of a fixed self is dismantled. The five aggregates: form (*rūpa*), sensation (*vedanā*), perception (*saññā*), mental formations (*sankhāra*), and consciousness (*viññāṇa*), are presented in the Pali Canon not as components that constitute a self but as the exhaustive analysis of what is conventionally mistaken for one. The *Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta* (SN 22.59) records the Buddha's systematic examination of each aggregate through three interconnected arguments: each aggregate is impermanent (*anicca*), therefore unsatisfactory (*dukkha*), and therefore not-self (*anattā*).²³

The logic is precise. If form were truly self, if it possessed *svabhāva* (inherent, independent existence), it would not be subject to change. But the body of infancy is not the body of youth, which is not the body of old age. Cells regenerate, organs fail, skin changes. Because form is impermanent, it is unsatisfactory: we cannot maintain the body in the state we desire. And because we lack sovereignty over form, we cannot

²¹Aśvaghōṣa, *Vajrasūcī*, in *Life of the Buddha*, trans. Olivelle, 393–415. For analysis, see Vincent Eltschinger, *Caste and Buddhist Philosophy* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2012), 31–68.

²²Vincent Eltschinger, *Caste and Buddhist Philosophy: Continuity of Some Buddhist Arguments against the Realist Interpretation of Social Denominations* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2012).

²³Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans., *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Saṃyutta Nikāya* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2000), 889. See *Anattalakkhaṇa Sutta*, SN 22.59.

command, “Let my form be thus; let my form not be thus,” it cannot be identified as self, for selfhood in the Brahmanical sense implies precisely such sovereign control.²⁴ The same analysis applies to each of the remaining aggregates. Sensations arise and pass away unbidden. Perceptions shift. Mental formations are conditioned responses, not autonomous acts of will. Even consciousness, the most tempting candidate for selfhood, is revealed as arising dependently upon the other aggregates and upon contact between sense organs and sense objects.

Herbert Guenther characterizes the aggregates as “a unitary process of becoming in which no part can be isolated and called a self.”²⁵ This process-oriented understanding is central to Ambedkar’s appropriation of the teaching. Where the Brahmanical tradition posits an essential self that has various properties, including, crucially, a caste identity and a corresponding epistemic capacity, the Buddhist analysis reveals only a dynamic flux of processes that are conventionally designated as a “person.” The distinction matters enormously for social and epistemological philosophy alike. If persons are constituted by aggregates in constant transformation rather than by fixed essences, then the assignment of permanent social categories based on “essential nature” is not merely unjust but incoherent. It mistakes a conventional designation for an ultimate reality. And the assignment of permanent *epistemic* categories—the claim that certain persons are by nature knowers and others by nature unknowers—is equally incoherent, for the same reason: there is no fixed essence that could ground a fixed cognitive capacity.

This is the philosophical mechanism by which the *skandha* analysis dismantles epistemic caste. If the “self” is a conventional designation for five aggregates in constant flux, then the “Brahmin self” and the “Śūdra self” are equally conventional designations, equally devoid of inherent nature. The Brahmin’s supposed natural capacity for knowledge is no more an intrinsic property of the aggregates that compose a Brahmin than the Śūdra’s supposed natural incapacity is an intrinsic property of the aggregates that compose a Śūdra. Both designations are imposed upon a process that, in its actual nature, supports neither. The *skandha* analysis does not merely argue that caste is socially constructed (a claim that could be made from many philosophical traditions); it argues that the very *self* to which caste and epistemic capacity is attributed, is itself a construction. There is no essential subject who *is* a Brahmin or a Śūdra, because there is no essential subject at all.

Ambedkar makes this connection explicit in *The Buddha and His Dhamma* when he presents the Buddha’s engagement with the Vedic tradition. The text records the

²⁴Ibid. The Pali formula is: *netam mama, neso ’ham asmi, na meso attā* (“this is not mine, this I am not, this is not my self”).

²⁵Herbert V. Guenther, *Philosophy and Psychology in the Abhidharma* (Berkeley: Shambhala, 1976), 231–232.

