

## CONTRIBUTION OF JYOTIBA PHULE AS A SOCIAL REFORMER

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Jotirao Govindrao Phule (1827-90) was accused of having a negative attitude of being anti-brahmin. He was the first to raise his voice against the exploitation of the dalits, caste system and social inequality. Phule occupies unique position among the social reformers of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, while other reformers concentrated more on reforming the social institutions of family and marriage, Phule revolted against the unjust caste system under which millions of people suffered from centuries. Jotiba had a positive social philosophy for the upliftment of the downtrodden. We will try to evaluate the social thoughts of Jotiba on the bases of his works.

To understand and appreciate the philosophy of Jotiba Phule one must have a clear picture of the socio-political condition in Maharashtra, during and before his age. In the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century the Chhatrapatis were reduced to the position of the titular monarchs. The real power had passed to the Brahmin Peshwas. All non-Brahmins were relegated to the position of second class citizens. The civil and criminal law was patently partial to the Brahmins. Almost all the high offices were held by the Brahmins. The non-brahmins had to face social persecution at every step. The condition of the untouchables were horrible.

In Maharashtra there was clear cut domination in the services and general cultural life. This culminated into anti-brahminical movements by the end of the century. The anti-brahmin assault was first sounded in Maharashtra in the 1870's by Jotiba Phule with his book *Gulam-Giri* (1872) and his organization, the *Satyashodhak Samaj* (1873) which

proclaimed the need to save the lower caste from the hypocritical Brahmins and their opportunistic scriptures.<sup>i</sup>

In 19<sup>th</sup> century the number of movements or so called radical movements questioned the fundamentals of the social organizations like caste system. Jotiba Phule argued that it was Brahmin domination and their monopoly over power and opportunities that lay at the root of the predicament of the Sudra and anti-sudra castes. So he turned the Orientalist Theory of Aryanisation of India upside down.<sup>ii</sup> Jotiba Phule argued that the Brahmins were the progeny of the alien Aryans, who had subjugated the natives of the land and therefore the balance now needed to be redressed and for achieving that social revolution, he sought to unite both the non-brahman peasant castes as well as dalit groups in a common movement.

In the steel-frame of the caste system the so called lower classes were denied education and social equality. Jotiba Phule claimed that the caste system originated due to the helpless condition of the sons of the soil. He opposed the Hindu religious bigotry and caste discrimination. Till 1851 admission to colleges was restricted only to the Brahmins. No attempt was made to educate the masses, the Government having expressed their inability to undertake a scheme of mass education.<sup>iii</sup>

In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century Christian Missionaries started working among the dalits and the colonial government sponsored institutions for the spread of education among these classes. However Christian Missionaries were not always the aggressive agents of improvement among the dalits

as they too often succumbed to the pressure of the intolerant society and ambivalent bureaucracy.<sup>iv</sup> Further there were also fears of conversion to Christianity in the missionary schools.

After diagnosing the malady correctly, Jotiba prescribed the antidote. He also found that ignorance was the root cause of the evils, he therefore took upon himself the task of educating the masses. He thought over a scheme of education that to of a girl education to begin with. In 1848 Jotiba founded a school for girls.<sup>v</sup> This school was opened to all sections of the society. It became very popular despite the presence of the Missionary schools in Poona mainly due to the conversion issue.

Jotiba was not able to find female teacher for this school, he, therefore, himself taught his wife Savitri and later appointed her as a teacher in the school. He had to suffer for this daring to go against the then existing social thought. The school was later closed due to the social pressure and financial crisis. Jotirao re-opened it with the help of his Brahmin friends - Govande and Valvekar in 1852.<sup>vi</sup>

As per the existing social taboos the children of the untouchables<sup>vii</sup> could not go to any school. Jotiba was against exploitation of any type. In 1852 he started a school for the boys and the girls of the untouchables. In the beginning he had to spend from his meager income for the maintenance of the school. Later on because of the efforts of Mr. Reeves, the Revenue Commissioner, the schools got financial assistance from the government.<sup>viii</sup> As no one would give even water to the children during the school hours, he allowed them to have water from his own tank.<sup>ix</sup>

