

The Feminist Philosophical Thoughts of Mahatma Phule: In the Special Context of Women's Social Status

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Abstract

"I measure the progress of a community by the degree of progress which women have achieved."-
B.R.Ambedkar.

It has been heard that a woman's place is at home. She has no right over his mind, not even over his own body. Woman is sin itself? How much? Is women's only purpose in life to please men with her youth, looks, beauty and her labour in housework?

Buddhism, Jainism or Bhaktitried to eradicate the poor situation of women in ancient and medieval India. During the British India period, various eminent persons like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar emphasized on women's education in India. Mahatma Jyotiba Phule, Periyar E.V Ramswamy and Babasaheb Dr. Ambedkar took initiative of the availability of women's education in India. This paper intends to focus on the problems faced by women over the years, their roles and the initiatives of some greatest activists. The study will help us to understand the thoughts and deeds of Mahatma Phule.

Mahatma Phule fought all his life for women, to educate them and to give them equal opportunities. Jyotirao saw that a thousand teachers or masters could not mould a child more than an educated mother. In this small work I would like to focus on the philosophical aspect of his thought about women and will conclude with remarks on the contemporary relevance of Jyotiba Phule's contribution to construct a society with equality by empowering women.

Keywords: Indian Social System, Status of Women, Women Empowerment & Mahatma Phule's perspective, Cast discrimination, Social revolution.

INTRODUCTION:

Women are deprived of their right to education, right to livelihood, right to property, even the right to call their own body. A woman stands as her husband's property. It must be remembered that the words 'Bhārya' and 'Bhritya' are derived from the same 'Bhri' dhātu (meaning to feed), and basically have the same meaning. During ancient times the form of society was matriarchal (mother as ruler and head of the family) and popularly it was said that, "यत्रतार्यस्तुपूज्यन्ते, रमन्ते तत्रदेवता" means God resides at places where women are worshiped. But the deterioration of their status started in later Vedic period. women

were treated as slaves by imposing so many orthodox principles upon them. In Mahabharata quotes are made about 'DraupadiVastraApaharana' depicting disrespect to women.

It is surprising that a woman does not get as much respect as a wife that she gets as a mother from a man. Otherwise, 70 percent of women would not be victims of domestic violence today, thousands of women would not be victims of rape or sexual violence every year. The man who respects a woman in the role of a mother and puts her almost in the seat of a goddess, the same man is stripping, raping, and inflicting physical injuries on her.

Mahatma Jyotirao Phule is remembered as a social reformer and advocate for equal rights for women. His own life was a reformist movement, a mission. Thus, Uma Chakravarty the feminist scholar stated him as a forerunner elaborating the theory of "Brahmanical Patriarchy". [3]

STATUS OF WOMEN: Gender discrimination is sometimes naked, sometimes hidden, sometimes flexible, and sometimes so nasty that it is frightening to think of it.

Illicit relations between father and daughter are the subject of the NavanedishtaSukta. This relation between siblings is the subject of the famous Yama-YamiSanbadSukta. Rivers flow to Visvamitra, as women bow to men who are kissed in Visvamitra-NadiSanbadSukta. The Rigveda also has evidence of women fighting on the battlefield. So we hear the story of Mud-Galini's victory. Vishpala lost a leg and Badhrimati an arm in the battle. Badhrimati and Sasiyasi are also mentioned for their bravery. This shows that women enjoyed some equality in the ancient Vedic period.

In Ramayana we find that Rama tried hard to rescue Sita. He did all this to protect morality, to prevent exceptions and to remove the stigma on his proud lineage. Rama did not stop here. He cast a dirty look at Sita. There is doubt in her character, so Rama declared that Sita can be wherever she wants to go and be with whomever she wants to be.

तदस्य व्याहृतं भद्रे मयैत कृतबुद्धिना।
लक्षणे वाथ भारते कुरु बुद्धियथा सुखम्॥ [15]

Means "O gracious lady! Therefore, this has been spoken by me today, with a resolved mind. Set your mind on Lakshmana or Bharat, as per your ease."