Buddha's assessment that the Vedic Rishis were "groping for the truth but did not reach it," and details the Buddha's selective acceptance of Sāṅkhya philosophy: he accepted that reality must rest on proof, that there was no logical basis for presuming God's existence, and that *dukkha* pervades the world—while bypassing the remainder of Kapila's system as irrelevant to his purpose.²⁶ What Ambedkar highlights in this selective appropriation is the Buddha's methodological commitment to empirical analysis over speculative metaphysics; a commitment that, when applied to the question of personhood, yields the *skandha* analysis rather than the *ātman* doctrine, and that, when applied to the question of knowledge, yields a universally accessible practice of investigation rather than a restricted body of revealed truth.

The body contemplation practices preserved in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* (MN 10) extend this analysis experientially. The practitioner is instructed to contemplate the body's constituent parts: "head-hairs, body-hairs, nails, teeth, skin, flesh, sinews, bones," revealing that "body" is a conceptual designation for a collection of parts, each of which can be further subdivided.²⁷ Śāntideva, in the *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, extends this analysis through the lens of emptiness: when we search for the body in its parts, we find only components; when we search for those components in *their* parts, the process continues without terminus. The body, like the chariot in Nāgasena's famous analogy in the *Milindapañha*, cannot be located as a substantial entity.²⁸ For Ambedkar's purposes, the critical implication is that if the "person" is a conventional designation applied to a collection of conditioned processes, then "caste identity" is a conventional designation applied to a conventional designation; a second-order abstraction with no ground in ultimate reality.

V

Dependent Origination and the Emptiness of Caste

The doctrine of Dependent Origination (*paṭiccasamuppāda*) provides the systematic framework within which the *skandha* analysis and the teaching of *anattā* are situated. The classical Pali formulation is terse and comprehensive: "This being, that becomes; from the arising of this, that arises. This not being, that does not become; from the ceasing of this, that ceases."²⁹ The doctrine describes a principle of conditioned co-

²⁶Ambedkar, BAWS, vol. 11, *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, Book I, Part III ("Buddha and His Predecessors"), §§20–36.

²⁷Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans., *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1995), 145 (Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, MN 10).

²⁸Śāntideva, *A Guide to the Bodhisattva Way of Life*, trans. Vesna A. Wallace and B. Alan Wallace (Ithaca: Snow Lion, 1997), ch. IX, vv. 56–60.

²⁹See note 2 above

production: phenomena arise not from a single cause in linear sequence but through specific combinations of conditions, and they cease when those conditions cease.

A common misinterpretation of Dependent Origination reduces it to linear causation: A causes B, which causes C. The canonical teaching is more radical: it describes the *interdependent* arising of phenomena, where each element in the chain both conditions and is conditioned by the others. The twelve links (*nidānas*)—from ignorance (*avijjā*) through formations (*sankhāra*), consciousness, name-and-form, six sense bases, contact, feeling, craving, clinging, becoming, birth, and aging-and-death—constitute not a temporal sequence but a structural description of how the experience of a “self” in a “world” is generated and sustained moment by moment.

Ambedkar’s interpretation of this doctrine is articulated most fully in his treatment of Buddha’s concept of *sūnyatā* (emptiness). In *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, Ambedkar glosses *sūnyatā* not as nihilism or metaphysical void but as “the potential changes occurring at every moment in the phenomenal world.”³⁰ This interpretation is philosophically significant: emptiness, for Ambedkar, is not a negative property (the absence of something that should be there) but a positive condition (the openness of phenomena to transformation). Things are empty of fixed essence precisely because they are full of conditioned processes in constant flux. This reading aligns with the Mādhyamaka tradition’s insistence that emptiness and dependent origination are not two separate doctrines but two descriptions of the same reality: phenomena are empty because they arise dependently, and they arise dependently *because* they are empty of inherent nature.

Applied to caste, the implications are devastating to essentialist ideology. If all phenomena arise through interconnected causes and conditions, then no social category can possess the fixed, inherent nature that caste ideology attributes to it. The Brahmin’s “purity” is not an essential property but a socially sustained designation; the Śūdra’s “impurity” is equally devoid of ontological ground. In Ambedkar’s formulation, “being is becoming,” what we take to be stable entities are in fact processes in constant transformation. Caste, when subjected to the analysis of Dependent Origination, reveals itself as a contingent formation sustained by specific historical, social, and cognitive conditions: economic exploitation, political power, epistemic enclosure, and, most fundamentally, the wrong view that persons possess fixed essences. Applied to the epistemic dimension, dependent origination reveals that the capacity for knowledge, as *guṇas* the Gita attributes to persons, are themselves dependently arisen, products of conditioning, not expressions of inherent nature. The capacity for knowledge is a function of conditions (education, access, opportunity) rather than of birth. The Brahmin’s knowledge is conditioned, not innate; the Śūdra’s

³⁰Ambedkar, *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, BAWs, vol. 11, introduction, 6.

ignorance is produced by epistemic enclosure and epistemocide, not by ontological deficiency or *tamas*-dominated *svabhāva*.

