

Mahatma Jyotirao Phule (1827-1890) and the Struggle for Dalit Rights

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Abstract:

The 19th-century social reform movement in India was a historic period that played a crucial role in advancing progress, science, human rights, and religious freedom in Indian society. Reformers such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Swami Vivekananda, Mahatma Gandhi, Jyotirao Phule and others dedicated their lives to the promotion of education, women's rights, child welfare, religious, political reform and the upliftment of the marginalized Dalit community. Among these reformers, Jyotirao Phule of Maharashtra held a distinctive position. He was an outspoken critic of caste-based discrimination and placed special emphasis on the dignity and rights of women. He believed that "Every individual should seek the truth and shape themselves accordingly, as only then can human society be truly happy." He also stated that "British rule provided an opportunity for the common people to free themselves from Brahmanical oppression." Phule, along with his followers, established the Satyashodhak Samaj (Society of Truth Seekers) with the aim of securing equal rights for the lower castes and improving the conditions of the oppressed sections of society. This paper examines how Jyotirao Phule dedicated his life to the struggle for the social dignity of Dalits and analyses the lasting impact of his contributions on Indian social reform.

Keyword: Social Reform, Caste System, Dalit Rights, Education, Satyashodhak Samaj, Gender Equality

1. Introduction:

The 19th century was a transformative period in Indian society, marked by progressive social reform movements advocating education, human rights, scientific temper, and religious freedom. Phule was a vocal critic of the caste system and patriarchal oppression. He firmly believed in the power of education as a means to uplift marginalized communities and was committed to eradicating caste-based discrimination. His establishment of Satyashodhak Samaj (Society for Truth-Seekers) in 1873 was a significant step toward achieving social justice for the lower castes. He also advocated for women's education, widow remarriage, and the rights of peasants and laborers. His reformist ideals were deeply rooted in rationalism and humanism, making his work relevant even today. This paper aims to analyse Jyotirao Phule's lifelong struggle for the social upliftment of Dalits, his contributions to education, and his efforts to challenge the Brahmanical social order.

2. Objectives:

The primary objectives of this study are:

1. To examine Phule's role in the social reform movement – Understanding his contributions to caste ab-

olition, women's empowerment, and educational reform.

2. To analyse the impact of Satyashodhak Samaj – Evaluating how this organization empowered Dalits and other marginalized groups.
3. To assess Phule's critique of Brahmanical dominance – Studying his writings and activism against religious orthodoxy and caste oppression.
4. To explore the long-term influence of Phule's ideas – Understanding how his reformist ideology shaped later movements for Dalit rights and social justice in India.

3. Methodology:

This research is based on a qualitative approach, utilizing historical and textual analysis. The methodology includes:

1. Primary Sources: Examination of Jyotirao Phule's writings, including *Gulamgiri* (Slavery) and his letters, speeches, and pamphlets.
2. Secondary Sources: Reviewing scholarly works, historical analyses, and contemporary interpretations of Phule's contributions.
3. Comparative Analysis: Studying Phule's impact in relation to other social reformers of his time and the later Dalit movement led by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar.
4. Thematic Analysis: Identifying recurring themes in Phule's activism, such as education, caste abolition, and gender equality.

This research will provide a comprehensive insight into Phule's revolutionary role in shaping modern India's social and political discourse.

4. Discussion:

Mahatma Jyotirao Phule was born on April 11, 1827, into a lower-caste Mali community in the Satara district of Maharashtra. His father was a vegetable vendor in Pune. In 1828, when he was just one year old, his mother passed away. Due to financial difficulties, after completing his primary education, he had to leave school and assist his father by working on their family farm. In 1840, at the age of just 13, he married Savitribai Phule. In 1841, he enrolled at the Scottish Mission High School in Pune, where he completed his English education in 1848. This schooling significantly transformed his life. Once, he was invited to attend the wedding of a Brahmin friend. However, during the ceremony, the groom's relatives insulted and humiliated him for being of a lower caste. They told him that, as a Shudra, he had no right to attend such an event. This incident deeply impacted him and strengthened his resolve to reject the caste system. He then decided to dedicate his life to securing social dignity and serving the oppressed Shudra community. For the rest of his life, he fought tirelessly for the liberation of the marginalized. The struggle he initiated in his early years continued until his death on November 28, 1890.

