



Jyotiba Phule: Father of Indian Social Revolution

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Abstract

The nineteenth century saw the beginning of a violent and controversial movement of protest amongst western India's low and untouchable castes, aimed at the effects of their lowly position within the Hindu caste hierarchy. Religious hierarchies had combined with the consequences of British colonial authority to generate inequity and injustice in many spheres, from religion to politics and education, according to the pioneers of this movement. Jyotiba Phule was a pivotal pioneer in the history of modern India. He was a famous Maharashtra social reformer in the nineteenth century. He tirelessly fought for the education of women and Dalits, the upliftment of the underprivileged and Dalits, the upliftment of the downtrodden, and the reform of the Indian social system. After Buddha, he was the first downtrodden teacher, a critic of orthodoxy in the social order, and a revolutionary. This article focuses on Mahatma Jyotiba Phule, the movement's initial leader. It portrays him as the country's first ideologist, developing a distinct style of radical humanism. It examines his role in the construction of a new regional identity, which was one of the most important and underappreciated social changes in western India during this time.

Introduction

The projection of an inspirational map and a functionality of a desired future is inevitably a part of social movements. This they accomplish by rejecting or changing the society's past and present forms of norms and values, or by supplanting previous values and transposing them in the envisioned framework of the future society. In this regard, social movements exemplify the clustering and coalescence of a people's collective ambitions, dreams, and wants, as well as the aspirations, hopes, and wishes of groups or subgroups of a society. The significance of movement is the role of ideology or Idealism in the construction of a "better" society and better living, as well as human pleasure in seeking to put paradise to reality. By definition, social

movements challenge the idea of a set and unchanging conception of society's seats and locations of values, norms, authority, and hierarchy. Discrimination, exploitation, alienation, inequality, and other forms of oppression of the weaker sections, such as backward classes, Shudras, and women, were all targets of social movements. Many of India's first socio-political reformers and organisations established similar social movements. Many reform movements and organisations, such as Brahma Samaj, Arya Samaj, Satya Shodhak Samaj, and others, played an important role in the emancipation of women and backward classes, especially Shudras, during the British period. Many of these reforms were recommended for various reasons for the backward classes and women, including education, reservation, socioeconomic equality, equal political rights, land grants, and so forth.

Many low caste individuals had opted to escape the caste system by converting to Christianity or Islam before the arrival of these social reformers. Prior to the arrival of social reformers, saints such as Kabir, Ravidas, Namdev, wise, and others battled for the elimination of the caste system and the emancipation of the lower caste from societal bonds¹. Jyotiba Phule was an Indian philosopher who revolutionised conventional philosophy by focusing on practical and social issues such as injustice and oppression. He may be seen as a thinker who distanced himself from the metaphysical origins of Indian philosophical systems such as Yoga, Vedanta, and Buddhist Philosophy in order to give these systems social relevance. Jyotiba Phule was a key figure in the development of contemporary India. He was the downtrodden castes' philosopher, leader, and organiser. He consistently put what he preached into practice. He campaigned for the untouchables' and women's rights, as well as their liberation. He discovered and theorised the most pressing issues of the day. These include religion, the Varna system, ritualism, British rule, mythology, and the gender question, the condition of production in agriculture and the lot of the peasantry. While other reformers concentrated more on reforming the social institutions of family and marriage with special emphasis on the status and right of women, Jyotiba Phule revolted against the unjust caste system under which millions of people had suffered for centuries and developed a critique of Indian social order. Mahatma Phule was an earliest leader, who strongly opposed gender inequality. He was in the real sense a great thinker finder of truth. He was of the view that every individual should search for the truth and mould accordingly, only then the

¹ Nagaraju Vadapalli, Kontham Narsaiah, 'Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's Religious Philosophy and Navayana Buddhism', Kakatiya University Journal of Social Sciences, Vol.6, No.1&2, 2010, pp. 184.

human society can remain happy. He gave new meanings to education: He said, “The education which does not help the common mass of people to equip themselves for the struggle for life, which does not bring out strength of character, a spirit of philanthropy, and the courage of a lion.real education is that which enables one to stand on one’s legs².”