Jotiba was one of the pioneers to advocate compulsory and free primary education. He demanded that the Government should spend a sizeable amount from the land revenue for educating the masses. If the people did not send children to such schools he advised that the Government should use force to bring their boys and girls to the schools.<sup>x</sup> In the evidence that he gave before the Hunter Commission on education, he discussed the necessity of free and compulsory

education for the masses.<sup>xi</sup> In reply to Jotiba points the Commission remarked that 'it is desirable that the whole population of India should be literate' and to ensure such general literacy it recommended special funds to be set apart particularly for the education of backward community.<sup>xii</sup>

The caste-system was an anathema for Jotiba. He believed that the Brahmins created the cast hierarchy in order to keep the people forever divided. He firmly believed in equality of man. He had the courage to declare as far back as 1873 that the ancestors of the Mahars and the Manga and the ancestors of the rest of the people were the same. He traced the common lineage of the untouchables and the caste Hindus. Even his relatives did not pardon him for this brave assertion. They could not forget his views even after his death. They refused to perform his last rites.<sup>xiii</sup>

He was persistently working for the eradication of the caste system. He put forward logical arguments to prove that the occupational castes were not meant to be hereditary.<sup>xiv</sup> He pointed out that the children of the intelligent Brahmins did not necessarily have the acumen of their father. On the other hand there may be some bright young men amongst the so-called backward classes, who if given a suitable opportunity, would prove themselves superior to the Brahmins.<sup>xv</sup> He has dedicated his book 'Brahamanvche Kasab' to the dalits like Mali, Mang, Mahar etc. with great affection.<sup>xvi</sup>

Emancipation of the Shudras was the one aim for which he worked throughout his life. To set an example he declared that he would inter-dine with a person belonging to any caste.<sup>xvii</sup> This form of inter-dining was later also followed by Paramhansa Sabha in Bombay. It even went further asked the member to sip milk from the same glass for the removal of caste barriers.

Jotiba condemned the Brahmins but he also accepts that the Brahmins under the influence of western ideas and civilization have changed. Yet he asserted that they did not abandon 'their time cherished notions of superiority'.<sup>xviii</sup> His aim was to

establish a casteless society. For this purpose, he founded the 'Satya Shodhak Samaj' on September 24, 1873. The aim and objects of the Samaj were (i) to emancipate the Shudras from the slavery of the Brahmin, (ii) to free the Shudras from the religious rituals enunciated by the Brahmins in their fake books, and (iii) to enable them to understand their rights through advice and education. Every member of the Samaj had to take an oath, wherein he accepted that all men were the children of one God and, therefore, brethren of each other. Every member had also to declare that he would see to it that his children were properly educated. The oath further stressed that there was no need of an intermediary to pray God.<sup>xix</sup> He also did not believe in idol worship.

Jotiba was also influenced by the casteless society of the Muslims and Christians. He even declared that the Kind Creator sent the Muslims to this country to liberate the Shudras from the slavery of the Brahmins. He extolled the Muslim rule in India, because the Muslims were violators of the caste-system. This obsession reached its nadir, when he reproached Shivaji for chasing the Muslims out.<sup>xx</sup> He praised the Muslims for converting them to Islam. He even upbraided Jynaneshwar for writing his work to keep the Hindus away from Islam.<sup>xxi</sup> These statements showed the level of aggravation reached by Jotiba. It also speaks volumes about the Brahmanical tyranny over the other castes.

There was however a subtle shift in the non-brahman ideology, as Phule focused more on mobilizing the kunbi peasantry. There was more emphasis on the unity of those who laboured on the land a contestation of the claim by the Brahmin - dominated Poona Sarvajanik Sabha that they represented the peasantry. This shift of the focus on the Kunbi peasants also led to the privileging of the Maratha identity which was dear to them, and an assertion of their Kshatriyahood,<sup>xxii</sup> which, as Rosalind O'Hanlon has argued, "seemed at times perilously close to a simple Sanskritising claim."<sup>xxiii</sup> Phule tried to overcome this problem by claiming that these Kshatriyas, who were the ancestors of the Marathas, lived harmoniously with the Sudras and

assisted them in resisting Aryan assaults. But this emphasis on Kshatriyahood also led to a diminution of interest in the mobilization of dalits. In other words, while this Kshatriya identity was constructed to contest the Brahmanical discourse that ascribed to them an inferior caste status, it also inculcated an exclusivist ethos that separated them from the dalit groups who were once treated as brothers-in-arms in a previous tradition inspired by Phule's own inclusive message. Ironically, such indigenous constructions of identity also impacted on colonial stereotyping, as the dalit Mahars and Mangs were no longer treated as "martial races", i.e., of Kshatriya lineage and therefore were excluded from military service from 1892.<sup>xxiv</sup>

