



INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES AND INTERDISCIPLINARY STUDIES

(Peer-reviewed, Refereed, Indexed & Open Access Journal)

DOI : 03.2021-11278686

ISSN : 2582-8568

IMPACT FACTOR : 8.428 (SJIF 2026)

Vernacular Literature as Anti-Colonial Knowledge in British India: Language, Education, and Cultural Resistance

Nitya Tak

Neerja Modi School,
Jaipur (Rajasthan, India)

Dr. Sejal Ashok Yadav

HustleEd Consultants,
Jaipur (Rajasthan, India)

DOI No. **03.2021-11278686** DOI Link :: <https://doi-ds.org/doi/10.2026-25688751/IRJHIS2610001>

Abstract:

This paper examines vernacular literary production in colonial India as a domain of epistemic contestation rather than merely cultural expression or nationalist sentiment. Focusing on Marathi, Urdu, and Tamil intellectual traditions between 1835 and 1943, it argues that vernacular writers did not simply oppose colonial rule politically, but challenged the epistemological hierarchies through which colonial authority constituted itself. The year 1835 marks a decisive rupture with Thomas Babington Macaulay's Minute on Education, which institutionalised English as the language of higher learning and repositioned vernacular traditions as culturally expressive yet intellectually subordinate. Against this restructuring of linguistic authority, vernacular discourse emerged as a site through which alternative histories, moral frameworks, pedagogical models, and conceptions of modernity were articulated.

Through a comparative reading of Gulamgiri, Musaddas, and Ini Varum Ulagam, the paper traces distinct yet interconnected modes of vernacular knowledge production. Phule reinterprets Brahminical mythology and caste history through Bahujan Marathi in order to expose the relationship between language, religion, and social domination. Hali transforms Urdu poetry from a courtly literary form into a pedagogical and sociological mode of public reasoning centred on moral and intellectual reform. Periyar moves beyond both colonial modernity and civilisational revivalism to articulate a radically rationalist and futurist critique of caste, religion, patriarchy, and inherited social structures. Read together, these texts demonstrate that vernacular writing in colonial India functioned not merely as a medium of communication but as a theoretical space capable of reorganising the terms through which history, society, and authority were understood.

Methodologically, the paper employs critical discourse analysis of secondary literature to examine how vernacular intellectual traditions have been framed within colonial and postcolonial scholarship. In doing so, it distinguishes between the "post-colonial" as a temporal condition following formal empire and the "postcolonial" as an epistemic critique of colonial structures of knowledge. Although the texts examined here were produced within the colonial period, they are read as postcolonial interventions insofar as they destabilise the discursive foundations of colonial epistemology itself. By repositioning vernacular literature as a site of intellectual and theoretical production, this paper argues that the making of modern Indian thought cannot be understood solely through colonial institutions or English language discourse, but must also be located within the vernacular publics that reconfigured the epistemic foundations of modernity from within colonial rule itself.

Keywords: Vernacular Literature; Colonial Epistemology; Postcolonial Thought; Epistemic Resistance

Introduction:

British colonialism in India was not only a political and economic project but an epistemological one. Beginning with the territorial consolidation of the East India Company in the late eighteenth century and intensifying after Crown rule in 1858, colonial governance reorganised systems of law, education, and administration through a logic of classification and hierarchy.¹ Language stood at the centre of this restructuring. Colonial rule did not merely introduce English as an additional language; it institutionalised a linguistic order that redefined authority, legitimacy, and knowledge itself.

The decisive moment came with the educational reforms of the early nineteenth century. Thomas Babington Macaulay's 1835 Minute on Education articulated a policy that privileged English as the medium for higher learning, framing European literature and science as inherently superior to Indian intellectual traditions. English was constructed as rational, modern, and universal, while vernacular languages were repositioned as local, emotional, and culturally expressive but intellectually limited. This was not a neutral pedagogical reform; it was a discursive act that reordered epistemic hierarchies.

The institutional privileging of English had profound consequences for Marathi, Tamil, and Urdu literary traditions. These languages had long-standing histories of philosophical argumentation, ethical reflection, devotional and reformist discourse, and political commentary. Yet under colonial educational regimes, vernacular literature was increasingly displaced from formal curricula and scholarly authority. Its relegation did not amount to disappearance; rather, it involved a subtle but systematic reframing. Vernacular texts were tolerated as cultural heritage but stripped of epistemic legitimacy. In this sense, colonial linguistic policy operated as a form of epistemic erasure: it narrowed the domain of what could count as "knowledge" and tied intellectual credibility to English.

However, vernacular writing in Marathi, Tamil, and Urdu did not function merely as repositories of cultural nostalgia or proto-nationalist sentiment. Across the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, writers, reformers, and educators in these languages produced sustained engagements with questions of history, morality, pedagogy, and sovereignty. They critiqued colonial curricula, reinterpreted classical traditions, debated social reform, and articulated alternative visions of community and political belonging. Vernacular literature thus became a site of epistemic intervention, challenging not only colonial power but the very categories through which knowledge was organised.

¹ Mark Cartwright, "Fall of the East India Company," *World History Encyclopedia*, October 26, 2022

This paper focuses on Marathi, Tamil, and Urdu as a deliberately selective comparative sample rather than an attempt at exhaustive coverage of India's linguistic landscape. The three languages represent materially different vernacular publics shaped by distinct histories of print, pedagogy, script, and regional political formations, allowing the argument—vernacular literature as anti-colonial knowledge to be tested across dissimilar cases. Marathi, Tamil, and Urdu differ in script traditions (Devanagari, Tamil, and Perso-Arabic), in their relationship to colonial education and linguistic standardisation, and in the ways literary discourse became entangled with reform, community, and political belonging.² This “most-different cases” design strengthens the analysis: if vernacular writing can be shown to function as an epistemic intervention across these divergent knowledge ecologies, the claim is less likely to be reducible to a single region, genre, or nationalist trajectory. The choice is also methodologically practical for critical discourse analysis of secondary literature, since each language has a substantial and contested scholarly archive through which epistemic hierarchies—between English and the vernacular, and between “culture” and “knowledge”—can be traced with analytic depth.

