



ECONOMIC REFLECTIONS IN MAHATMA PHULE'S WRITINGS

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Mahatma Phule (1827-1890) is recognised as the great writer, philosopher, social reformer, up lifter of downtrodden-women and educationist. He not only analysed the contemporary conditions acutely but also set a structure in order to make the better and happy lives of common mass. He made tremendous efforts to turn it into reality and for that purpose he established 'Satyashodhak Samaj'.

After having started the social work he thought that it is necessary to drive away the social-economic-religious inequality to liberate women-downtrodden from the tyranny of own and to start social movement. So, finally he came to the conclusion that to accomplish in it, it is necessary to write. An ignorance of the mass is not God made but it is embedded in social structure, so he dragged the attention of people to religious based intellectual slavery, social injustice and economic exploitation, therefore he began to write. The thoughts he produced manifested the definition of social revolution and versatile transformation. His thoughts were radical. He explored the economic exploitation along with socio-religious exploitation. Hence, economic crux becomes the gist of his writing and thinking.

In 1855 he wrote a play '*Trutiy Ratna*¹'. He passed the message through this play: "education is the third eye of Human being". He shown that, how ignorant and uneducated farmer has been exploited by Purohits. He wrote ballad on 'Chhatrapati Shivaji Raje Bhosale'² through

which he tells about him: “he wanted to defend and conserve farm and farmer; he was the upholder of poor. He wanted to defend common people. He wanted to bring changes into the lives of poor, so he suggested and made various changes in revenue system and ordered to army not to trouble them”. He indicates an economic vision of Shivaji Maharaj through this ballad. Through his another ballad titled ‘Vidyakhatyatil Brahman Pantoji’³, he explored the worst condition of contemporary society. In the book ‘*Tact of Brahmins (Brahmnanche Kasab)*’⁴ he has described an economic exploitation of common man from the birth to death by Brahmins. At the end of this book he has shown the exploitation by black-white bureaucrats⁵. An appendixes at the end of this book; poems, abhangas, and ballads are also about economic exploitation.

The book ‘*The Whip of Farmers*’⁶ has been written in order to rationalise and to suggest remedies on the economic exploitation of farmers. He wrote a booklet ‘*Warning (Ishara)*’⁷ to counter argue the statement made by Justice Ranade, “the condition of farmers is satisfactory than last 30 years”. In the same book he also describes a very pathetic condition of farmers’ exploitation in the name of farm tax. The above two books craftily manifest the pitiable economic exploitation of farmers. ‘*Sarvajanik Satydharm*’⁸ is a book of Phule which shows the ‘the concept about Human being’. It is a manifesto of Human freedom.

It seems that Phule turned to writing after 1855. He turned to the writing in awareness that without exposing the exploitative nature of selfish religion, there cannot be hope for the liberation of poor and farmers. His inspiration of writing was different from the contemporary writings. The exploited and common man was at the centre of his writings and reflections⁹. So, the emancipation of these people was his sole intention behind the writings. It is clearly reflected in his book ‘*Slavery*’.

The literature of Phule first of all touched the life truths of villagers, farmers, the working class, women, and shudras. He paved the way for pains of these people through their mother tongue Marathi. He expressed the sorrows of these people. He unveiled the question like these. That is why, Jyotiba become the ‘leader of common masses’¹⁰.

Mahatma Phule describes the exploitation and utter poverty of farmers by Brahmins, money-lenders and feudal in his seminal book ‘*Slavery*’:

“How can get a cloth, just plough the farm, II1II
Without a single cloth, women did not anything to wear, II2II
All the time behind pets, children follow all the day, II3II
Feed their belly with grain and buttermilk; still feel happy in life, II4II

The government tax is strict, Brahmin cheat every day II5II
Daily the debt get grow, ruthless moneylender loot us II6II
An ignorant doesn't understand anything, but Brahmin writes anything II7II
We cannot afford advocate, jury do not feel pity II8II
Nod sin-virtuous here, all are for money II9II
All looters are the same, no one is for shudras II10II¹¹

All contemporary thinkers of Phule asserted that there some external causes which are responsible for the economic exploitation of India. But Phule attacked on the internal own people who are responsible for exploitation and on the basis of this analysed the worst condition of farmers of India. Like Phule, Lokhitwadi also commented on the internal exploitation of farmers.

