

Mahatma Jyotirao Phule 1827-1890 and his Writings: A Critique of his Revolutionary ideas

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ABSTRACT

Mahatma Jyotirao Phule (1827-1890) was a messiah of lower castes and helpless women of India in the nineteenth century. He played a key role in organizing movements against discriminatory social organizations. It was, in fact, anti-upper caste domination and anti-Brahmanical movements as Jyotirao strongly attacked and vehemently opposed upper caste supremacy and Brahmanical hegemonism based on an inhumane and oppressive caste system. His revolutionary ideas aiming for socio-religious reforms are not only well displayed in his performances throughout his life but also broadly described in his multiple kinds of writings. His writings are a literary treasure of India as they challenged, opposed, and criticized caste-based social discrimination and Brahmanical dominance. He was not only a non-Brahman social reformer but also an active author who wrote a number of books and broke the myth of upper caste supremacy in the field of writing and teaching. His writings became a source of inspiration for oppressed and degraded lower castes and untouchables in India. He not only aimed at complete abolition of the caste system but also socio-economic inequalities. His revolutionary ideas and thoughts reflected in his writings gave a sense of identity to lower castes and untouchables against upper caste dominance and Brahman supremacy. Historically, Phule led a movement in India that aimed at the creation of a new social order in which no one would be subordinate to the upper castes. The present study focuses on most of his authored books, poems, dramas, etc. and examines the revolutionary ideas contained and narrated in his writings.

Keywords: Caste, Class, Reform, Society, Inequality, Writings.

Introduction: Mahatma Jyotirao Phule was one of the social reformers of India in the nineteenth century. Born in a lower caste in Maharashtra, Phule suffered from Brahmanical supremacy in caste-based society. The turning point came in his life in 1848, when he was insulted and abused by family members of his Brahmin friend bridegroom in a marriage procession because of his being an inferior caste while he was duly invited. (Narke 2002:17) Phule left the procession and made up his mind to defy the prevailing caste system and social restrictions. He personally realized the absurdity of the caste system and resolved to fight inequality caused by the inhuman and oppressive caste system prevailing in society. Phule had read biographies of Shivaji and George Washington. He had also studied carefully the thoughts and ideas of his predecessor social reformers, especially in respect of hypocrisies and baseless customs sanctioned by the Brahmans against lower and backward classes. So in his opinion, the Brahmans

were squarely responsible for most of the contemporary socio-religious evils of Indian society. He was also greatly influenced by Thomas Paine's "Rights of Man" (1791) and developed an impeccable sense of social justice and grew passionately critical of the Indian caste system. Influenced by Paine's book, Phule had developed a keen sense of social justice and forcefully argued that education of women and the lower castes was a vital priority in addressing social inequalities. He believed that enlightenment of the women and lower caste people was the only solution to combat the social evils. In the 1860s, Phule started his anti-Brahmanical campaign among lower castes (particularly Dalits known as untouchables) of Maharashtra and also strongly advocated the uplift of women. According to O'Hanlon, Phule championed widow remarriage and started a home for dominant caste pregnant widows to give birth in a safe and secure place in 1863 (O'Hanlon 2002:135), while Figueira stated that

Phule's orphanage was established in an attempt to reduce the rate of infanticide (Figueira 2013:147).

He established the Satyasodhak Samaj (Society of Seekers of Truth) in Pune on 24 September 1873 "to liberate masses from the thralldom of the sacerdotal authority and make them conscious of their rights by educating them" (Chand 2016:218). The Samaj aimed at stressing the worth of the human individual irrespective of caste. (Srinivas 1998:110). Phule wrote many books, essays, poems, and plays and exposed and criticized the caste system, caste discrimination, and Brahmanical supremacy in society and socio-religious affairs. (Srinivas 1985: 20) Professor Narke observed that "Through his writings, Jotirao opened a front against idol worship, priestcraft, ideas regarding reincarnation, casteism, polygamy, addiction to narcotics and drugs, excessive expenditure in weddings and death ceremonies, and the highhandedness of the arrogant bureaucracy.(Narke 2002:22) In 1888, Vithalrao Krishnaji Vandekar, a noted social activist of Maharashtra, bestowed Phule with an honorific Mahatma title, meaning 'venerable' or 'great-souled'. In this paper his writings and revolutionary ideas and progressive thoughts contained therein are traced, discussed and analyzed.