This paper argues that vernacular literature in British India must be understood as anti-colonial knowledge rather than simply nationalist expression. By reading Marathi, Tamil, and Urdu literary discourse comparatively, the study demonstrates how vernacular intellectual production contested the epistemological hierarchy instituted by colonial education. These interventions did not always reject modernity; rather, they reworked it, negotiated it, and translated it into alternative frameworks rooted in regional intellectual traditions.

Methodologically, this paper employs critical discourse analysis of secondary literature to examine how colonial linguistic policy and vernacular literary production have been interpreted, categorised, and hierarchised in existing scholarship. Rather than treating vernacular texts solely as historical artefacts, the analysis focuses on the discursive structures through which knowledge about them has been produced. Drawing on postcolonial theories of language and power, including insights from Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o³ and Frantz Fanon⁴, this study interrogates how colonial and postcolonial academic frameworks continue to reproduce or challenge epistemic hierarchies.

The intervention of this paper is twofold. First, it reconceptualises vernacular literature in Marathi, Tamil, and Urdu as a domain of intellectual labour that actively contested colonial knowledge regimes. Second, it demonstrates how historiography itself participates in the construction of epistemic

² A. R. Venkatachalapathy, *The Province of the Book: Scholars, Scribes, and Scribblers in Colonial Tamilnadu* (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2012), 45–52.

³ Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (London: James Currey, 1986), 4–16

⁴ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (New York: Grove Press, 1963), 210–20.

authority, often marginalising vernacular traditions by subsuming them under nationalism or cultural revivalism. By foregrounding vernacular discourse as a site of knowledge production, this study repositions language at the heart of anti-colonial thought and complicates prevailing narratives of colonial modernity.

Research Gap:

The institutional hegemony of English in the colonial educational institution and the consequential relegation of the vernacular languages in the production of formal knowledge have been widely recorded in the postcolonial scholarship. Colonial education machinery, especially since Macaulay's Minute of 1835, has been critically examined as the process by which European intellectual power was bureaucratised and Indian culture re-franchised as a culturally important, but epistemologically inferior, thing. However, the literature on the topic is oftentimes inclined to view vernacular writing as either a nostalgic cultural remnant that has remained in the interstices of colonial modernity, or as proto-nationalist mobilisation that would later give rise to independence movements in the twentieth century. This periodisation and teleology covers up the fact that vernacular literature itself is in some form of simultaneous intellectual project with its own epistemological assertions, argumentative seriousness and conscious pursuit of questions of knowledge, power and truth. The hegemony of such an interpretive frame has produced twice: firstly, scholars run the risk of essentialising vernacular traditions as being repositories of mythical pre-colonial purity; secondly, they drain vernacular intellectual labour of its analytic specificity.

The majority of analyses currently in existence are confined to monolingual or single-tradition paradigms to study Marathi reform writing, Tamil literary renaissance, or Urdu journalism in a more or less vacuum relative to each other. The result of this methodological compartmentalisation is that it is hard to detect patterns of epistemic contestation that cut across regional or linguistic boundaries, to distinguish between vernacular writing that served as more of an expression of identity and vernacular writing that expressed more systematic concerns about the knowledge regimes presented in the colonial period, or to identify similar intellectual strategies in dissimilar situations. The conceptual equipment that has been bequeathed by postcolonial theory, despite its indispensability to the discussion of power and representation, tends to reproduce the very division that it is meant to condition the vernacular as a responsive category with a history of location in relation to colonial English instead of an independent field of thought with its own internal intellectual histories, argumentative agendas and developing traditions of debate. Such relational framing inevitably makes vernacular discourse intelligible only as a reaction to colonialism as opposed to being a productive location of knowledge production working by its own logic.

The processes by which the vernacular intellectuals strategically used, re-framed, and repurposed Indian philosophical, devotional and textual conceptual resources in service to expressing

an alternative set of structures of understanding frameworks that dealt with epistemology, historicity, ethics, and social organisation have not been well theorised. What did the writers of Marathi, Tamil, and Urdu do in simultaneously appealing to classical sources of philosophy and in the same breath participate in the contemporary discussions? What were the methods of their negotiation between the loyalty to tradition and the requirements of modern argumentation? These what might be called the questions are not thoroughly explored in the available literature, which many times advocates vernacular intellectuals as either traditionalists who need to guard against modernity or proto-modernists who gradually succumb to rational reform.

More so, the aspect of historiography itself as a contributor to epistemic hierarchies has been little subjected to critical analysis. Intellectual history and literary criticism still perpetuate a subordination of vernacular writings to nationalist histories, cultural revivalism models, or heritage preservation models, in which, although sympathetic, the vernacular writing is not valued so much on the basis of its intellectual merit, but because it is the writing that articulates local identity. The epistemic regimes by which scholarly knowledge on vernacular traditions has been generated such as the regional literature, cultural identity, lingo nationalism, etc. can continue to reproduce colonial epistemic regimes even as they seek to protect vernacular traditions against being marginalized.

Such interrelated gaps require a framework that does not see vernacular discussion as an addition to but a constitutive part of anti-colonial intellectual history, but, at the same time, addresses, to be critically analyzed, the ways in which the construction of knowledge on these traditions produces, challenges or alters colonialised categorisations. This necessitates an understanding of vernacular writing not as historical artifacts, but as epistemological intervention, and both the contents of vernacular thought and the historical forms that it has been revealed to have had in making itself intelligible or unintelligible to later generations of scholars.