Ambedkar traced the historical dimension of this analysis in “Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Ancient India.” His central claim that “the history of India is nothing but a history of a mortal conflict between Buddhism and Brahmanism,”³¹ is often read as political polemic, but it carries a precise philosophical meaning within the framework established here. The “conflict” is between two incompatible views of reality: one that posits fixed essences and derives social and epistemic hierarchy from them, and one that reveals the dependent origination and essential emptiness of all phenomena, including social categories and claims to knowledge. Ambedkar’s account of the decline of Buddhism in India, through the combination of Brahmanical reassertion, the absorption of Buddhist elements into “Hinduism” (including the appropriation of the Buddha as an avatar of Vishnu), and the destruction of monastic institutions by Muslim invasions,³² is thus not merely a historical narrative but an account of how wrong view reasserted itself after the Buddhist “revolution” in right view, and, simultaneously, an account of epistemocide: the destruction of the institutions through which non-Brahmanical knowledge had been produced and transmitted.

Ambedkar was careful to distinguish between the “decline” and the “fall” of Buddhism, attributing the former to the internal dilution of Buddhist distinctiveness as Brahmanism absorbed its elements, and the latter to the external destruction of monastic centres. Peter Harvey’s analysis supports Ambedkar’s general framework while adding nuance: the surface similarities between Hindu and Mahāyāna devotional cults may have led the laity to perceive the two traditions as interchangeable, while Brahmanism’s integration into caste-based life rituals ensured its survival in a way that monastery-centered Buddhism could not match.³³ Gail Omvedt, drawing on A.L. Basham, emphasizes that even Buddhist families had their life rituals handled by Brahmins, enabling the gradual reabsorption of Buddhism into a reformed Brahmanism.³⁴ The philosophical point remains: the reassertion of caste was simultaneously the reassertion of *ātman* doctrine and the restoration of epistemic enclosure - the re-establishment of a knowledge hierarchy grounded in the fiction of fixed, essential selfhood.

³¹Ambedkar, *Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Ancient India*, BAWS, vol. 3, part III, 267.

³²Ambedkar, *Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Ancient India*, BAWS, vol. 3, 229–232

³³Peter Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhism: Teachings, History, Practices*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 195–197.

³⁴Gail Omvedt, *Buddhism in India: Challenging Brahmanism and Caste* (New Delhi: Sage, 2003), 160–161, citing A.L. Basham, *The Wonder That Was India* (1954; repr. New York: Grove Press, 1959), 265–266.

VI

The Bhagavat Gita as Philosophic Defence of Caste-Self: Wrong View Codified

If the Upanishadic doctrine of *ātman/swayambhu* provides the metaphysical foundation of caste, and the *Manusmriti* provides its juridical enforcement, then the Bhagavad Gita provides what Ambedkar identified as its most sophisticated *philosophical defence*. In his essay “Krishna and His Gita,” Ambedkar argued that the Gita came into being specifically to counter the Buddhist challenge to Brahmanism. The text does not merely assert the divine origin of *catuvarṇa*; it offers a philosophical justification for caste by linking it to the theory of innate, inborn qualities (*guṇas*) derived from Sāṅkhya philosophy. As Ambedkar writes, “The fixing of the Varna of man is not an arbitrary act, says the Bhagavat Gita. But it is fixed according to his innate, inborn qualities.”³⁵ This move is philosophically significant: the Gita shifts the ground of caste’s legitimacy from pure divine fiat to a quasi-naturalistic claim about the inherent constitution of persons. In doing so, it provides the caste system with exactly the kind of philosophical respectability that Ambedkar’s Buddhist critique was designed to dismantle.