Hearing this Sita was unable to bear all these words and entered into fire-

"अमृष्यमाना सा सीता विवेशज्वलनं सती" [1]

Just as dog-licked ghee cannot be used in yajna, Sita used by others will no longer be accepted as such. Remember, even Ravana himself did not commit such a crime against Sita. The husband has no obligation to refute false accusations against the wife, but it is the wife's sole duty to refrain from slandering her husband. In Ramcharitmanas by Tulsidas, it is said that-"Dhol, ganwar, shudra, pashu, naari - Ye sab tadanke adhikari". [16]

The women in the Mahabharata have been treated as slaves, property, chattel and commodities used for the pleasure of men. The key characteristics of women are seen as submission, suppression, obedience and silence. Here we find (Sabha Parva) that Shakuni suggests Draupadi's staking after Nakula in the Dice game, when Yudhisthira starts to describe the beauty of draupadi-

तथा सयाच छील संपत्या याम इच्छेत पुरुषःसत्रियम।३५।
आभाति पद्मवद वक्तं सस्वेदंम ल्लिकेव च।
वेदीमध्या दीर्घकेशी ताम्राक्षी नातिरोमशा।।३८।। [13]

It is a clear sexual hint. When Yudhishtira accepts the stake and Shakuni slyly replies that-
अभ्यन्तरा च सर्वस्वे द्रोपदी भरतर्षभा (Draupadi is included in all the possessions), Yudhishtira could not respond to that sly suggestion. Once Yudhishtira loses himself, Draupadi should have been considered automatically lost. Draupadi in Mahabharata was '*नाथवती-अनाथवत्*'. 'But why would nobody Dharmik Vikarna, Wise Bidura, Bhishma, Drona and Dhritarashtra not point out the redundancy at this phase? What sort of collective amnesia is this?' [16]. Bhishma, who is dying in peace, says to Yudhishtira, there is nothing worse than a woman, a man should have no affection for a woman. Dharmaputra Yudhishtira condemns women and says that women are the root of all evil; Krishna says that when a woman is stigmatized, she becomes hybrid and ultimately loses.

The Vedic society, the most important duty of a wife is to bestow the matrimonial family with a son. One such example, at the ceremony to get male progeny, the woman has to eat a barley corn and two mustard seeds or beans placed on both sides of the barley corn and an image of the male genital organ so that she may give birth to a male child. The position of women further experienced a decline with the prevalence of child marriage, sati, polygamy and the purdah system. Thousands of such arrows of hatred have been thrown at women in Dharmashastra and Puranas. Women and Shudra were treacherous and ungrateful. They had no right to chant Vedic Mantras. In the Vedic age, women were the cause of impurity, sinfulness and evil. It has been said in Maitrayani Samhita- Women are liars, unlucky and just like sura and gambling they are just addicts.

During the Mauryan period too, the status of women was in a deteriorated condition. Though the kings employed female bodyguards and spies. Arthashastra imposed more stigmas upon them; they were not permitted to go to any places without the permission of their husbands and were not allowed to make decisions on their own. Manu dictated that they would be dependent upon their fathers during the childhood stage, husbands in youth and on sons in old age-

पिता रक्षति कौमारे भर्ता रक्षति यौवने।

रक्षन्ति स्थाविरे पुत्राः न स्त्री स्वातन्त्र्यमर्हति।।(9.3) [4]. This is further supported by Narada Smriti, which says "*पक्षद्वयावसाने तु राजा भर्ता स्त्रियांमतः।।*" If nobody is there to protect women on both sides, her father and in-laws, it is the duty of the King to take care of women. In *Smriti Chandrika* also it is said -

रक्षेत्कन्यां पिता वित्रांपतिः पुत्रास्तु वार्धके।

अभावे ज्ञातयस्तेषां न स्वातन्त्र्यं क्वचित्स्त्रियाः।।(8.299)

In the Manusmriti, Manu refers to the woman as the field and the man as the seed of the field and he says-
वीजस्य चैव योन्याश्च वीजमुत्कृष्टमुच्यते।

सर्वभूतप्रसूतिर्हि वीजलक्षणलक्षिता।।9.35।। [5]

The seed is the best of the two, the seed and the vagina. Because everywhere the child becomes symptomatic of the seed.

Here it is also said that - Women are nothing but an inferior sexuality-

स्वभाव एष नारीणां नराणामीह दूषणम्।

अतोऽर्थात्र प्रमाद्यन्ति प्रमदासु विपश्चित्।।2.213।। [6]

It is the nature of women to pollute men in this world. That is why scholars never neglect women.

The scriptures also say that no man will live alone with his mother, sister or daughter, Because the senses are so restless that they attract even the wise person with lust.