Research Question:

This paper asks whether, between 1835 and 1943, vernacular writers and thinkers in British India articulated deliberate epistemic resistance to colonial regimes of knowledge. Rather than treating vernacular literature as a derivative space of nationalist sentiment or cultural revival, the study examines how Marathi, Tamil, and Urdu intellectual traditions produced forms of thought that did not conform to colonial epistemological frameworks.

More specifically, the paper investigates how vernacular literary discourse enabled modes of reasoning, argumentation, and conceptualisation that exceeded the binary of nationalism and revivalism. It interrogates how vernacular writing operated as an autonomous domain of knowledge production that exceeded the binaries of colonial opposition and cultural revival, by transforming the epistemic terms through which knowledge, society, and authority were constituted.

Research Methodology:

This paper employs Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as an interpretive methodology to examine how colonial and postcolonial scholarship has constructed vernacular literature as an object of knowledge. Following Fairclough's⁵ understanding of discourse as constitutive of social reality, the analysis moves beyond the thematic content of literary texts to examine how language, literary form, and historiographical interpretation participate in the production and contestation of epistemic authority. Rather than asking only what vernacular writers argued, the study investigates how their texts reorganised the conditions under which knowledge could be produced, legitimised, and circulated within colonial India.

The analysis operates at three interconnected levels. First, it examines the linguistic strategies through which Phule, Hali, and Periyar reposition Marathi, Urdu, and Tamil as legitimate languages of intellectual inquiry. Second, it analyses literary form as an epistemic strategy, exploring how dialogue, didactic poetry, and speculative prose enable alternative modes of reasoning that challenge colonial assumptions about vernacular expression. Third, it examines the historiographical framing of these texts within secondary scholarship to identify the discursive categories through which vernacular intellectual labour has been interpreted, marginalised, or incorporated into narratives of nationalism, reform, and colonial modernity.

The selection of *Gulamgiri*, *Musaddas*, and *Ini Varum Ulagam* follows a most different case of comparative design. Although these texts emerge from distinct linguistic, religious, and regional traditions, each responds to the shared epistemic consequences of colonial linguistic hierarchy. Their comparison therefore enables the identification of common structures of vernacular knowledge production while preserving the historical specificity of each intellectual tradition.

Periodisation: 1835–1943

The temporal framework of this study is analytically grounded in shifts in colonial epistemic policy and corresponding transformations in vernacular intellectual production. Rather than treating colonial modernity as a singular or uniform process, this periodisation traces how Marathi, Urdu, and Tamil vernacular discourse progressively evolved from defensive assertions of legitimacy to autonomous forms of knowledge production that reworked the very foundations of modernity, history, and social authority.

The year 1835 marks a decisive epistemic rupture. Thomas Babington Macaulay's Minute on Education institutionalised English as the language of higher learning and formalised a hierarchy in which European knowledge was positioned as universal, while vernacular traditions were rendered

⁵Norman Fairclough, *Discourse and Social Change* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992), 62–64.

epistemically subordinate.⁶ This moment represents the consolidation of a colonial knowledge order in which legitimacy became increasingly tied to English education, bureaucratic literacy, and colonial pedagogy.

The period from 1835 to approximately 1870 is characterised by an initial phase of vernacular response. During these decades, vernacular intellectuals did not reject English outright; rather, they sought to demonstrate that their own languages were equally capable of sustaining philosophical reasoning, ethical reflection, and historical argumentation. Through essays, dialogues, translations, and pedagogical writing, they engaged in an internal reformulation of vernacular traditions while simultaneously contesting their dismissal within colonial epistemologies. This phase is marked by a defensive yet conceptually significant insistence on epistemic legitimacy.

From roughly 1870 onward, vernacular discourse increasingly shifted from defensive reform to affirmative knowledge production. The expansion of print culture, the proliferation of journals and newspapers, and the emergence of vernacular reading publics transformed regional languages into active sites of intellectual exchange. Debates on caste, religion, gender, education, science, and political authority unfolded within vernacular public spheres that no longer relied entirely on English language mediation. In texts such as Gulamgiri and Musaddas, vernacular writing begins not merely to contest colonial claims but to reorganise the conditions through which knowledge itself is produced and circulated.

The extension of this study to 1943 is methodologically significant. Unlike earlier reformist vernacular interventions that remained anchored in reinterpretations of history or social morality, *Ini Varum Ulagam* represents a qualitatively different stage in vernacular epistemic thought. Writing in the late colonial period, Periyar no longer seeks legitimacy through recovery of the past or inclusion within colonial modernity. Instead, he deploys the vernacular to theorise a radically alternative future grounded in rationalism, technological transformation, and the dismantling of caste, religion, patriarchy, and inherited social structures. The inclusion of 1943 therefore allows this paper to trace the evolution of vernacular intellectual production from epistemic defence to epistemic reconstruction. This periodisation also requires a reconsideration of nationalist chronology. While the onset of the Non-Cooperation Movement under Mahatma Gandhi⁷ undoubtedly transformed the political landscape, vernacular epistemic interventions did not disappear into nationalist mobilisation. Rather, texts such as *Ini Varum Ulagam* demonstrate that vernacular intellectual traditions continued to produce forms of critique that exceeded both colonial discourse and nationalist frameworks. The endpoint of 1943 thus reflects not a shift from literature to politics, but the consolidation of vernacular

⁶ Gauri Viswanathan, *Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 20–24.

⁷ Sumit Sarkar, *Modern India, 1885–1947* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989), 165–79.

writing as an autonomous domain of theoretical and epistemic production under late colonialism.