Ambedkar’s reading of the Gita as a response to Buddhism is central to his broader thesis that “the history of India is nothing but a history of a mortal conflict between Buddhism and Brahmanism.” The Gita, in this reading, is not a timeless spiritual text but a historical intervention—a counter-revolutionary document produced to shore up the Brahmanical order against the Buddhist assault. Ambedkar identifies the specific doctrines under threat: the Buddha had preached non-violence, condemning the animal sacrifices of the *karma kaṇḍa*; he had attacked *catuvarṇa* with “some of the most offensive similes”; Śūdras and women had become *sannyasis*, a status that the counter-revolution sought to deny them. The Brahmanical response, according to Ambedkar, was twofold: first, to assert that “these things were ordained by the Vedas, the Vedas were infallible, therefore the dogmas were not to be questioned”; and second, to provide a more philosophically respectable defence through the Gita’s *guṇa* theory.³⁶

Ambedkar exposed a fundamental logical flaw in this defence. The Sāṅkhya system recognizes three *guṇas*: *sattva* (goodness, light), *rajas* (passion, activity), and *tamas* (darkness, inertia). But *catuvarṇa* requires *four* categories: Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya, and Śūdra. As Ambedkar observes, “How can a system of four varnas be defended on the basis of a philosophy which does not recognise more

³⁵Ambedkar, *Essays on the Bhagvat Gita: Philosophic Defence of Counter-Revolution*, BAWS, vol. 3, 362.

³⁶*Ibid.*, 363.

than three varnas?"³⁷ The logical incoherence reveals the apologetic nature of the Gita's philosophical apparatus: the Sāṅkhya framework is pressed into service not because it fits the social reality but because any philosophical framework is better than naked assertion. The mismatch between three *guṇas* and four *varṇas* exposes the Gita's defence of caste as post hoc rationalization rather than genuine philosophical derivation.

More revealing still are the Gita's two injunctions that Ambedkar identifies as the practical enforcement of its philosophical defence. The first, in Chapter III, verse 26, instructs that "a wise man should not by counter propaganda create a doubt in the mind of an ignorant person who is follower of Karma kand", in other words, one must not agitate people to rebel against *caturvarṇa*. The second, in Chapter XVIII, verses 41–48, ties salvation itself to the performance of *varṇa*-specific duty, warning that "a Shudra however great he may be as a devotee will not get salvation if he has transgressed the duty of the Shudra, namely to live and die in the service of the higher classes."³⁸ *Bhagavad-Gītā* teaches, it is better to engage in one's occupation...one should not give up the work born of his nature.³⁹ Read together, these injunctions constitute what in the epistemological framework of this article must be recognized as a double enclosure: the first injunction encloses the questioning of caste (epistemic enclosure of critical thought itself), while the second encloses salvation within caste duty (soteriological enclosure). The Śūdra is denied not only the right to knowledge but the right to challenge the system, and not only the right to challenge but even the possibility of spiritual liberation outside the prescribed caste function.

From the Buddhist philosophical perspective that Ambedkar adopted, the Gita's defence of caste constitutes a paradigmatic instance of wrong view—what the Pali texts term *pāpa-ditṭhikaṃ*, the holding of evil or wrong views.⁴⁰ The term is significant: in the Pali Canon, *pāpa-ditṭhikaṃ* does not merely designate intellectual error but marks a morally consequential distortion of reality that generates suffering for oneself and

³⁷Ibid., 363. Ambedkar's argument is that the Sāṅkhya system recognizes only three *guṇas* (*sattva*, *rajas*, *taṃas*) while *caturvarṇa* requires four categories, exposing a logical incoherence in the Gita's philosophical defense of caste.

³⁸Ibid., 365. The injunction in Chapter III, verse 26, forbids counter-propaganda against *karma kaṇḍa*; Chapter XVIII, verses 41–48, ties salvation to the performance of *varṇa*-specific duty.

³⁹Bhaktivedanta Swami A.C., *Bhagavad-Gītā*, (II ed)The Bhaktivedanta Book Trust, Los Angeles, 2021, 798-800

⁴⁰The Pali term *pāpa-ditṭhikaṃ* (holder of wrong view, or one given to evil views) appears in the Majjhima Nikāya and the Anguttara Nikāya. See Bhikkhu Bodhi, trans., *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 1995), and *The Numerical Discourses of the Buddha* (Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2012). The designation marks not merely intellectual error but a morally consequential distortion of reality that generates suffering for oneself and others.

others. The Gita's claim that persons possess innate, inborn qualities that determine their *varṇa* is, in Buddhist analysis, a specific instance of the more general error of attributing *svabhāva* (inherent self-nature) to what are in fact dependently arisen and constantly changing phenomena. The *guṇas* are presented as fixed properties of persons; the Buddha's teaching reveals that all properties of persons are impermanent, conditioned, and devoid of inherent existence. The Gita's philosophical defence of caste is thus not merely politically objectionable but *ontologically false* from the standpoint of Dependent Origination: it mistakes contingent formations for inherent essences, conventional designations for ultimate realities.