Purpose and Motivation:

Jyotirao Phule was dead against the Brahmanical supremacy, upper caste domination and social discrimination based on inhuman and oppressive caste system introduced and supported by Brahmins. His ideas and thoughts are fairly depicted in his various kinds of books, dramas, plays etc., so the purpose of the study is to collect, discuss and examine his writings and his ideas. As Phule always opposed and criticized all kinds of discriminations responsible for deplorable plight of lower castes etc. is no less motivational force in present scenario of caste politics, political violence, vote politics and appeasement policies, etc. being followed across the country.

Methodology:

The study is based on published sources consisting of authored and edited books and research articles in journals and Proceedings of Seminars as available in archives and libraries in India. Census Reports and relevant sources available in Google Scholars etc. are other important sources of the study.

The study mainly assesses the writings of Jyotirao Phule who was only non-Brahman social reformer in the nineteenth century.

Literature Review:

Most of works on the History of Modern India do not focus on and discuss and assess properly the writings of Phule. In Books by S.R.Sharma (1951), Percival Spear (1970,1978), Anil Chandra Banerjee (1992), Dhanpati Pandey(2016), Ishwari Prasad(2016) ,not only life and works of Phule but also his writings are not mentioned. Undoubtedly in books by Sumit Sarkar (1986:57,84) Sekhar Bandopadhyay (2004: 149, 244, 346; 2004: 149, 241), B.L.Grover and Yashpal (2005:285-286), Bipan Chandra (2009:139,235,241) Ishita Banerjee-Dube (2015: 103,148-150,352,357), Sailendra Nath Sen (2017:217) etc. Jyotirao Phule is mentioned but in brief and very few lines about his writings. Dr.K.K.Datta, ,a historian of global repute wrote a very nice book titled "A Social History of Modern India" (Macmillan New Delhi,1975), surprisingly enough, Phule is not even mentioned. Noted authors Kanhaiyalal Chancharik (1988:90-96) and Suranjan Chatterjee and Siddhartha Guha Ray (2015: 426-238,496,497,720,730,731) discussed most of the writings of Phule but not all of his writings, and the assessment is also in brief. Moreover, in a very known book "Sanskriti ke Char Adhyay (1993), Lokbharti Prakashan, Allahabd) by Rashtrakavi Ramdhari Singh Dinkar, there is a separate chapter "Maharashtra mein Navoutthan (Innovation in Maharashtra)," p. 547-552, and the noted author wrote about M.G. Ranade, Gopal Ganesh Agarkar, Bal Gangadhar Tilak, and Gopal Krishna Gokhale but did not write about Phule even a single sentence. Another noted Indian scholar, Govind Sadashiv Ghurye (1893-1983), also overlooked Phule, as the author just mentioned Phule in his book "Caste and Race in India(2013:179). Above all, a well-known scholar and writer, Tarkatha Laxmansharti Joshi, wrote the biography of "Jotirao Phule" (1992, National Book Trust, New Delhi), but overlooked discussion and assessing the writings of Phule.

Mahatma Jyotirao Phule (1827-1890):

As a revolutionary social reformer and thinker, Phule played a crucial role in challenging and opposing caste discrimination and gender inequality