Selection of Texts and Analytical Rationale:

This study examines three texts from distinct vernacular traditions: *Gulamgiri* (1873) by Jyotirao Phule⁸ in Marathi, *Ini Varum Ulagam* (1943) by E.V. Ramasamy (Periyar)⁹ in Tamil, and *Musaddas* (1879) by Altaf Hussain Hali in Urdu.¹⁰ These texts are selected not as representative samples of their respective literatures, but as analytically significant interventions that foreground the epistemic capacities of vernacular writing within colonial India.

The choice of Marathi, Tamil, and Urdu enables a comparative framework across linguistically, regionally, and religiously distinct contexts, allowing the paper to examine vernacular knowledge production beyond a single cultural or ideological trajectory. Rather than treating vernacular resistance as region-specific or derivative of nationalist politics, this selection demonstrates that epistemic interventions through language were neither confined to a particular linguistic community nor reducible to a unified political program.

Across these texts, a notable shift is visible in the function of literature itself. Each author departs from established literary conventions in order to mobilise vernacular language as a medium for historical argumentation, social critique, and pedagogical intervention. Phule employs dialogic prose and reinterpretative historiography to critique Brahminical dominance; Periyar reconstructs utopian consciousness through radical projections of a post-caste and technologically liberated future; Hali transforms Urdu poetic form by introducing a didactic and reform-oriented framework that prioritises social analysis over aesthetic convention. In each case, literature is repositioned from a domain of cultural expression to a site of knowledge production.

A key point of convergence across these works lies in their use of history as an epistemic tool. Rather than accepting colonial or elite historiographies, all three authors produce counter-historical narratives that expose the constructed nature of dominant knowledge systems. Phule reinterprets mythological frameworks to argue that caste hierarchy is a product of historical domination rather than divine order. Periyar constructs an alternative future grounded in hyper-rationalist materialism (*pakutharivu*) to challenge both colonial developmental technologies and brahminical structures of social hierarchy. Hali revisits Islamic intellectual history to critique contemporary stagnation and articulate a framework for renewal grounded in rational inquiry. In doing so, these texts do not merely

⁸ Jyotirao Phule, *Gulamgiri* (Pune, 1873); reprinted in *Selected Writings of Jotirao Phule*, ed. G. P. Deshpande (New Delhi: LeftWord Books, 2002), 23–100.

⁹ E. V. Ramasamy (Periyar), *The World to Come* [English version of *Ini Varum Ulagam?*, 1943], trans. A. S. Venu, ed. S. F. N. Chelliah, 2nd rev. ed. (Chennai: Periyar Self-Respect Propaganda Institution, 2012).

¹⁰ Altaf Hussain Hali, *Musaddas-e Madd-o Jazr-e Islam* (1879), in *Hali's Musaddas: The Flow and Ebb of Islam*, trans. Christopher Shackle and Javed Majeed (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997), 99–160.

contest specific claims but interrogate the authority of dominant historical narratives themselves.

Equally significant is the rejection of externally imposed identities. Each text challenges classificatory regimes whether colonial, religious, or caste-based, that sought to define communities through fixed categories. Phule critiques the ideological foundations of the varna system¹¹, exposing its historical construction. Periyar rejects the category of the “sacred” by rearticulating Tamil social life through the dissolution of patriarchal marriage and caste-based divisions of labor. Hali contests colonial representations of Muslim society as decadent or irrational by reconstructing an ethical and intellectual tradition rooted in rationalism. Vernacular writing thus emerges as a site of self-definition, where communities articulate their own epistemic and historical frameworks rather than inheriting imposed identities.

Finally, all three texts converge on the question of education as a transformative force. However, education is not conceived merely as access to colonial institutions or administrative mobility. Instead, it is framed as a process of cognitive and epistemic reorientation. Phule emphasises education as a means of dismantling caste-based domination; Periyar situates speculative futurism as central to reclaiming vernacular intellectual agency from the stagnation inherited traditions; Hali advocates for a synthesis of modern scientific learning with ethical self-cultivation. In this sense, education functions not as assimilation into colonial modernity but as a strategy of intellectual autonomy.

Taken together, these texts illustrate that vernacular literature in colonial India operated as a domain of structured knowledge production. They do not simply express resistance or cultural identity; they generate alternative frameworks for understanding history, society, and authority. Their significance lies precisely in their refusal to conform either to colonial epistemological hierarchies or to narrowly defined nationalist or revivalist agendas.

Case Study I: Vernacular Epistemic Intervention in Jyotirao Phule’s *Gulamgiri* (1873)

In this section, I examine *Gulamgiri* (1873) by Jyotirao Phule as a foundational instance of vernacular literature functioning as a site of epistemic intervention within colonial India. Rather than reading the text solely as a critique of caste or an early articulation of anti Brahmin politics, I situate it within a broader reconfiguration of knowledge, language, and pedagogy.

A defining feature of *Gulamgiri* is its linguistic positioning. Phule’s decision to employ the spoken idiom of the Bahujan rather than a Sanskritised register of Marathi¹² constitutes a strategic intervention within a colonial linguistic order structured by overlapping regimes of power. Language

¹¹ Susan Bayly, *Caste, Society and Politics in India from the Eighteenth Century to the Modern Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 8–16.

¹² Rosalind O’Hanlon, *Caste, Conflict, and Ideology: Mahatma Jotirao Phule and Low Caste Protest in Nineteenth-Century Western India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 149–52.

here operates as a site through which epistemic authority is produced and regulated. By refusing both the Brahminical monopoly over classical forms and the colonial privilege of English as the language of rationality and modernity, Phule disrupts the conditions that determine what counts as legitimate knowledge. In doing so, he exposes how linguistic hierarchy sustains social exclusion by aligning access to “pure” language with access to power.