Ambedkar recognized that the Gita occupies a peculiar intermediate position in the Brahmanical tradition. As he observes in Volume 3 of his *Writings and Speeches*, "The Gita does not, like Buddhism, absolutely reject the Vedas, but it shelves them. The Gita does not totally root out caste. It places caste on a less untenable basis."⁴¹ This observation is philosophically acute. The Gita's strategy is not to defend caste on the old grounds of Vedic infallibility—grounds that the Buddhist critique had made untenable—but to provide new, quasi-rational grounds through the *guṇa* theory. It concedes part of the Buddhist criticism (the arbitrary authority of the Vedas) in order to save the essential Brahmanical institution (caste hierarchy). Ambedkar saw through this strategy: the new philosophical basis is no less a wrong view than the old scriptural basis, because both attribute fixed, inherent properties to what Buddhism reveals as a flux of conditioned processes. Whether one claims that a person is a Śūdra because the Vedas say so or because innate *guṇas* make it so, the fundamental error is the same—the attribution of *svabhāva* to the caste-self. The Buddha's teaching of *anattā* dissolves both foundations simultaneously.

The Gita's defence of caste also reveals the *epistemocidal* dimension of the counter-revolution with particular clarity. The injunction against "counter propaganda", against creating doubt in the minds of those who follow *karma kaṇḍa*, is an explicit instruction to suppress critical inquiry. It sanctifies ignorance: not the innocent ignorance of those who have not yet encountered the truth, but the *enforced* ignorance of those who are forbidden from questioning the foundations of their subordination. This is epistemic enclosure operating not merely through restriction of access to texts but through the prohibition of thought itself. When the Gita instructs the "wise man" not to create doubt, it deputizes the intellectual class as enforcers of epistemic enclosure – turning the Brahmanical guardians of knowledge into active agents of epistemicide against critical consciousness. Ambedkar's Buddhist reading exposes this for what it is: the most insidious form of wrong view, one that not only distorts reality but actively prevents others from seeing clearly.

⁴¹Ambedkar, BAWS, vol. 3, 386. The passage discusses how the Gita "shelves" the Vedas and places caste "on a less untenable basis" without rooting it out, in contrast to Buddhism's absolute rejection.

VII

From Deconstruction to Epistemic Liberation: Conversion and the Navayāna Buddhist Movement

Ambedkar's philosophical deconstruction of caste was inseparable from his practical programme of conversion. If caste rests on wrong view, and if wrong view generates epistemic enclosure, epistemic caste, and epistemocide, then the remedy is not social reform alone but a fundamental shift in the conceptual framework through which persons understand themselves, their world, and their capacity to know. Ambedkar's announcement at the Depressed Classes Conference at Yeola on 13 October 1935, "I will not die a Hindu," inaugurated a twenty-one-year process in which the philosophical critique and the practical programme developed in tandem.⁴²

The delay between announcement and conversion was not indecision but deliberation. As Zelliott documents, Ambedkar considered and rejected multiple alternatives: Sikhism had the advantage of being an Indic religion but did not provide the philosophical resources he sought; Islam and Christianity carried associations with colonial power that complicated the question of national identity. More significantly, Ambedkar judged that "none of the available choices were intellectually and politically suitable to him," and that constitutional work offered a more immediate method of change.⁴³ It was only after 1950, with the constitution drafted and Ambedkar's disillusionment with the pace of social transformation growing, that Buddhism emerged as the clear choice, not as a default but as the tradition whose philosophical foundations most thoroughly dismantled the ontological and epistemological architecture of caste.