Upbringing of Jyotiba Phule

In the year 1827, Jyotirao Govindrao Phule was born in the Maharashtra region of Satara. Govindrao, his father, was a vegetable trader in Poona. Jyotirao's ancestors were from the 'mali' caste, and their original surname was 'Gorhay.' The Brahmins regarded Malis as a lower caste, and they were socially ostracised. Jyotirao's father and uncles employed as florists, giving the family the surname "Phule." Jyotirao was a bright young man, but he had to abandon his education at a young age owing to his family's financial hardship. He began by assisting his father on the family's farm. A neighbour, seeing the youngster prodigy's talent, convinced his father to send him to school. Jyotirao enrolled in the Scottish Mission's High School in Poona in 1841 and finished his schooling in 1847. There, he met Sadashiv Ballal Govande, a Brahmin, who remained his close friend throughout his life³.

Jyotiba Phule was one of India's most prominent proponents of contemporary humanitarian thinking, while others such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar in Bengal, Swami Dayanand Saraswati in Gujarat and others existed before him but he didn't follow their footsteps and developed his ideology. He was the first socio-political reformer to recognise all people's human rights in all spheres of life. He emphasized education, religion and caste based equality, solve problems of peasants, eradication of untouchability, social evils associated with women such as child marriage, forced widowhood, etc⁴. At that time Indian society has become lifeless and devoid of vitality and energy as a result of its traditions. These reformers got to the source of the problem and developed an ideology that would result in the creation of a new, integrated social structure. The youth began to become acquainted with concepts that questioned conventional beliefs and restrictions as a result of modern education in the nineteenth century. Jyotirao had the foresight to be influenced by modern ideas. He was one

² Tarkateertha Laxmanshastri Joshi, Jotirao Phule, translator Daya Agarwal, National Book Trust, New Delhi, 2013, p.37

³ Available at <https://www.culturalindia.net/reformers/jyotiba-phule.html>

⁴ Rajendra Sing; Some Reflection on the Study of Collective Violence and Indian Social Structure, in: Collective Violence. Edited by K.S. Shukla. New Delhi: Indian Institute of Public Administration, 1988. P. 29-30.

of the first Indians to firmly incorporate the French Revolution's principles of liberty, equality, and fraternity into the Indian way of thought. He popularized the concept of 'slavery', which was an important component of the ancient social structure but had never gained traction in India. One of the features of the slave system was that the master had absolute personal and physical control over the slave, but this element is absent from the ancient Indian social system. However, there was another social evil in India that prevented social growth or development: the caste system, which defined social status at birth, with the highest caste being the Brahmins and the lowest caste being the untouchables or Mahars mangs, Dhers, and so on. The Brahmins discovered the priestly class, who taught religious education using religious literature known as Shrutis, Smriti's and Purans. A Brahmin was regarded as the most sacred of people. Between the two extremes of pure and impure would be the remaining caste. The Brahmins unilaterally assumed the authority to control society, according to Jyotiba, and society accepted this right. Jyotiba attacked this privilege with the notion of slavery, warning that people could only attain all-around growth if they were released from the chains of this specific type of slavery. Jyotiba attacked the orthodox Brahmin and other upper castes and termed them as 'Hypocrites'⁵. He along with Gopalbala Walankar has proposed to burn the Brahmanical Manusmriti⁶.

Jyotiba's battle against caste prejudice was inspired by an occurrence in 1848, which ignited a social revolution in Indian society. Jyotirao was invited to a wedding of one of his acquaintances, who came from a Brahmin family of the top caste. When the bridegroom's relatives learned about Jyotiba's background, they humiliated and mistreated him at the wedding. Jyotirao left the event and resolved to defy the caste system and societal limitations in place. He dedicated his life to hammering away at the helms of social majoritarian dominance, aiming for the emancipation of all human beings who were subjugated to social hardship. Jyotirao was strongly inspired by Thomas Paine's thoughts after reading his renowned book 'The Rights of Man.' He thought that the best way to address societal problems was for women and lower caste people to be educated. Phule worked towards the abolition of untouchability and started educational institutions for untouchables in the second half of the 19th century. T.L. Joshi

⁵ Rosaland O'Hanlon, *Caste, Conflict and Ideology: Mahatma Jyotirao Phule and Low Caste Protest in Nineteenth Century Western India*, Cambridge Press, India, 2002, p 4.