मात्रा स्वस्रा दुहित्रा वा न विविक्तासनो भवेत्।

वलवानिन्द्रियग्रामो विद्वांसमपि कर्षति।।2.215।। [7]

Nari Shudra and Vaishya are also placed in the same category in the Gita-

"मां हि पार्थ व्यापाश्रिता येऽपि स्युः पापयोनयः।

स्त्रियो वैश्वास्तथा शूद्रास्तेऽपियान्ति पराई गतिम्।।"(32) [8]

Indian society, like the number of classical societies, was patriarchal in nature. When the Vedic period came to an end, then women were deprived of social and religious rights. They were not allowed to participate in social, religious and cultural functions. Purana and sastras described—“*अवला-दुर्वला*” +“*दुर्वलस्य-वलमराजा*” “*वलानाम् रोदनम् वलम्*”, “*विनाश्रय नावर्तन्ति कविता वनिता लता*” etc. The society treated women as the weaker sex, dependent on male and subordinate sex. In this age the suppression of women started on a larger scale due to influence of the religion, caste system, custom and they are victimised in all walks of their life. The family was regarded that the birth of girls would prove to be a major hindrance within the course of bringing about welfare of the family and community. Whereas, the male children were regarded as assets. Widows were neglected in a number of aspects and were not allowed to render a significant participation in social, cultural or religious functions. Ambedkar, in his article, “*The Rise and fall of Hindu Women*” attacked Manusmriti for leaving bitter remarks on womanhood and legally sanctioning a benighted life of suppression. The status of women improved a little during the Buddhist period. He did not preach religion for any particular community or gender, in his view men and women were equal. According to the Mahaparinirvana Sutras of the Sutrapitaka, the Buddha told the monks that he would give knowledge to the old woman as a mother, the young woman as a sister and the girl as his own child. Because excluding women, men are useless. The contribution of the wealthy Vishakha to the propagation of Buddhism is still remembered in the history of Buddhism. Their Patachara was well versed in religious education and provided religious education to many women. Buddha was the first to establish a women's organization or nuns' association for the realization of women's education, health and individual freedom.

MAHATMA PHULE'S PERSPECTIVE ON WOMEN: Mahatma Jyotiba Phule (1826-1890 AD) is a respected name in the history of the social reform movement in Maharashtra in the nineteenth century. Mahatma Phule was determined for the overall development of the lower-class people including Shudra and Ati-Sudra. He was the first to launch a women's education campaign. Education should be given to live as a capable woman. Phule started his career as a teacher by educating his wife. He was the first Indian citizen to advocate the idea that primary education should be compulsory and free. Mahatma Phule's feminist thought has evolved out of intuitive understanding, respect for the dignity of all human beings and belief in their equality. Mahatma Phule has seen the condition of women by linking them to the shackles of caste and varna. The Brahmin patriarchy deprived the woman of all rights and warmth for her sexual luxuries, making her completely powerless and dependent on the patriarchy. Mahatma opposed

the Brahmanical patriarchal monopoly which gives the woman the status of a mere slave in the dominion of man by creating the biggest obstacle in the male-female relationship. When they oppose the practice of Sati, they attack its foundation.

Mahatma Phule supported women not only at the level of thought but also arranged for Western education for them. He established institutes like the 'Pune Female Native Schools' and the Society for Promoting Education for Mahar. To teach in these made his wife literate. He presents the philosophy of liberation from social and mental slavery of the exploited and neglected people. Mahatma Phule, in his social thought, considered the cruellest aspects of the caste system and presented a new ideology for the abolition of the caste system. He was probably the first thinker who did direct work for women's emancipation, women's education, economic rights of women and their social existence and self-respect, security. Similarly, he was also strongly opposed to cutting the hair of widowed women. He was insistent on the remarriage of widows. Keeping in mind the needs of the society, he made widow ashrams and provided rights and alimony to the widowed women. Similarly, he also started children's homes for the orphan children of widows (1863), even got a home built for housing upper caste widows during (1854). He did many social works like schools for the untouchables, providing water by opening water cisterns of their homes. He stated, "Narnarisabhimehnati bane. Parivarko pale. Anand le. Nit bachobachikopadnebheje". Mahatma Phule's book 'SampadaJajwalya' is a literal philosophy of revolutionary ideology. He was particularly influenced by the abhang of Sant Tukaram Maharaj. He says that the progress of an individual is only possible with education. "When a man gets educated, only the man learns. When a woman gets educated, the entire generation learns" [9]. Jyoti Rao says in the introduction to the book "Shetkaryacha Asud":

Without education wisdom was lost;

Without wisdom morals were lost;

Without morals development was lost;

Without development wealth was lost;

Without wealth the Shudras were ruined;

So much has happened through lack of education.[9]

Mahatma Jyoti Rao Phule contributed a lot in his life to reform society and by bringing equality in it. Following his principles Dr. Ambedkar had compiled the constitution in which we have provision for free and compulsory education and universalization of education in the constitution.