The Buddha and His Dhamma, completed shortly before Ambedkar's death in 1956, represents the culmination of this dual project of philosophical deconstruction and epistemic reconstruction. The text is structured as a biographical narrative of the Buddha, but its introduction establishes a hermeneutic framework that transforms it into something more: an argument about how to read Buddhism for emancipatory purposes. Ambedkar frames four "problems": the historical circumstances of the Buddha's renunciation; whether the Four Noble Truths belong to the original teaching; the apparent contradiction between the denial of *ātman* and the doctrines of karma and rebirth; and the purpose of the monastic community.⁴⁴ The very act of framing

⁴²For a detailed account, see Christophe Jaffrelot, *Dr Ambedkar and Untouchability: Analysing and Fighting Caste* (London: Hurst, 2005), 119–122; Zelliott, *Ambedkar's World*, 155–162.

⁴³Zelliott, *Ambedkar's World: The Making of Babasaheb and the Dalit Movement*, Navayana Publications, New Delhi, 161–170.

⁴⁴Ambedkar, BAWs, vol. 11, *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, introduction, 6. Aakash Singh Rathore and Ajay Verma, eds., *B.R. Ambedkar: The Buddha and His Dhamma—A Critical Edition* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2011).

these problems, of a Dalit intellectual subjecting the Buddhist canonical tradition to critical hermeneutic scrutiny, is itself a reversal of epistemic caste. Ambedkar does not approach the tradition as a supplicant seeking admission to an enclosed body of knowledge; he approaches it as a critical thinker exercising the epistemic agency that the Brahmanical system denied to persons of his birth. The introduction closes by inviting readers to participate in the making of the text by contributing their own solutions, an invitation that extends epistemic agency to the community of readers, dissolving the model of knowledge as a restricted possession transmitted from authority to recipient.⁴⁵

The text's treatment of the "Campaign of Conversion" draws on the biographical tradition of Aśvaghōṣa's *Buddhacarita* while reframing it for Ambedkar's purposes. The Buddha's conversion of followers across social categories, the high and the low, men and women, the fallen and the criminal, is presented as evidence of a religion that refuses the essentialist distinctions upon which caste depends.⁴⁶ Ambedkar positions his own conversion as continuous with this original campaign: a revival of the Buddhist movement against caste essentialism, interrupted by the historical "counter-revolution" of Brahmanism and its accompanying epistemocide.

The conversion ceremony of 14 October 1956 at Nagpur, attended by approximately half a million people, embodied the philosophical argument in ritual form. Ambedkar received conversion from an eighty-three-year-old *bhikkhu* from Burma, then administered the three refuges (*tisaraṇa*) and the five precepts (*pañca sīla*) in Pali, maintaining continuity with the classical Theravāda tradition.⁴⁷ The twenty-two vows that followed, however, were Ambedkar's own composition, delivered in Marathi, the language of his community, the language that epistemic enclosure had designated as unfit for sacred knowledge. The choice of language is itself an act of epistemic liberation: sacred truth is now spoken in the vernacular of the formerly excluded.

The twenty-two vows perform the philosophical argument analyzed in this article. The first five vows negate Hindu theological claims, with the fifth: "I do not believe that Lord Buddha was the incarnation of Vishnu. I believe this propaganda is mischievous and false," directly addressing the Brahmanical strategy of absorbing Buddhism that Ambedkar identified as central to its historical decline. Vow nineteen: discarding the Hindu religion, enacts the rejection of wrong view. The remaining vows affirm

⁴⁵Ambedkar, *The Buddha and His Dhamma*, BAWs, vol. 11, introduction, 8.

⁴⁶Patrick Olivelle, introduction to Aśvaghōṣa, *Life of the Buddha*, trans. Patrick Olivelle (New York: New York University Press, 2008), xx.

⁴⁷For Ambedkar's engagement with Pali, see Vasant Moon, *Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar* (New Delhi: National Book Trust, 2002), 206; Eleanor Zelliot, *Ambedkar's World: The Making of Babasaheb and the Dalit Movement* (New Delhi: Navayana, 2004), 250.

Buddhist principles.⁴⁸ The vows thus combine *de-brahmanization* (the dismantling of wrong view and the breaking of epistemic enclosure) with *re-orientation* (the adoption of right view and the reconstruction of epistemic agency), corresponding exactly to the dual movement of Ambedkar's philosophical project: the deconstruction of caste-self through the *skandha* analysis and the reconstruction of selfless, epistemically liberated personhood through *anattā*. The conversion is, at its deepest level, an act of collective epistemic self-determination: a community that had been defined for millennia as incapable of knowledge now claims the right to know, to interpret, and to construct meaning on its own terms.