One of the greatest sources of inspiration in Jyotirao Phule's life was reading the biographies and works of various philosophers. He was particularly influenced by the ideas of Thomas Paine and his book *Rights of Man*. Reading this book instilled in him a deep sense of social justice. He studied the biographies of George Washington and Chhatrapati Shivaji and drew inspiration from their lives. Phule aspired to replace the exploitative Indian social system with one based on individual freedom and equality. Additionally, he sought to establish a universal religion instead of the rigid caste-based structure of Hinduism. Phule was a pioneering thinker in advocating human equality and rights. He is regarded as India's first revolutionary and a leader of oppressed farmers. He was a strong advocate for women's education and an active promoter

of national progress and human unity. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar once remarked, "Mahatma Phule was the greatest Shudra of modern India, who made the lower-caste Hindus aware of their enslavement by the upper castes and spread the message that social democracy is more important than political independence for India."

During the time of Jyotirao Phule's father, the power and influence of the Peshwas had significantly declined. The rulers had abandoned just governance, and Brahmins became the privileged class. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Brahmins dominated society, enjoying exclusive benefits, dictating social regulations, and monopolizing educational opportunities. In contrast, individuals from other castes were deprived of education and equal rights in society. Their merits were often ignored, and they faced severe economic hardships. Under the rule of Bajji Rao II, Brahmins enjoyed even greater privileges, further exacerbating the plight of the lower castes. Due to the ruling class's extravagance, the government fell into financial distress and became dependent on moneylenders. This reliance on moneylenders led to extreme difficulties for farmers, as land revenue and interest rates on loans increased. The most widespread issue was social discrimination, where lower castes and women were subjected to severe oppression. Phule became a vocal critic of this societal inequality.

Phule expressed his reformist thoughts and humanitarian perspective through his writings. His first published book, *Tritiya Ratna* (1855), highlighted various social injustices and the rights of the lower castes. In *Brahmananche Kasab* (1869), he exposed the exploitation of marginalized communities by Brahmin priests. That same year, he authored *Powada: Vidyakhatyatil Brahman Pantoji*, where he detailed the privileges enjoyed by Brahmins in society. His book *Gulamgiri* (1873) provided historical evidence of the enslavement of lower castes and described the history of Brahmin dominance in India. He advised the masses that religious epics were human creations and that they had contributed to exploitation and social inequality. In *Shetkaryacha Asud* (1883), he discussed the oppression of farmers and detailed how they suffered during his time. In *Satyashodhak Samajokta Mangalashthakasha Sarva Pooja Vidhi* (1887), he analysed Brahminical rituals and their adverse social effects. *Sarvajanik Satya Dharma Pustak* (1889) presented his vision of a universal religion and criticized blind faith. His book *Asprshyanche Kaifiyat* (1893) focused on the agrarian crisis and proposed solutions to agricultural problems. Phule's writing style was bold and confrontational. His works were a direct response to Maharashtra's rigid social and religious structures. He argued that the upper castes dominated society and enjoyed privileges, while caste and gender-based discrimination prevailed. The oppressed had no fundamental human rights, only suffering, mistreatment, injustice, and exploitation. This unjust social order was legitimized by religious scriptures such as the Vedas and Puranas. Phule strongly opposed this system and sought to establish a new cultural and social framework based on equality, justice, and humanity.