⁶ Sanjay Paswan and Pramanshi Jaideva (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of Dalits in India*, Volume 14, Gyan Publishing House, New Delhi, 2002, p 112.

stated, “Jyotiba Phule turned into one of the first persons to rebellion towards the conventional social gadget in India. From where did he find the inspiration for this rebellion thinking about that the triumphing social laws had taken a firm hold at the Indian mind for lots of years? The answer is that Jyotiba turned into a Satyashodhak-a seeker of reality-the Moral fact of human lifestyles. The manifestation of that perennial truth becomes his notion in guy’s freedom in the universe, as upheld by means of current western civilization⁷.

Along with his wife, Savitribai Phule, he is regarded as pioneers of women's education in India. In August 1848, they became the first native Indians in India to start a school for females. Mahatma Phule, the great social reformer, lived during a period that can be appropriately described as the dawn of revolution in Maharashtra's and the country's history in various fields such as education, caste systems, agriculture, economics, women and widow upliftment, human rights, and untouchability.

Jyotiba’s Philosophical Thoughts

One of the most important and distinctive structures of Indian culture, civilisation, and society is the caste system. It has divided Indian society into rigid, locked, and impenetrable segments of upper and lower social classes⁸. In the second part of the nineteenth century, Phule sought to abolish untouchability and established educational institutes for untouchables. The importance of equality and humanity was paramount in Phule's ideology. To foster the virtues of justice, he desired equality, freedom, and fearlessness via education. His thoughts and actions were always centred on women. He supported education for women and the oppressed. It's also crucial that it creates a sense of belonging. He believes that women lack self-reliance as a result of a lack of education. He believed that the quantity of knowledge available to women in society determines how far society has progressed. On his opinion woman educated means whole family educated because she nurtured whole family. He believed that women should be required to attend school. Phule advocated for women's rights and worked toward their independence⁹. He advocated education for female students from the downtrodden (Shudras/Atee Shudras)

⁷ Tarkateertha Laxmanshastri Joshi, et. al., p 23.

⁸ Michaelm, S.M., 'Dalit vision of a just society in India', in S.M. Michael (ed.), in *Modern India: Visions and Values*, Sage Publications, New Delhi, 1999, pp.75.

⁹ Sharmila Rege, *Education as Trutiya Ratna: Towards PhuleAmbedkarite Feminist Pedagogical Practice*, Economic & Political Weekly, Vol. 45, No. 44, October 30, 2010, p 90.

communities and adults. He established institutes like the 'Pune Female Native Schools' and the 'Society for Promoting Education for Mahar, Mangs'.

Jyotiba's philosophy is synthesis of Indian and western thought. Jyotiba's philosophy and religion are dominated by humanism. His philosophy is not repetitive but critical, progressive, revolutionary and formative. One of his writings he said: "Jichya Hati Padnyachi dori tich sansare sambhali" {Who holds (Mother) string of baby's cradle, maintain life of family as well as life society} Phule made a sever attack on tradition which denied genuine rights of women. Phule started a school for untouchables as early as 1848. He started a school for girls in Pune. Only eight girls were admitted on the first day. Steadily the number of students increased. Jyotirao opened two more girl's schools during 1851-52. He was honored by the Board of Education for the work he did for girl's education in 1852. By 1858, he gradually retired from the management of these schools and entered into a broader field of social reform. Women's education was given ample stress in these schools. The main inspiration to raise the women question in India during this period was from the "First wave feminism", which was characterized by the demand that women should enjoy the same legal and social rights as men. Its expression can be traced in many feminist works. Phule perceived education as a means for a movement for self-respect and self dependence, and social peace¹⁰.

Jyotiba himself tells his friends what he did on the eve of starting the first girls' school. "The Low-castes, Mahars, Mangs, Chambhars etc." he narrates, composing a great part of my countrymen, being sunk deep in ignorance and misery, the Lord was pleased to excite in me a desire to better their conditions through means of education". Female schools, he observes, "first of all attracted by notice, as upon mature consideration, they were found to be even more necessary than male ones, the route of education lying in the proper term mothers give to the disposition of children between their second and third years. In this state of mind I visited, while at Ahmednagar, in company with a particular friend, the female schools belonging to the American mission conducted by Miss Farrar and was highly pleased with the manner in which the girls in those school were educated... Jyotiba continues "I opened a low-caste female school, allowing, however, such a boys as wished to do so to attend also."¹¹

¹⁰ Archana Malik-Goure, Feminist Philosophical Thought in Colonial India, Journal of East-West Thought, p 29.