According to Jyotiba Phule's biographer, Professor Pawar "He was a true revolutionist of India in social reforms and Education"

SOCIAL REVOLUTION: Mahatma Phule (1827-1890) is addressed as the father of the social revolution and the original architect of India's gender revolution as well. The first gender-sensitive act of Jotirao was to encourage his young wife Savitri to read and write. Mahatma Phule started the first school for girls on 15 May 1848 at Bhide Wada, Poona. Girls of all castes gathered there under one roof. Jyotiba started the marriage ceremony without a Brahmin priest.

Dr. Ambedkar wrote thoroughly on women's suppression and set up newspapers like '*MookNayak*' and '*Bahishkrit Bharat*' with sections that exclusively covered women-centric issues. Equal status to all citizens is guaranteed in Indian constitution under article 14 and does not discriminate against a man or a woman. Moreover, article 15 makes special provisions for women. Dr. Ambedkar, while being a labour member in the Viceroy's Executive Council, arranged maternity leave for women for the first time. After

being sworn in as law minister, he first enacted the Hindu Code Bill. The Bhakti movement also sought to restore the status of women and questioned the forms of dominance. Bhakti movements openly advocate social justice and equality between men and women in the Hindu community. Tracing the roots of Indian Feminism Bhakti challenged Brahmanical patriarchy through their songs, poems and ways of life. Sent.Kabir says-

Nari narak na janiye, sab santan ki khaan

Jaame harijan upjay, soyee rattan k ikhaan [14]

He also says that-

Nari ninda na karo, nari nar ki khaan

Nari se nar hota hai, Dhruv Prahlad samaan.[14]

A number of the emancipation of women and the self-respect movement were the major issues Periyar E.V.R. fought for. Periyar insisted on abolishing the institution of marriage in India because for women marriage was a symbol of slavery.

He developed the concept of self-respect marriage in the year 1929. There were two basic principles of this marriage, first gender equality and second the right to make their decisions. He articulated all these thoughts in his talks, speeches and writings, which were compiled in the form of a booklet titled "*Why the Woman was Enslaved*". He persuaded his newly wedded 13-year-old wife, Nagammal, to discard the "thali" or mangalsutra. He stated that "*if the right to divorce is not granted, polygamy and polyandry should become norms. To bear in silence and patience the travails of an unhappy marriage is a slur on one's humanity, self-respect and an act of clear folly*" (Anaimuthu: 148). Periyar was in favour of giving women unlimited and unconditional freedom in the matter of sex and reproduction. He used to address women in the context of children, saying that women should stop giving birth to children if it hinders their independence.

After Independence, the educational rights of women were promoted and they were made aware of the value of education. The number of working women has also steadily increased.

CONCLUSION: "A beautiful woman is loved by her husband." (Satapatha Brahmana, 13.1.9.6). First of all, not all women are beautiful; does a woman with a normal appearance not get the love of her husband? And what would happen when the beautiful bride lost her form due to age, multiple births and marital labour?

However, motherhood played a very significant role in the social life of ancient India. Motherhood was imperative; A girl was taught to be a good wife, a good mother. She was blessed to be the 'mother of many sons'. The ascetics blessing the pregnant girl in the fourth act of the play *Abhingeenashkuntalam*, that she should get the rare honor of *Veerprasavini*.

While dedicating one of his important books '*Shudra KaunThe?*' (Who were Shudras?) Ambedkar declared that Phule had made the lower castes aware of how they were slaves to the higher varnas. Among his three gurus – Buddha, Kabir and Phule – Ambedkar was the closest to Phule. The logic and tone and tenor of Phule are clearly reflected in Tarabai Shinde's historical essay '*Stri-PurushTulana*' (Comparing men and women). Mahatma Phule had great respect for "Lokhitwadi." Mahatma JotibaPhule's '*Gulamgiri*' is considered one of the first tracts against the caste system.

Manusmriti declares, "*Women have no business with the text of the Vedas.*" The education of girls was entirely domestic. At this time there was a need in the society for some people who could improve the condition of women. Jyotiba Phule formed the Satya Shodhak Samaj (Society of Seekers of Truth) to

decontaminate the society from the caste and gender based discrimination and liberate the oppressed lower-caste people from the stigmas inflicted by the Brahmins. Even after 75 years of independence, there is no denying the existence of some inequality between men and women in Indian society. Years ago, 15 women were there among the total 389 members of the Constitution Drafting Committee. The numbers are quite small, but given the disparity, this participation should not be underestimated. This role of women behind the drafting of the constitution, which is called the backbone of the country, ultimately remained a protest against that inequality.

India is increasingly doing better in the field of female education. The more we spread and imbibe the spirit of Jyotiba Phule's words; the chances are that we will do better as a nation.

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