Jyotirao Phule was dedicated to establishing social justice and human rights. Through his life and work, he built a strong movement against the prevailing untouchability and caste system in society. His work was characterized by an unwavering commitment to social justice and equality. During the nineteenth century, caste-based discrimination in India was widespread. Indian society at that time was divided into four major castes—Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras. Shudras faced extreme discrimination and were relegated to the lowest social status. They were often assigned menial tasks such as sanitation work, cremation of dead bodies, and other low-status jobs. The untouchables (now referred to as "Dalits") existed outside this four-fold caste hierarchy and were denied any social status or rights. They were labeled as 'impure' or 'untouchable' and were forced to live in isolation from the main settlements of villages or cities. Higher-caste individuals would not even touch them, as it was considered an act of impurity. Phule

revolted against this unjust caste system. He firmly believed that all individuals should have equal opportunities and that everyone is born free and equal. He was a staunch advocate of human rights and fought tirelessly to secure justice and dignity for the oppressed lower castes.

He strongly opposed the Hindu caste system and the man-made discrimination embedded within it. He fearlessly fought for reforms in Hindu society. He sought to eliminate the inferiority complex from people's minds and raised awareness among the Shudras about their rights. He advised them to pursue education and gain empowerment, emphasizing that they were not slaves but human beings. T.L. Joshi stated, "Jyotirao Phule was one of the first revolutionaries against India's traditional social structure. Considering that conventional social laws had kept the Indian consciousness in chains for thousands of years, where did he draw the inspiration for this rebellion? The answer is that Jyotirao was a 'Satyashodhak'—a seeker of truth—who realized the moral truths of human life. The manifestation of that eternal truth was reflected in his belief in human freedom, which was supported by modern Western civilization."

In 1873, Jyotirao Phule founded the Satyashodhak Samaj (Society for the Seekers of Truth). Its primary objective was to eradicate caste discrimination, untouchability, religious superstitions, and social inequality from society. Through this movement, he aimed to establish equality and human rights for people from all social backgrounds. Phule firmly believed that no person should suffer discrimination due to their birth and that everyone deserved equal rights and opportunities. The core objectives of the Satyashodhak Samaj were: eliminating caste and racial discrimination, fighting against untouchability, promoting education for all, Opposing religious superstitions. The Satyashodhak Samaj brought a significant shift in Indian social reform. The movement initiated by Phule later became an inspiration for leaders like Mahatma Gandhi and Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. His efforts led to the establishment of various rights for Dalits and lower-caste individuals, strengthening the idea of social equality in India.

Phule established the Satyashodhak Samaj with the ideals of human welfare, happiness, unity, equality, and simple religious principles and practices. A Pune-based newspaper, "Dinbandhu," served as the voice supporting the ideology of the society. The members of this society included Muslims, Brahmins, and government officials. Phule's own Mali community played a significant role in providing leadership and financial support for the organization. In addition to being a social reformer, Phule was also a businessman. In 1882, he identified himself as a merchant, farmer, and municipal contractor. He owned 60 acres (24 hectares) of agricultural land in Manjari, near Pune. For some time, he worked as a government contractor and supplied construction materials for building a dam over the Mula-Mutha River near Pune in the 1870s. Additionally, he secured contracts to supply laborers for the construction of the Katraj Tunnel and Yerwada Jail. In 1863, Phule established a business supplying metal casting equipment. In 1876, he was appointed as a commissioner (municipal council member) of the Pune Municipality and served in this unelected position until 1883. On May 11, 1888, the prominent social reformer from Bombay, Vitthalrao Krishnaji Vandekar, honored him with the title of "Mahatma."