¹¹ Dhananjay Keer, Mahatma Jotirao Phooley: Father of the Indian Social Revolution, Popular Prakashan, Bombay, 1997, pp 23-24.

This process of identity formation is studied against the background of the earlier history of caste relations in this area of India, and contributes important evidence about the relationship between ritual status and political power. The movement itself provides a fascinating example of early Third World radicalism, illustrating the role of ideology and religion in the struggle against British colonial power. Mahatma Jyotiba Phule's philosophy can be found in his following books: *Brahmanacha Kasab* (1969): In this Phule has exposed the exploitation of downtrodden by the Brahmin priests. *Gulamgiri* (1873): In this book he has given a historical survey of the slavery of lower castes. Narrate the history of Brahmin domination in India. He advised the people that religious epics are made by men and do not tolerate exploitation on the name of religion. *Shetkaryancha Asud* (1883): In this book he has written on exploitation of peasants. He has analysed how peasants were being exploited in those days. *Sarvajanik Satyadharma Pustak* (1891): In this book he put forward the concept of universal religion and throws light on blind faiths. *Asprushyanchi Kaifiyat* (1893): In this book he discussed about crisis in Agriculture and suggested solutions of the agrarian problems. In all of these books, he used an aggressive and courageous writing style. His work was a protest against Maharashtra's social and religious structure. He said that the higher caste dominated the social structure and that they benefited through privileges. There were variations based on caste and gender. There were no human rights for the oppressed, just hardships, inferior treatment, injustice, and exploitation in the society. As a result, Phule reacted angrily to this. He aimed to establish in society a new culture based on equality, justice, and humanity.

Gail Omvedt mentions in her book "Culture Revolt in a Colonial Society"¹², that Phule's thought represented the fulfillment of the renaissance desire for social transformation along revolutionary lines. In sociological terms it makes good sense that he, rather than later and more widely known elite thinkers, should be seen as the primary renaissance figure. Any culture, after than later and more widely known elite thinkers should be seen as the primary renaissance figure. Any culture after all, rests upon the class society and the dominance of a particular class. Hence the total transformation of culture requires the destruction of this dominance. In terms of India, Hindu culture and the caste system rested upon Brahmanism. Hence Phule, who aimed for the complete destruction of caste, superstition and inequality, linked thought with a movement of opposition to the Brahmin elite. Non-Brahmanism in India, therefore, represents not simply

¹²Gail Omvedt, "Culture Revolt in a Colonial Society, Manohar Publications, 2011, New Delhi, p 100.

communalism or a result of British divide and rule policies; it traces its origin to the Indian renaissance and represents the first expression of social revolution in India.”

Practical Aspect of Jyotiba Phule’s Philosophy

Jyotiba Phule can be interpreted as an Indian philosopher who transformed traditional philosophy by turning to the practical and social problems of inequality and oppression. He was concerned about the status of shudras, untouchables and women in Indian society, while in economic terms he was interested in peasantry and its problems. For this he established the Satyashodhak Samaj (Society of Seekers of Truth) which sowed the seeds of development of the masses and propounded the spread of rational thinking. The samaj's movement was the first of its type to reach out to rural areas. He continued to push for social reforms based on social equality. Phule felt that men and women should be treated equally. He emphasised not just men's equality, but also men's and women's equality. For Phule, societal equality had no significance without equality of man and woman in the family. He propagated universal humanism based on values of freedom, equality and universal brotherhood. He criticised the caste system through the books "Gulamgiri" and "Brahmanache Kasab".