then prevalent in society. He came from a humble background and belonged to a lower caste (Malakar/Mali) family. His family was engaged in agricultural activities, and his father, Govindrao Phule (mother Chimnabai), worked as a vegetable vendor and follower supplier to the Peshwas and their family. So he got the title Phule and became known as the Phule family. Under the prevailing circumstances, Jyotirao could not pursue higher education (Chand 2016:217), but fortunately, under the persuasion of one of his neighbors, his father sent him to attend a secondary school run by Scottish Christian missionaries at Pune. In missionary schools, Phule learned English, and this proved to be an important turning point in his future efforts. He also learned about his predecessor reformers and was inspired by Thomas Paine's book on the rights of man, American Civil War 1860, and the teachings of Mahatma Buddha and poet Kabir. As noted above, his insult in 1848 in the wedding ceremony of a Brahmin friend because of his being low caste gave a profound blow to Phule. This helped open his eyes to the injustices and discrimination-based inhuman and oppressive caste system, upper caste domination, and Brahminical hegemonism. Tara Chand hints that Phule turned to the writings of Professor Wilson and Sir William Jones on Hinduism to study the superior claims of the Brahmans and noted that "His reading, his personal experience, and his association with Christian missionaries made him critical of the prevailing Hindu religion and customs. (Chand 2016:217) So with his wife Savitribai i Phule (1831-1897), he opened many schools for girls and people of lower castes. Moved by the helpless and miserable plight of the Hindu widows, he started a private orphanage for Hindu widows. But orthodox Brahmans blamed them for disrupting the prevailing social system; even then, the Phule couple continued their work of social and religious reforms. Phule continued opposing and criticizing the caste system, Brahminical pump, and dignity. By his critical ideas and thoughts about multiple kinds of social and religious evils and injustices, Phule led reformation movements in Maharashtra in the nineteenth century. "Herein lies Phule's greatness," as it is stressed by Tara Chand, who observed that "the idea of social revolt a century ago was an act of desperation and required great courage" (Chand 2016:218). Ta Chand further pointed out that "Phule might have been

inspired by violent dislike of the Brahman priesthood. But his work does not suffer thereby. He gave to the individual the dignity that the caste system denied them. This was the first attempt to bring solidarity to the Hindu social organization, which was split into groups by caste. He made no distinction between the non-Brahman and the untouchable" (Chand 2016:218). Ideas and thoughts are nicely mentioned and discussed in books, poems, essays, dramas, etc. authored by Phule.

Phule's Writings and a Critique of his Revolutionary Ideas

Jyotirao Phule was not only a reformer, an activist, and a thinker but also a prolific writer who wrote many books, essays, poems, and plays and exposed and opposed multiple socio-religious injustices based on caste systems favored by upper castes, especially Brahmans. A noted scholar J.T.F. Jordans pointed out that "Phule took up fight against brahmanical oppression in his voluminous prose and poetic works and gave a concrete form to his organization for the uplift of the low castes, the Satyasodhak Samaj." (Jordens 2023:370). The Samaj forcefully rejected the oppressive caste system and the authoritarian supremacy of the Brahmans. It promoted social equality, united and uplifted Shudras and other lower castes, education for one and all, and strongly advocated social and economic equality. Trutiya Ratna, Ballad Gulamgiri (slavery), Shetkarayacha Aasud (cultivator's whistlecord), Satyashodhak Samajachi Vangmayavali (collected works of Satyashodhak Samaj), Shetkarayacha Aasud Par. II (Cultivator's Whipcord Part II), Brahmanache Kasab (Priesthood Exposed), and Trutyache Bhashan (Speech on the Plague) are some of his known famous books, dramas, etc. wherein his notable and revolutionary ideas are found noted and discussed.

In Trutiya Ratna, a drama published in 1855, Phule revealed how 'Bhats (Brahmans) exploited ignorant Shudras. It was the first modern social and independent play in Marathi. The drama also depicted how a Christian preacher showed the exploited Shudras the way of truth. It also effectively described the importance of education by illustrating how masses are cheated because of their ignorance. "Powada: Chhatrapati Shivajirao Bhonsale Yanche" is another important work of Phule. This is an exhaustive ballad

published in 1869. It reviewed the works and achievements of Chhatrapati Shivaji Maharaj. It is in eight parts. It is presented in simple terms so that ordinary people can understand it. It is considered the first work of merit in Marathi poetry or literature in poem form. "Powad: Vidyakhatyatil Brahman Pantoji," also published in 1869, is a ballad of Brahman teachers working in the Education Department.

In *Brahmanache Kasab* (Priesthood Exposed), published in 1869, Phule defended the Sudra Community. He pointed out that Brahmanical hegemonism was the cause of the suppression of the martial race of Mahabharata that led to the subjection of the people to Muslim rule. In this writing, Phule presented exploitation of ignorant and poor Shudras by 'Bhats' (Brahmins) in poetic form. He dedicated this book to the Kunbis (peasants), Malis (gardeners), Mangs, and Mahars (untouchables) and stated that he did so in order to liberate lower castes from the Brahmans who exploited them under the garb of religion. It was Phule who encouraged people to solemnize wedding ceremonies without Brahman priests, and "to this end he greatly simplified marriage ritual" (Srinivas 1998:110) and also asked his followers not to engage any Brahman priest in any socio-religious functions. (Srinivas 1985: 20; Malik 1978: 237).