We can emphasize his ideas for leading social change with the following words: "Phule believed in dismantling a social structure where people were deliberately kept dependent, illiterate, ignorant, and poor to facilitate their exploitation. To him, the eradication of blind faith was a part of a broader socio-economic transformation. This was his strategy to end the exploitation of human beings. Mere advice, education, and alternative ways of living are not enough unless the economic framework of exploitation is abolished. The Shudras became aware of their caste identity and started demanding equality with the higher castes in all aspects of life. In short, Mahatma Jyotiba Phule liberated women and Shudras from the control of

religious vested interests and laid the foundation for a Backward Class Movement in India." He aimed to establish a new social system in India based on equality, justice, freedom, and fraternity. He was the first person in Indian history to establish girls' schools and open orphanages for widows and abandoned children, promoting women's education. In 1848, at the age of 21, Phule visited a girls' school run by Christian missionaries in Ahmednagar. That same year, he read Thomas Paine's *"Rights of Man,"* which deeply influenced his thoughts on social justice. He realized that oppressed castes and women in Indian society faced severe discrimination and that education was crucial for their liberation. To achieve this goal, in 1848, he first taught his wife, Savitribai, to read and write, and later, he opened the first indigenous-run school for girls in Pune. He and his wife also taught Sagunabai Kshirsagar, a relative, to write in Marathi. However, the conservative upper-caste society of Pune strongly opposed this initiative. The Brahmin community criticized him severely and attacked him for his noble work. Despite facing tremendous challenges, he continued his mission. Due to social pressure, his own family and community abandoned him. During this difficult time, their friends Usman Sheikh and his sister Fatima Sheikh provided them shelter and even helped them establish the school on their premises. Later, Phule also started schools for children from marginalized communities, such as the Mahars and Mangs. By 1852, Phule was successfully running three schools, educating about 273 girls. However, due to the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857, the withdrawal of government support, and disagreements over curriculum, these schools were forced to close by 1858.

One of Phule's significant efforts for women's welfare was his support for the remarriage of widows. In 1863, he established a shelter to provide a safe space for pregnant widows from dominant castes to give birth, aiming to reduce the high rates of infanticide prevalent in society. In the same year, a Brahmin widow named Kashibai in Pune became pregnant. After failing in her attempt to abort the child, she gave birth and later killed the newborn, disposing of the body in a well. When this incident came to light, she faced severe punishment and was imprisoned. This shocking event deeply disturbed Phule, prompting him to take action against such social injustices. With the help of his longtime friend, Sadashiv Ballal Govande, and his wife, Savitribai Phule, he established an Infanticide Prevention Center in Pune. To raise awareness about the center, they distributed pamphlets, one of which stated: *"Widows, come here and safely and discreetly give birth to your child. You have the choice to either keep the baby with you or leave them in our care. If you choose not to keep the child, the orphanage will take full responsibility for their upbringing."* Phule's initiative became a crucial support system for oppressed and abandoned women, setting a remarkable example of women's welfare in India.

Phule believed that education was one of the most crucial tools for shaping society. He stated: *"Education that does not help common people prepare for life's struggles, that does not instill strength of character, generosity, and the courage of a lion, is not true education. True education is that which enables a person to stand on their own feet."* He strongly advocated for including basic knowledge of agriculture and health in primary education. He emphasized the need to restructure the primary education curriculum to meet the needs of rural areas. There should be a clear distinction between rural and urban education to ensure that education remains practical and beneficial to society. Additionally, an ideal agricultural model should be implemented on a small scale for demonstration purposes.

Phule and his wife, Savitribai, continued to run the Infanticide Prevention Center until the mid-1880s. He also attempted to eliminate the stigma of untouchability by opening his home and well to members of oppressed castes. He advocated for the re-establishment of the mythical rule of Mahabali (King Bali), which he believed existed before the "treacherous Aryan uprising." Regarding the Aryan invasion theory,

Phule argued that the Aryan conquerors of India, who considered themselves racially superior, were in fact the brutal oppressors of the indigenous people. He believed they institutionalized the caste system as a means of enslavement and social division, securing the dominance of their Brahmin successors. Phule saw the later Muslim conquests of India as another form of subjugation. However, he viewed British colonial rule more favorably, considering the British as relatively enlightened rulers. In his famous book '*Gulamgiri*' (*Slavery*), he expressed gratitude to Christian missionaries and British colonialists for making the oppressed castes aware that they too were entitled to fundamental human rights. He dedicated the book to the people of the United States who were fighting for the abolition of slavery. The book serves as a powerful testament to his struggle against discrimination based on caste, gender, and social reform.