Phule was aware that the nature of his fight was economic, so he acutely pointed out detailed description of exploitation in his books; ‘*Tact of Brahmin*’ and ‘*The Whip of Farmers*’. Brahmin loots the farmers on the occasion of the birth of a child in the home of farmer, wedding ceremonies, housewarming, season warming, reading sacred books and along with these, on the festivals like; gudhipadava, Ramnavami, Sravani Somwar, Pola, Nagpanchami, Vijayadashami, Laxmipoojan¹², etc.. After the death of shudra man the Brahmin would tell the wife of that dead person to offer some rituals. So, that woman had to take debt. About this Phule writes:

“The Brahmin is wealthy, shudras poor, takes debt on the farm II
Offered food to cast and clans, in few days, interest of debt doubles II
Renewed the mortgage, the Brahmins became the owner automatically II¹³
That is how, the exploitation would begin before the birth and continued even after the death. The festivals, ceremonies were the ways of lootings. The description about all this is very acute in the writings of Phule. Arvind Deshpande writes, “Due to the economic dominance of Brahmins the poverty of shudras continued. Phule was the first thinker who was aware that

the Brahmins was not only a social community but of an economic community who has been dominating the shudras”¹⁴.

Along with Brahminical exploitation, bureaucratic exploitation was also pin pointed by Phule through his writings. In the British Rule, all bureaucratic posts like; police, teacher, educational officer, Justice, engineer were at the hands of Brahmins. Phule describes this in one of his book:

At village Brahmin, is the owner of writings I1I

In palaces owner of it, like corrupt officer I2I

Tahsildar like Yama, shudras are punished endlessly I3I

Before the shrewd Brahmin, the collector is nothing I4I

Revenue officer’s office, only Brahmins are officers I5I

Everywhere Brahmins, no one is for farmers I6I¹⁵

Jyotirao has said in the end of penultimate chapter of his book ‘*The Whip of Farmers*’ that, if you want be sure about how Brahmins were dominating the shudras, you must check the judicial decisions and find out how many Brahmins are punished¹⁶.

In Maharashtra, the British launched ‘Rayatwari’ tax system that eventuated into money lenders’ exploitation which became the instrumental medium to exploit farmers. The Rayatwari system brought changes into the relationship between money-lender and farmer and the government and farmers. Ultimately it resulted into the lessening of common awareness. The significance of the patil died down. The farmer became personally responsible to the government, so the social security of the farmer was over. According to the law, the government became the money lender along with private money-lender. So, the both, the government and money-lenders jointly became the sole source to provide economic support. It deeply influenced the farmer badly.

That time the money-lenders were belong to the Brahmin, Marwadi, and Gujar communities. The farmers would need money for farm-taxes, seeds, weddings, festivals, religious events, an ox for farming etc., so they would borrow money from money-lenders. Money-lenders would loot the goods of farmers and cheat them by making fraud in accounts. This is reflected in his writings:

Faults in accounts, all chaos II

The debt grows, the money-lender would loot II

Life on money, but money-lenders felt nothing II

Even after begging, no money would be lent II¹⁷

Phule not only severely criticised and analysed an internal exploitation but also external exploitation. When Phule was being criticised for making favour to British, it is worthy to note that he was attacking on the British bureaucratic and government. His economic criticism therefore become in favour of the common mass.

The British bureaucrat takes abundance of wages but do not work, only live luxurious life, Collectors and Judges are being played at the hands of their juniors. Phule describes:

The whites arrived, brought court and tents III

Tired of hunting, and making forgery I2I

Handed all over to the Brahmins, enjoyed drinking wine I3I

Sitting on coaches, reads newspapers I4I

You call yourselves as impartial, now you are our owners II not worrying about shudras I5I¹⁸

In the book *The Whip of Farmers* Phule depicts the luxurious life of white bureaucrats and the poverty of farmers. The farmers even do not get their basic need food and clothes¹⁹.

While writing the book '*The Whip of Farmers*' during 1878-1883, Phule found that the policies of the government are inadvertent to the farmers, so he began to use more sharp language in his book. He raised his voice against the rule of British government whenever he found that the policies are against the farmers.

There were few more ways of exploitation which Phule depicted through his writings. These are; by imposing taxes on farmers and loot them, in famine export grains and import raw material, by importing goods to make local workers unemployed, taking debt from foreign money-lenders in return of heavy interest, to spent too much money on army²⁰. This is how, Phule uncovered the exploitative face of the British government before the establishment of Congress.