This repositioning enables the vernacular to emerge as a counter-discursive space that is neither subsumed within colonial epistemologies nor reducible to precolonial revivalism. It brings into view a social constituency excluded from formal regimes of knowledge while simultaneously constituting that constituency as an epistemic subject. This is not merely a question of accessibility. By displacing elite linguistic codes, Phule reconfigures the relationship between language and epistemic legitimacy. Knowledge is no longer anchored in scriptural authority or colonial institutional validation, but in its capacity to circulate within vernacular publics and sustain critical reasoning. What emerges is an alternative epistemic formation grounded in shared linguistic practice rather than institutional sanction. Drawing on oral traditions, Phule constructs a conversational framework¹³, which reinforces this intervention, through which complex arguments are articulated in accessible yet rigorous form. This mode of narration challenges the privileging of abstract, text centric knowledge systems by foregrounding dialogue as a legitimate method of intellectual engagement. In doing so, Phule bridges the divide between literate and non literate audiences while asserting the epistemic validity of vernacular and oral modes of reasoning.

At the level of content, Phule undertakes a systematic reinterpretation of Brahminical scriptures and mythological narratives. Rather than treating these texts as sacred, he subjects them to rational scrutiny and historical re-reading. Foundational claims such as the origin of Brahmins from the body of Brahma are interrogated as internally inconsistent narratives¹⁴ that serve to naturalise hierarchy. This shift transforms religious texts into objects of analysis and displaces their authority as unquestionable sources of knowledge.

This strategy is most visible in his reinterpretation of the ten avatars of Vishnu. Phule reads these narratives as allegories of conquest, mapping them onto phases of Aryan domination over indigenous populations. Figures such as Matsya, Kurma, and Varaha are recast as symbolic representations of invasion, while Parashurama embodies the violent suppression of indigenous resistance.¹⁵ Through this counter-historical framework, Phule exposes how mythological narratives

¹³ Jyotirao Phule, *Gulamgiri* (1873), in *Selected Writings of Jotirao Phule*, ed. G. P. Deshpande (New Delhi: LeftWord Books, 2002), 23–24.

¹⁴ Phule, *Gulamgiri*, in *Selected Writings*, 27–29.

¹⁵ Phule, *Gulamgiri*, in *Selected Writings*, 30–45.

function as ideological instruments that legitimize social hierarchy and obscure histories of domination.

Central to this analysis is Phule's reconceptualisation of caste as a historically produced system of control rather than a divinely ordained order. He argues that Brahminical dominance was sustained through coercion and epistemic manipulation, with religious texts deployed to legitimize hierarchy. The internalisation of caste ideology by subordinated groups is thus understood as a consequence of restricted access to knowledge. In this sense, *Gulamgiri* interrogates the epistemic foundations that enable caste to persist.

Within this framework, education emerges as a central axis of transformation. Phule conceptualises education not as a pathway to inclusion within colonial administration but as a means of intellectual emancipation. By advocating universal access, he positions knowledge as the primary mechanism through which structures of domination can be exposed and dismantled.¹⁶ Education here is epistemic, enabling critical consciousness and the re-evaluation of inherited truths.

Phule's engagement with colonial modernity is therefore not reducible to rejection. While he critiques both Brahminical authority and colonial structures, he also recognises the potential of modern education and rational inquiry as resources for emancipation. His project is reconstructive. He seeks to rework modernity through vernacular frameworks, producing a form of intellectual practice that is neither derivative of colonial knowledge nor confined to precolonial tradition.

In this reading of *Gulamgiri*, I argue that vernacular literature in colonial India did not merely articulate social critique but actively reorganised the conditions of knowledge production. Phule's intervention lies in the way he mobilises language, form, and historiography to displace entrenched epistemic authority. By relocating philosophical argument into the vernacular, reinterpreting myth as history, and framing education as intellectual emancipation, I position *Gulamgiri* as an example of vernacular writing as an autonomous domain of knowledge. This case establishes the analytical framework for the paper. I read vernacular texts as sites where modernity is reworked. In the following sections, I extend this argument to Tamil and Urdu traditions to demonstrate that such interventions were neither regionally confined nor ideologically uniform.

Case Study II: Vernacular Futurism and Epistemic Rupture in Periyar's *Ini Varum Ulagam* (1943)

Here *Ini Varum Ulagam* (The World to Come) by E.V. Ramasamy (Periyar) has been analyzed as a vernacular epistemological site in the radical twentieth century. In general, postcolonial scholarship tends to understand the writings of Periyar in terms of linguistic nationalism, Dravidian

¹⁶ O'Hanlon, *Caste, Conflict, and Ideology*, 130–35.

identity politics, or iconoclastic social reform.¹⁷ However, I would like to point out that Ini Varum Ulagam should be understood as a profound philosophical break from the norm. Writing at the threshold of India's independence, the author does not focus either on the problem of sovereignty of a future state or on the romantic fascination of the Tamil literary Renaissance with the classical past of the Tamil culture. Instead, he uses vernacular to create the speculative hyper-rationalist vision of the future, which implies a radical rethinking of the terms of modern argumentation. One of the main features of Ini Varum Ulagam is the change in time frame used in Periyar's discourse. When Periyar's contemporaries tried to achieve epistemic authority by appealing to ancient Tamil texts in order to prove the wrongness of colonial ideas about the stagnation of Indian culture, he turned away from the past. The futurism in this case does not involve the passive embrace of Western science; rather, it entails the deployment of *pakutharivu*, or rationality, as a vernacular epistemology.¹⁸ The futuristic vision offered in this text sees the obsolescence of capitalism, organized religion, and the patriarchal family system through technological and intellectual advancements¹⁹, thereby breaking away from the Euro-colonial, imperialist definition of modernity. Rationality, according to Periyar, does not come from the colonial state or the elite university, but rather constitutes the very essence of vernacular thought once freed from the mystifications of theology and caste. Furthermore, Periyar's text offers a critical challenge to the episteme of the sacred, which has been used historically as the basis for social technologies of oppression within the context of caste and gender relations. In Ini Varum Ulagam, social institutions such as marriage and forced labor are divested of any metaphysical sanction and recontextualized as historically contingent practices²⁰ of regulating bodies and knowledge. His attack on the family system and the predicted obsolescence of traditional marriage systems are thus not only social reforms but prerequisites for the emancipation of human intellect.