He undertook a systematic deconstruction of existing beliefs and history, only to reconstruct an equality promoting version. He traced Brahmanism's origins via numerous other ancient writings, accusing Brahmins of enacting exploitative and inhuman rules in order to preserve their social supremacy by repressing the "shudras" and "atishudras" in society. The Satya Shodhak Samaj's mission was to cleanse society of caste prejudice and to free downtrodden lower-caste people from the stigmas imposed by Brahmins. Jyotirao Phule was the first to create the word "Dalits" to refer to all those who the Brahmins deemed lower caste and untouchables. Everyone, regardless of caste or class, was welcome to join the Samaj. He offers a ray of hope for overcoming society's difficulties. He spoke up against the unfair caste system and advocated the cause of women's and lower-caste education. He began basic and secondary education, as well as higher education, and campaigned for their rights. As a result, he introduced basic education as a means for perceiving the oppressed castes' work as dignified labour that was exploited by society.

Mahatma Jyotiba Phule and his wife, Savitribai, were remarkable personalities, especially for their times. He started women education from the education of his wife and trained her for the school. Savitribai was the first women teacher in India. He started the first school for girls at

Pune, and advocated education for female students from the downtrodden (Shudras/Atee Shudras) communities and adults. Jyotiba believed in the equality of men and women. He and Savitribai were strong supporters for all women's education, regardless of their caste.¹³ He emphasised women's education and liberation. He was a pioneer in bringing women into public life. He stated that equality and unity are essential for the country's prosperity. He opposed child marriage in order to empower women. He pioneered widow remarriage and established a widow's shelter. Many widows were young, and not all of them could live up to the expectations of the orthodox. Some widows chose abortion or abandoned their illegitimate children on the streets, leaving them to their destiny. He created a facility for newborn children in 1863 to avoid infanticides and suicides, realising the hazards of a widow giving birth to a child conceived under terrible circumstances following her husband's death." Phule was a staunch supporter of widow remarriage, and in 1854 he even had a house erected for upper caste widows. He constantly urged parents to send their children to the schools he established for the poor and women¹⁴.

Jyotiba desired to put science at the service of agriculture and to develop the idea of scientific breeding of farm yard cattle. On the basis of his in-depth knowledge of the rural economy and the agriculture sector, Phule suggested certain solutions to these problems. He knew the importance of fodder and firewood, manures and fertiliser. He wanted to put the land to the fullest use. He was worried about the diminishing yields of crops and about soil conservation, so he appealed to the government to adopt both protective and productive works... He prayed that peasants should not be left to the mercy of rains which are irregular and undependable. The first and the most important solution to the problem of the poverty of the farmers which Phule suggested was construction of bunds, tanks and dams so that sufficient water was made available to the farm. Dams and barrages across the valleys and rivers should be constructed more and more to solve the problem of water¹⁵.

¹³ Amol Murlidhar Nimsadkar, *Advanced Manual for Women Studies*, Himalaya Publishing House, New Delhi, 2017, p 12.

¹⁴ Chhaya Bakane, et.al (ed.), "Equality: Contribution of Jyotiba Phule (1827-1890)" in *Modern Indian Political Thought*, p.27

¹⁵ Dhananjay Keer, *op. cit.*, pp 192-93.

Conclusion

Jyotiba Phule along with Savitribai Phule are important social reformers in Indian History. Their contribution to and impact on Modern Indian history is commendable. They were pioneers in Lower caste and Women movements which laid the foundation for later day evolution of alternative voices of the nation. In place of the oppressive Indian social system, Phule wished to build a society based on individual liberty and equality, and he would have preferred to replace Hinduism with universal religion based on principles of liberty and equality. His Sarvajanic Satya Dharma put emphasis on truth seeking without the aid of any Guru or text. Phule thought, has given all human beings the liberty of thought and expression. In honour of the great reformer, the Mahatma Phule Museum was established in Pune, the Government of Maharashtra introduced the Mahatma Jyotiba Phule Jeevandayeeni Yojana which is a cashless treatment scheme for poor. A number of statues of the Mahatma have been erected as well as several street names and educational institutes have been rechristened with his name – eg. Crawford Market in Mumbai is rechristened as Mahatma Jyotiba Phule Mandai and the Maharashtra Krishi Vidyapeeth at Rahuri, Maharashtra was renamed Mahatma Phule Krishi Vidyapeeth. Apart from all this for the benefit of society, Mahatma Jyotiba Phule's ideology of education, human rights, women empowerment, socio-political, and religious ideals must be actively implemented.