Another masterpiece of Phule *Gulamgiri* (slavery) published in 1873, wherein he projected the Brahmans as invaders from the north who suppressed the indigenous people, non-Brahmans. It is rightly pointed out that it was one of his most famous and influential writings, wherein mythical stories have been critically analyzed. Phule effectively described the fight between Aryas and the original 'kshetrapatis' in the book and also, for the first time, presented that "Indian history is the history of the fight between Brahmins and non-Brahmins." It is to be noted that Bal Gangadhar Tilak gave emphasis on the glory of the Aryan period, whereas Phule recalled the glory of the pre-Aryan age. In this work, Phule strongly criticized the caste system, Brahmanical supremacy, and inhuman and oppressive torture faced by the lower castes. His critique of the caste system began with his attack on the Vedas. He refused to regard the Vedas as sacrosanct, opposed idolatry, and denounced the Churvarnya. (Patil 1991: xix) He considered them to

be idle fantasies and palpably absurd legends as well as a form of false consciousness. According to Phule, the superiority and inferiority of a person do not depend upon the caste in which he is born. A person's superiority depends upon the stage of his development. There are not religious books that have been written by God. God does not take bodily form, and ideas or rebirth and rituals are fragments of people's imagination. To behave truthfully is to behave morally. Only that is the true religion. There is no other religion but that of truth. There is no foundation for a belief in a caste system. Nature did not create a caste system. God did not create a caste system. It is a great sin to believe in the caste system. (quoted in Narke 2002:22) He is credited with introducing the Marathi word *dalit* (broken, crushed) as a descriptor for those who were outside the traditional Varna system. The terminology was later popularized by the Dalit Panthers in 1970s.

In this book, Phule compared the position of members of lower castes to that of enslaved people in the United States of America. He also argued for the uplift and education of the oppressed classes. It is "dedicated to the good people of the United States as a token of admiration for their sublime interest and self-sacrifice, devotion to the cause of abolishing Negro slavery, with an earnest desire that my countrymen may take their noble example as their guide in the emancipation of their shudra brothers from the trammels of brahman thralldom (Pathan 1977:241; see also o Phule 1994:5 In fact, Phule dedicated *Gulamgiri* to all those Americans who had fought to free slaves, thereby establishing a link between black slaves of America and people of lower castes in India. Perhaps he had perfect knowledge and understanding of the teachings and tenets of Buddhism; therefore, Phule admired Buddhism as a protestant religion against Brahmanism.

Phule fairly elaborated the maxims of religion that were preached by the Brahmans as follows: "A Brahman can do no wrong. To save the life of a Brahman, to speak a lie is not a sin. The feet of a Brahman are holy. In his left foot dwells all the teerthas (holy pilgrimages), and by dipping it into water, he makes it as holy as the waters of the holy teerthas. The Brahman may compel a Shudra to perform any duty because such man was created by the Almighty only

for the purpose of serving the Brahmanas. Let a Brahman not give temporal advice nor spiritual counsel to a Shudra. If a Shudra cohabits with a Brahman adulteress, he should be hanged, but if a Brahman cohabits with the lawful wife of Shudra, he is exempt from all corporal punishment. (quoted in Pathan 1977:242; Phuley 1994:11-12) These views are vividly discussed in Brahmanache Kasab, Gulamgiri, and Aasud.

In Shetkarayacha Aasud 1883 (Cultivator's Whipcord), focused on the exploitation of farmers by the moneylenders and landlords. Phule traced and exposed the unjust practices in the agrarian system and vehemently advocated for the rights of farmers. In Shetkarayacha Aasud Par. II (Cultivator's Whipcord Part II), Phule continued his attacks on the oppressive practices faced by farmers and agricultural laborers. Phule published two parts of Satsar (The Essence of Truth, Journal) in 1885 and wrote about Brahm Samaj, Prathana Samaj, and the social status of infants born of persons from different castes and the ideology of Aryabhattacha in its first part; in its second part, Phule condemned the people who used to criticize the women for adopting the new ways.