By deploying a plain, unembellished, and aggressively secularized Tamil prose language,²¹ Periyar divests the language of all its classical and religious associations, thereby demonstrating that the vernacular language is more than adequate for articulating sophisticated sociological theories and materialist philosophies in the absence of any recourse to classical and scriptural authority. Ini Varum Ulagam, through its theoretical speculation, reorients the dialectic between vernacular knowledge

¹⁷ Sumathi Ramaswamy, *Passions of the Tongue: Language Devotion in Tamil India, 1891–1970* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 15–20.

¹⁸ V. Geetha and S. V. Rajadurai, *Towards a Non-Brahmin Millennium: From Iyothee Thass to Periyar* (Calcutta: Samya, 1998), 355–58.

¹⁹ E. V. Ramasamy (Periyar), *The World to Come [Ini Varum Ulagam?, 1943]*, trans. A. S. Venu, ed. S. F. N. Chelliah, 2nd rev. ed. (Chennai: Periyar Self-Respect Propaganda Institution, 2012), 4–9.

²⁰ Periyar, *The World to Come*, 9–12.

²¹ M. S. S. Pandian, *Brahmin and Non-Brahmin: Genealogies of the Tamil Political Present* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2007), 178–82.

production and the global landscape. The text neither responds to colonialism nor finds itself at ease within the emergent national space of postcolonial India, which was, according to Periyar, a direct inheritance of Brahminical and majoritarian hegemony. Rather, by situating the vernacular speaker as a universal force of transformation on a planetary scale, *Ini Varum Ulagam* demonstrates that the vernacular speaker can produce a theory of technology, gender, and ethics distinct from both the colonial project of mimicry and the nationalist project of cultural revivalism.

Periyar's speculative futurism can therefore be read as a postcolonial intervention at the level of epistemology rather than merely politics. Unlike anti colonial nationalist discourse, which frequently sought legitimacy through the recovery of a glorified civilisational past, *Ini Varum Ulagam* refuses the epistemic authority of origins altogether. In this sense, Periyar performs what may be understood as a radical de sacralisation of knowledge. Rationality is detached from both colonial modernity and Brahminical textuality and relocated within the vernacular itself as a mode of critical thought. His futurism is not utopian in a simplistic sense but structurally disruptive. By imagining the dissolution of institutions such as caste, religion, marriage, and hereditary labour, Periyar destabilises the assumption that social organisation must derive legitimacy from either divine sanction or historical continuity. The text thus transforms the vernacular from a medium of cultural preservation into a site of theoretical production capable of articulating alternative futures. What emerges in *Ini Varum Ulagam* is not a demand for inclusion within existing structures of modernity, but an attempt to fundamentally reorganise the epistemic foundations upon which modernity itself is constructed.

Case Study III: Didactic Poetics and Rational Renewal in Altaf Hussain Hali's *Musaddas* (1879)

In this section, I examine Altaf Hussain Hali's *Musaddas* (1879) as an epistemic intervention within the Urdu literary and intellectual sphere of late nineteenth century British India. Existing scholarship has often approached the text either as a reformist manifesto of the Aligarh Movement or as an expression of Muslim decline after 1857.²² While these readings are not inaccurate, they remain analytically limited because they reduce the text to a sociological response to the colonial crisis. I argue instead that *Musaddas* performs a deeper epistemological restructuring through which Urdu literature is transformed into a site of rational inquiry, moral critique, and public pedagogy. Written in the aftermath of the 1857 rebellion, the poem responds not merely to political dispossession but to the colonial construction of the Indian Muslim subject as intellectually stagnant, excessively emotional, and incapable of modern critical reasoning.

One of Hali's most significant interventions lies in his reconfiguration of Urdu poetics itself. Colonial literary discourse frequently characterised Urdu poetry, especially the ghazal tradition, as

²² Christopher Shackle and Javed Majeed, introduction to *Hali's Musaddas: The Flow and Ebb of Islam* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997), 3–15.

ornamental, decadent, and detached from empirical reality.²³ Such readings relegated vernacular literary forms to the domain of sentiment while reserving rational and analytical discourse for English. Hali directly challenges this hierarchy by rejecting the conventions of courtly romanticism and reorienting poetry toward social critique and ethical instruction. His adoption of the *musaddas* form, organised through six line stanzas, enables a sustained argumentative structure that departs from the fragmentary aesthetic of the classical *ghazal*.²⁴ Through plain yet rhetorically disciplined language, Hali transforms Urdu poetry into a medium capable of historical reflection, sociological diagnosis, and collective introspection.

This formal shift constitutes more than literary reform. It is an epistemic intervention into colonial assumptions about the vernacular itself. Hali demonstrates that Urdu does not require validation through English rationality in order to sustain critical thought. Instead, he reconstructs Urdu as a language capable of generating its own modes of analytical reasoning. In this sense, the poem disrupts the colonial separation between emotion and intellect, where European knowledge was associated with rationality while vernacular expression was confined to affect and cultural nostalgia. Hali's poetics therefore reposition literature as a legitimate mode of knowledge production rather than aesthetic ornamentation.