An incident in 1848 further intensified Phule's fight against social injustice and caste-based discrimination. He was invited to the wedding of a Brahmin friend from an upper-caste family. However, when the groom's relatives discovered Phule's caste background, they humiliated and insulted him. Deeply offended, Phule left the ceremony and resolved to challenge the rigid caste system and oppressive social norms. From that moment, he dedicated his life to relentlessly challenging the dominance of the upper castes and working for the liberation of the oppressed. Phule was profoundly influenced by Thomas Paine's famous book '*The Rights of Man*'. He firmly believed that education was the only solution to fighting social evils and that knowledge was essential for the upliftment of women and lower-caste individuals. His efforts to secure education for women were strongly supported by his wife, Savitribai Phule. One of the few educated women of that era, Savitribai was first taught to read and write by Jyotiba Phule and later became a pioneer in women's education.

5. Result:

Perhaps the most significant legacy of Mahatma Jyotiba Phule is his relentless fight against social stigma and the profound ideology behind it, which remains highly relevant today. In the 19th century, society conditioned people to accept discriminatory practices as unquestionable social norms. However, Jyotiba Phule sought to challenge and transform these inequalities based on caste, class, and social hierarchy. He was a fearless pioneer of social reform. He initiated awareness campaigns that ultimately inspired leaders like Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and Mahatma Gandhi, who later took significant steps against caste-based discrimination. In 1974, Dhananjay Keer wrote a biography of Phule titled "*Mahatma Jyotiba Phule: The Father of Our Social Revolution*." In honor of this great reformer, the Mahatma Phule Museum was established in Pune. The Maharashtra government launched the Mahatma Jyotiba Phule Jeevandayini Yojana, a cashless medical assistance scheme for the underprivileged. Additionally, numerous statues have been erected, and several streets and educational institutions have been renamed in his honor. For instance, Crawford Market in Mumbai has been renamed Mahatma Jyotiba Phule Mandai, and the agricultural university in Rahuri, Maharashtra, has been named Mahatma Phule Krishi Vidyapeeth. Jyotiba Phule wrote numerous literary essays and books during his lifetime, most of which were based on the ideals of social reform and equality. One of his most notable works is "*Shetkaryacha Asud*" (*The Cultivator's Whipcord*). He also wrote significant literary pieces such as "*Tritiya Ratna*", "*Brahmanache Kasab*", and "*Ishara*." Additionally, he wrote plays like "*Satsar*" (*Parts 1 and 2*), which were staged to spread awareness against social injustices. He also authored books for the Satyashodhak Samaj, which critically examined the history of Brahminism and outlined the religious practices that lower-caste individuals were historically denied access to. Through these writings, he worked tirelessly to establish an egalitarian society.

6. Conclusion:

He was the first Indian to be honored by the British government for his remarkable contributions to social service. Jyotiba Phule dedicated his entire life to the upliftment of the oppressed, farmers, and women. His work and ideals inspired numerous great personalities. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, the architect of the Indian Constitution, was deeply influenced by Phule's revolutionary efforts. Phule's philosophy was based on justice, equality, liberty, and fraternity, emphasizing the right to education for all, women's welfare, minority development, and respect for the oppressed. It is crucial to acknowledge that Phule passed away in 1890, yet 135 years later, many of the social issues he fought against remain unresolved. The current government should incorporate his ideology and principles into school and college curricula to inspire future generations to work toward social reform. For the holistic progress of society, it is essential to actively promote education, human rights, women's empowerment, and social-political and religious awareness. Phule's struggle proves that bringing social change requires hard work, determination, and selfless love for humanity. The vision of equality he dreamed of continues to inspire social reform even today, and his contributions will forever remain an integral part of Indian history.

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