In another important work titled 'Ishara' (1885, A Warning), Phule beautifully specified that the caste imbalance is the obstacle in the development of the nation and seriously warned that false opinions can misguide the common people; ultimately, this would harm the nation. He indicated that the statement 'the condition of the farmers is better' is false. He wrote this book with the sole aim of saving the peasants from the clutches of the Brahmanas. (Pathan 1977:241). Describing the plight of the farmers, Phule wrote, "Just in the recent past, till the reign of the last of the Peshwas, if a farmer was a little lax in paying taxes, he was made to bend to the hot sun, with a big stone placed on his back or his wife was made to sit on his back, and he was made to inhale the smoke of hot chillies. The rulers looked upon their subjects as some kind of animal, whose only utility was to grow food, weave clothes, slog in fair or foul weather, and provide all items of luxury to the king and his kind, his wives, and his children. Now with the new (British) government, the people are finally free from the atrocities of the previous regime. Earlier, farming activity was heavily dependent on the rains. So, if the

monsoon failed, the farmer was hard put to repay his debt. The situation has not changed much since, but then the government was totally on the moneylender's side—that put the debtor in a difficult situation. He often came to the brink of losing everything he owned. In those days, moneylenders had no complaints against the government, for they had the government at their beck and call. They treated the debtor as they pleased, thrashed him, snatched away all his goods, sold off his cattle, and inflicted all kinds of torture on him. For a debt of as little as seven rupees, a debtor lost his land, cattle, well, and farms, and would finally have no other option but to flee or commit suicide. (quoted in Joshi 1992:81)

As it is obvious from the title of the book Satyashodhak Samajachi Vangmayavali, the book contains the collected works of Satyashodhak Samaj, a social organization founded by Phule in 1873. It is a collection of Phule's writings and speeches, especially on caste, gender, education, religious reform, etc. Phule's other notable book, Trutyache Bhashan (Speech on the Plague), includes his speech on the devastating plague outbreak that occurred in Maharashtra during 1896–1905. Phule revealed the official negligence and highlighted the plight of the marginalized communities affected by the spread of epidemic plague.

Savajaneek Satyadharma Pustak is the last book by Phule published posthumously in 1891. He completed the writing of the book with his left hand as his right hand was paralyzed. The great thoughts of Manav Dharma (Humanitarian Religion) have been presented for common people. Manav Dharma advocates the abandonment of rigid and outdated religious orthodoxy. According to Phule, both men and women were entitled to enjoy rights, and it was a sin to discriminate between human beings on the basis of sex. (Patil 1991:xix) Phule believed that accepting ethical thoughts based on liberty, equality, fraternity, and humanity would help in the construction of a new society. Phule included a description of simple rites that lead to happiness. So "if his solutions and remedies on various socio-economic problems are understood and followed, it may help us to steer through the present turmoil and guide us for the future. (Narke 2002:22)

Conclusion:

Thus, in his writings, Phule seriously challenged and vehemently attacked upper caste hegemony, Brahman supremacy in religious affairs, and society based on an inhuman and oppressive caste system. He advocated education for the masses through his various kinds of writings and the Satyasodhaka Samaj established in 1873. According to Tara Chand, the work of Phule is "the anguished cry of the suppressed classes trying to get back their own after centuries" (Chand 2016:217-218). His literature treasury challenged, opposed, and criticized caste-based social discrimination and Brahmanical domination. He was not only a non-Brahman social reformer but also an active author who, by his plethora of writings, broke the myth of upper caste supremacy in the field of writing and teaching. His writings became a source of inspiration for oppressed and degraded lower castes and untouchables in India. He not only aimed at complete abolition of the caste system but also socio-economic inequalities. His revolutionary ideas and thoughts reflected in his writings gave a sense of identity to lower castes and untouchables against upper caste dominance and Brahman supremacy. Patil rightly pointed out that "the unflinching espousal of the 'rights of man'... remained till the end of his life a major theme of his writings and a goal of his actions. (Patil 1991:xxi) The revolutionary ideas, therefore, contained in his various kinds of writings, continue to influence modern India as his work and writings gave impetus to and laid the foundation for the socio-religious reform movements in India. His revolutionary ideas and thoughts still inspire all those who continue to fight against social and religious injustices and inequality across India.

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