VII

Conclusion: Being as Becoming, Knowing as Liberation

Ambedkar's engagement with Buddhist philosophy constitutes a distinctive contribution to both Caste studies and Buddhist Studies – predominantly in the field of socially engaged Buddhism. By identifying the structural homology between *ātman* doctrine and caste ideology, Ambedkar reframed the social question of caste as a philosophical question about the nature of selfhood, and, as this article has argued, as an epistemological question about the nature of knowledge and the right to know. The three categories examined in this article: *swayambhu*, *skandha*, and *śūnyata*, represent not separate arguments but three moments of a single philosophical movement: the identification of caste's metaphysical and epistemological foundation in the doctrine of self-existent selfhood; the analytical dismantling of that foundation through the Buddhist teaching that what we call "self" is a conventional designation for five aggregates in constant flux; and the positive articulation of an alternative understanding of personhood grounded in selflessness, dependent origination, and universal epistemic capacity.

The three epistemological concepts introduced in this article—epistemic enclosure, epistemic caste, and epistemicide—provide an analytical vocabulary for naming what Ambedkar's Buddhist critique was designed to dismantle. Epistemic enclosure names the institutional mechanism by which knowledge is restricted to a hereditary elite. Epistemic caste names the ontological claim that naturalizes that restriction by grounding it in the supposed essential natures of persons. Epistemicide names the systematic destruction of alternative knowledge traditions and the denial of epistemic capacity to subordinated groups. Together, these three concepts reveal caste as not merely a social hierarchy but a *knowledge regime*, a comprehensive system for controlling who can know, what can be known, and on whose authority knowledge

⁴⁸Zelliot, *Ambedkar's World: The Making of Babasaheb and the Dalit Movement*, Navayana Publications, New Delhi, 169–170. The twenty-two vows are reproduced in full in Zelliot's text.

claims are validated. Ambedkar's Buddhist intervention addressed all three levels: breaking the enclosure by rejecting Vedic authority, dissolving epistemic caste by denying *svabhāva*, and reversing epistemocide by reviving the Buddhist tradition as a framework for non-Brahmanical knowledge production.

The doctrine of Dependent Origination provides the overarching framework for this movement. Because all phenomena arise through interconnected causes and conditions, no phenomenon - including what we call "caste" or "epistemic capacity," can possess the fixed, inherent nature that essentialist ideology attributes to it. Ambedkar's reading of *śūnyatā* as "the potential changes occurring at every moment" reframes emptiness not as absence but as possibility, the condition that makes transformation, including social and epistemic transformation, possible. If things possessed fixed essences, change would be metaphysically impossible; precisely because they do not, emancipation is achievable.

If I put in Dōgen's formulation: "To study the Buddha Way is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self,"⁴⁹ captures something of the paradox at the heart of Ambedkar's project. Ambedkar studied the self—the caste-self, the *ātman*-self, the *swayambhu*-self—with extraordinary rigor and historical depth. And through that study, he arrived at the annihilation of self: the recognition that the self which caste claims to classify, rank, and assign differential worth and differential knowledge does not, in the final analysis, exist as an independent, fixed entity. What remains after this deconstruction is not nihilism but what Ambedkar called the Eightfold Path and the ten *pāramitās*—a practical programme for living without the conceptual, social, and epistemic prison of caste-self. The Navayāna school cannot be classified as solely rational or solely mystical because its ultimate aim—emancipation through the dissolution of the fiction of inherent selfhood - operates simultaneously at the philosophical, social, epistemological, and spiritual levels.

The Navayāna movement that Ambedkar initiated thus represents not merely a religious conversion but an act of *epistemic liberation*: the reclamation by formerly excluded communities of the right to know, to interpret, to construct meaning, and to define the terms on which reality is understood. In a system built on epistemic enclosure, epistemic caste, and epistemocide, the most radical act is not to demand admission to the enclosed knowledge but to demonstrate, as the Buddha demonstrated, and as Ambedkar demonstrated after him, that the knowledge was never the exclusive possession of anyone, because the self to which it was attributed never existed in the first place. Nothing is fixed, nothing is eternal, and therefore everything, including the most entrenched structures of social and epistemic oppression, is subject to change and thus subject to transformation.

⁴⁹On Dōgen's *genjōkōan*, see Hee-Jin Kim, *Dōgen on Meditation and Thinking* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2007), 55–78.

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