At the level of content, *Musaddas* performs a systematic reinterpretation of Islamic intellectual history. However, Hali does not construct this history through military triumph or civilisational nostalgia. Instead, he foregrounds traditions of rational inquiry, scientific observation, ethical conduct, and intellectual discipline. Concepts such as *aqal* become central to his reconstruction of Islamic civilisation,²⁵ allowing him to argue that reason and empirical thought are not Western imports but historically embedded within non European intellectual traditions. This move is theoretically significant because it provincialises the colonial claim to exclusive ownership over modern rationality. Hali repositions modernity itself as a contested and historically plural formation rather than a uniquely European achievement.

Crucially, Hali's diagnosis of contemporary Muslim decline is framed not as racial inferiority or civilisational exhaustion, but as an epistemological crisis. The problem, for Hali, is not tradition itself but the abandonment of critical inquiry in favour of imitation, intellectual rigidity, and passive adherence to inherited authority. In this sense, *Musaddas* departs both from colonial narratives of Muslim backwardness and from purely revivalist discourse. Hali neither advocates wholesale

²³ Frances W. Pritchett, *Nets of Awareness: Urdu Poetry and Its Critics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 130–45.

²⁴ Shackle and Majeed, introduction to *Hali's Musaddas*, 40–48.

²⁵ Altaf Hussain Hali, *Musaddas-e Madd-o Jazr-e Islam* (1879), in *Hali's Musaddas: The Flow and Ebb of Islam*, trans. Shackle and Majeed, 99–130.

Westernisation nor romantic return to the past. Instead, he constructs a vernacular modernity grounded in ethical reform, rational inquiry, and intellectual self criticism.

The poem also intervenes in the colonial production of community identity. Colonial census practices and administrative discourse increasingly sought to stabilise Indian Muslims as a singular and homogeneous population defined through fixed religious categories.²⁶ Hali disrupts this static construction by transforming the Urdu public sphere into a site of internal critique and collective reflection. The Muslim community in *Musaddas* is not represented as an immutable category but as a self reflexive intellectual formation capable of diagnosing and reforming its own historical condition. Through this move, Hali reconstitutes the vernacular public not as an object of colonial classification but as an epistemic subject capable of self production.

Education occupies a central role within this framework. Like Phule and Periyar, Hali understands education as the primary mechanism through which intellectual transformation becomes possible.²⁷ Yet he does not advocate assimilation into the colonial educational structure designed to produce bureaucratic intermediaries detached from vernacular realities. Instead, he proposes a synthesis between scientific learning and moral vernacular literacy. Education in *Musaddas* therefore functions as a process of cognitive reorientation through which the vernacular subject can participate in modernity without surrendering epistemic agency.

What distinguishes Hali's intervention from both colonial pedagogy and nationalist literary discourse is his redefinition of the function of literature itself. Poetry in *Musaddas* ceases to be merely aesthetic and becomes pedagogical, analytical, and socially constitutive. Hali transforms Urdu literary culture into a space through which communities can theorise their own condition, interrogate inherited structures of authority, and imagine alternative futures. In doing so, he relocates rational critique from colonial institutions into the vernacular public sphere.

In this reading of *Musaddas*, I argue that Hali does not merely adapt Urdu literature to colonial modernity but actively reshapes the epistemic terms through which modernity is understood. His intervention demonstrates that vernacular literature in colonial India could function as a domain of theoretical and sociological production independent of colonial intellectual validation. By reconstructing Urdu poetry as a medium of rational inquiry and public pedagogy, Hali challenges the colonial assumption that critical modern thought could emerge only through English. *Musaddas* therefore stands not simply as a reformist poem, but as a postcolonial reorganisation of literary reason within the colonial present itself. If Phule relocates philosophy into the vernacular and Periyar relocates the future into the vernacular, Hali relocates reason itself into the vernacular.

²⁶ Kenneth W. Jones, *Socio-Religious Reform Movements in British India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 25–33.

²⁷ Shackle and Majeed, introduction to *Hali's Musaddas*, 50–58.

Comparative Analysis:

Read together, *Gulamgiri*, *Musaddas*, and *Ini Varum Ulagam* reveal that vernacular literary production in colonial India was not merely a vehicle of social critique but a struggle over epistemic authority itself. Although emerging from distinct linguistic, religious, and regional contexts, all three texts confront the same fundamental problem: the colonial relegation of vernacular traditions to the status of culture while reserving the status of knowledge for English and European intellectual forms. Their significance lies not simply in what they argue, but in their shared insistence that vernacular languages are capable of producing theory, history, and social critique on their own terms.

One of the strongest convergences across the three texts is their refusal to accept inherited narratives as epistemically binding. Phule reinterprets Brahminical mythology as a history of conquest and domination. Hali reconstructs Islamic intellectual history to challenge colonial claims to a monopoly over rationality and scientific inquiry.²⁸ Periyar rejects the authority of origins altogether, treating both civilisational nostalgia and colonial developmental narratives as ideological constructions. The three texts differ most profoundly in their relationship to historical time. Phule seeks liberation through the recovery of a suppressed past, Hali through the reactivation of an intellectual tradition, and Periyar through the rejection of historical authority in favour of futurity. What unites them is not a shared historical narrative but a shared commitment to exposing dominant histories as products of power rather than repositories of truth.

A second convergence lies in their reconfiguration of literary form. Phule's dialogic prose privileges oral reasoning over scriptural authority. Hali transforms Urdu poetry into a medium of sustained argument and public pedagogy.²⁹ Periyar's secular and uncompromising prose strips Tamil of its devotional associations to establish it as a language of rational critique. In each case, form becomes an epistemic claim. The vernacular is not merely a medium of communication but a medium of knowledge.

The three texts also share a commitment to education as intellectual emancipation. Yet they diverge sharply in their engagements with modernity. Phule's project is reconstructive, combining rational inquiry with a critique of caste hierarchy. Hali's is synthetic, locating the resources for modernity within Islamic intellectual traditions themselves. Periyar's is radically transformative, rejecting both colonial modernity and civilisational revivalism in favour of an unprecedented rationalist future. These differences reflect distinct intellectual strategies rather than varying degrees of anti colonialism.