Mahatma Phule was closely witnessing the loot of farmers by feudals, money-lenders and the government. He was aware of the poverty, famine, and pains of farmers. He himself was a farmer, so he was acquainted with the pains of farmers. These issues are reflected in his books like; *The Whip of Farmers*, '*Warning*', '*Akhandatun*'. He effectively analysed the economic issues in his writings and commented on the problems of farmers. He depicted that how the farmers and his family have been squeezed and exploited by all. He used very penetrating and pertinent language to uncover these issues. The description made by him applicable even to the present scenario.

Phule focused on the bitter realities of the contemporary life of farmers and suggested that common should be freed from it. In order to make changes in the lives of farmers he suggested some changes along with enough availability of water to farming. The farmer should be saved from the religious-social lootings. So, the farmer must be educated. In short, it shows that he was intending to bring changes in the material life of farmers.

Phule advocates 'Kunbi Policy' through his writings. He discussed in his writings on; the care of farming, animal breeding, forests, canals, sterility, famine, inactive bureaucracy and government. He thought that intellectual slavery is more hazardous than social-religious-economic-and physical. So, he asserted that people should be freed from intellectual slavery.

Mahatma Phule kept safe distance from the thinking of extremist and revolutionaries and devoted his life to the farmers and exploited class of the society. His base of thinking was economic. He was the only social thinkers in the 19th century who said, "the farmer must get fair labour value".

Mahatma Phule was the first thinkers in the Maharashtra who openly expressed his views. Though his thoughts were not in formal or technical language but it is true that he had proper understandings of the ceaseless exploitation of farmers and workers. He considered this question not only as economic but social-religious-and cultural. Keen analysis, intellectual approach, sharp thinking, reflective attitude and the capacity to go beyond the traditions in order to find out economic reflections were some of the features of Phule's nature. He was the pioneer of the movement of farmers and workers who inspired the mass. He made two groups; exploiter and exploited.

In the thinking of Karl Marx and Lenin, workers were the forerunner. But their thinking was challenged in Russia (1917) and China (1949). In these two revolutions farmers made monumental role. On the basis of this, the preference to farmers given by Phule-Gandhi into the movements becomes more significant. In it Gandhi's thoughts were after the Russian revolution. On the other hand, Phule's thoughts were too much prior to the Russian Revolution. It means, "Without awakening the farmers the country would not awake, so, if there is no development of farmer, then there is no growth of the country". This was the first equation Phule advocated which may be 'the guiding principle' to today.

Notes and References:

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- 2) Phule, Jyotirao Govind. *Ballad on Chhatrapati Shivaji*, Mumbai,1869, added, Collective Phule.p.45-81.

- 3) Ibid. p.85-90.
- 4) Phule, Jyotirao Govind. *Tacts of Brahmins* (Brahmananche Kasab). Mumbai. Collective Phule. P. 95-118.
- 5) Phule, Jyotirao Govind. *Slavery*. Pune,1873, added, Collective Phule. P. 123-201.
- 6) Phule, Jyotirao Govind. *Whip of Farmers*. 1883, added, Collective Phule. P. 259-343.
- 7) Phule, Jyotirao Govind. *Warning (Ishara)*. 1885, added, Collective Phule, p. 401-413.
- 8) Phule, Jyotirao Govind. *Sarvajanik Satydharm, Pustak*. Mumbai,1891, added, Collective Phule, P. 457-560.
- 9) Collective Phule. P. 137.
- 10) Bhole, Laxman Bhaskar. *Mhatma Jyotirao Phule*. New Delhi,1996,p. Introduction.
- 11) Collective Phule. P. 200.
- 12) Ibid. p. 103-116.
- 13) Ibid. p. 115.
- 14) Deshpande Arvind. *Pioneer of an Alternative Culture*. Added, Narke Hari (ed). *Mahtma Phule: Way of New Findings*, Mumbai, 2006, p. 08.
- 15) Collective Phule. P. 81.
- 16) Ibid. 288.
- 17) Ibid. 110,111,115.
- 18) Ibid. 199.
- 19) Ibid. 278.
- 20) Ibid. 200,279, 280, 301, 304, 319, 324, 325, 333, 544, 591, 603, 764.