Taken together, these texts demonstrate that vernacular knowledge production in colonial India

²⁸ Altaf Hussain Hali, *Musaddas-e Madd-o Jazr-e Islam* (1879), in *Hali's Musaddas: The Flow and Ebb of Islam*, trans. Christopher Shackle and Javed Majeed (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997), 99–110.

²⁹ Shackle and Majeed, introduction to *Hali's Musaddas*, 31–40

was neither uniform nor derivative. It was a plural and contested field in which competing visions of history, community, modernity, and social transformation were articulated. What binds these texts together is not a common political programme but a shared refusal to concede epistemic authority to colonial knowledge systems.

Conclusion:

The central claim of this paper is not that vernacular literature participated in anti colonial politics, but that it participated in the production of knowledge. Through a comparative reading of *Gulamgiri*, *Musaddas*, and *Ini Varum Ulagam*, I have shown that Marathi, Urdu, and Tamil intellectual traditions did more than resist colonial authority. They generated alternative frameworks through which history, reason, community, education, and social transformation could be understood.

Across all three texts, vernacular writing functions as a site of theoretical production. Each challenges dominant narratives through counter historical reasoning, reimagines literary form as a vehicle of intellectual inquiry, and positions education as a process of epistemic emancipation rather than institutional inclusion. The recurrence of these patterns across distinct linguistic and regional contexts suggests that vernacular epistemic intervention was not exceptional but constitutive of intellectual life under colonial rule.

This argument has important historiographical implications. Scholarship that treats vernacular literature primarily as an expression of nationalism, cultural identity, or social reform often reproduces the very hierarchies it seeks to critique by denying vernacular texts the status of theory. To read these works merely as reflections of political movements is to overlook their more fundamental intellectual labour. These texts do not simply respond to modernity; they theorise it. They do not merely resist colonial knowledge; they generate alternative modes of knowing.

The distinction between the post-colonial and the postcolonial becomes particularly significant in this context.³⁰ Phule, Hali, and Periyar were not post-colonial writers in a chronological sense. They wrote within the colonial period and engaged directly with the structures of colonial rule. Yet their interventions were postcolonial in an epistemic sense because they challenged the assumptions, categories, and hierarchies through which colonial authority legitimised itself. Recognising this distinction allows us to locate the critique of colonial knowledge not only in the aftermath of empire but within the vernacular intellectual traditions that emerged under colonialism itself.

Ultimately, recovering vernacular literature as a domain of knowledge rather than culture requires a fundamental rethinking of intellectual history in colonial India. The question is no longer whether vernacular texts participated in modernity, but how they helped redefine its epistemic foundations.

³⁰ Ella Shohat, "Notes on the Post-Colonial," *Social Text*, no. 31/32 (1992): 99–113.

Bibliography:

1. Hali, Altaf Hussain. Hali's Musaddas: The Flow and Ebb of Islam. Translated by Christopher Shackle and Javed Majeed. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997.
<https://searchworks.stanford.edu/view/4285699>
2. Macaulay, Thomas Babington. "Minute on Indian Education." February 2, 1835. In Macaulay: Prose and Poetry, edited by G. M. Young, 721–24. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1957.
http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/00generallinks/macaulay/txt_minute_education_1835.html
3. Phule, Jyotirao. Gulamgiri. 1873. In Selected Writings of Jotirao Phule, edited by G. P. Deshpande. New Delhi: LeftWord Books, 2002. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gulamgiri>
4. Ramasamy, E. V. (Periyar). The World to Come. Translated by A. S. Venu. Edited by S. F. N. Chelliah. 2nd rev. ed. Chennai: Periyar Self-Respect Propaganda Institution, 2012.
<http://thesatyashodhak.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Periyar-E-V-Ramasamy-The-World-to-Come-The-Periya>
5. Bayly, Susan. Caste, Society and Politics in India from the Eighteenth Century to the Modern Age. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.
6. Cohn, Bernard S. Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996.
7. Dalmia, Vasudha. The Nationalization of Hindu Traditions: Bharatendu Harishchandra and Nineteenth-Century Banaras. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997.
8. Fanon, Frantz. The Wretched of the Earth. Translated by Constance Farrington. New York: Grove Press, 1963.
9. Geetha, V., and S. V. Rajadurai. Towards a Non-Brahmin Millennium: From Iyothee Thass to Periyar. Calcutta: Samya, 1998.
10. Naregal, Veena. Language Politics, Elites, and the Public Sphere: Western India under Colonialism. London: Anthem Press, 2001.
11. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature. London: James Currey, 1986.
12. O'Hanlon, Rosalind. Caste, Conflict, and Ideology: Mahatma Jotirao Phule and Low Caste Protest in Nineteenth-Century Western India. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511563379>
13. Omvedt, Gail. Seeking Begumpura: The Social Vision of Anticaste Intellectuals. New Delhi: Navayana, 2008.
14. Orsini, Francesca. The Hindi Public Sphere 1920–1940: Language and Literature in the Age of

- Nationalism. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002.
15. Pandian, M. S. S. Brahmin and Non-Brahmin: Genealogies of the Tamil Political Present. Delhi: Permanent Black, 2007.
 16. Ramaswamy, Sumathi. Passions of the Tongue: Language Devotion in Tamil India, 1891–1970. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997.
 17. Sarkar, Sumit. Modern India, 1885–1947. Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989.
 18. Shohat, Ella. "Notes on the Post-Colonial." Social Text, no. 31/32 (1992): 99–113.
<https://doi.org/10.2307/466220>
 19. Venkatachalapathy, A. R. The Province of the Book: Scholars, Scribes, and Scribblers in Colonial Tamilnadu. Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2012.