Colonial rule disengaged caste system from its pre-colonial political contexts, but gave it a new lease of life by redefining and revitalizing it with its new structures of knowledge, institutions and policies.<sup>xxv</sup> The colonial rule created opportunities, which were "*in theory caste free*."<sup>xxvi</sup> Land became a marketable commodity; equality before law became an established principle of judicial administration; educational institutions and public employment were thrown open to talent irrespective of caste and creed, but still the pre-existing social order and privileged position was maintained.<sup>xxvii</sup> Social reformer attacked inequality and separatism and stood for equality (in liberal bourgeois) and cooperation they called on the people to work for betterment in the real worlds in which they lived rather than strive for salvation after death. They branded the caste system as a powerful obstacle to the growth of national unity and solidarity.<sup>xxviii</sup> Under these conditions the social reformers therefore got support of the Government and vice versa and because of these Phule was often accused of being partisan of the British in his approach and working.

His struggle was against Brahmanism. He however bore no malice to individual Brahmins. When he started a school for girls he got accommodation in the house of a Brahmin. After the release of Tilak from Dongri Jail, he organized a reception in his honour.<sup>xxix</sup> He however has been

criticized for his approach towards the Muslims and British and also against the caste Hindus.

The movement also had a radical trend, represented by the Satyodhak Samaj, which developed a "Class content" by articulating the social dichotomy between the "bahujan samaj" or the majority community or the masses, and the "shetjibhatji"- the merchants and Brahmans. The non-Brahmanical movement gradually became part of the Brahmin dominated Congress.<sup>xxx</sup>

As a pioneer of dalit upliftment the credit goes to Mahatma Jotiba Phule to raise the issue of dalit rights in different fields. He not only emphasized on their education, including women education, he also demanded to improve their socio-economic condition. He strongly opposed inequality

based caste system on the other side he praised and supported the concept of unity and the caste system of the Britishers. Though there is some division in their caste system but it was not as wide as in Hinduism, Brahmins and Dalits.

Jotiba Phule like medieval bhakti saints opposed idol worship. As a dalit reformer of Maharashtra he initiated to improve the status of the dalits and the cue was later taken over by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and who justified it with the special position granted to the dalits in the Indian Constitution. Though the social reformers of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century, including Gandhi also tried to resolve caste based social discrimination occasionally guided by their own inner self and sometimes due to the political expediency.

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<sup>i</sup> Sumit Sarkar – *Modern India*, Macmillan India, Delhi, 1983 p.56-57

<sup>ii</sup> Gail Omvedt – *Cultural Revolt in a Colonial Society: The Brahmans Movement in Western India 1873-1930*, Scientific Socialist Education Trust, Bombay 1976 quoted by Shekhar Bandyopadhyay – *From Plassey to Partition: A History of Modern India*, Orient Longman, New Delhi, 2004, p. 346

<sup>iii</sup> Report of the Board of Education for the year 1847-48, p.3

<sup>iv</sup> Oliver Mendelsohn and Marika Vicziany – *The Untouchables: Subordination, Poverty and the State in Modern India*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1998. p.78-79

<sup>v</sup> Jotirao Phule Samgra Granth, Adhikari Prakashan, Poona, 1963, p. 295

<sup>vi</sup> <http://mahatmaphule.com/lifesketch.html>

<sup>vii</sup> Historically, untouchability was the social fruit of the Aryan conquest of India. In the process of social interaction, a portion of the indigenous conquered population was incorporated into the Aryan fold the most backward and despised section of this incorporated population, it appears, constituted the hereditary caste of untouchables

<sup>viii</sup> Gulamgiri, Jotirao Phule Samgra Granth, Adhikari Prakashan, Poona, 1963. p.117

<sup>ix</sup> In 1952 he was honoured by the Government and presented shawl in a special darbar for his work in the field of education.

- <sup>x</sup> Saravjanik Satydharm Pustak, Jotirao Phule Samgra Granth, Adhikari Prakashan, Poona, 1963. p.236
- <sup>xi</sup> Report of the education commission, vol II, pp.140-145
- <sup>xii</sup> R.P.Singh – British Educational Policy in nineteenth-century India – A nationalistic critique. In the Contested Terrain: Perspectives on Education in India, ed. S. Bhattacharya, Orient Longman, Hyderabad. P. 115
- <sup>xiii</sup> Jotirao Phule, Appendix IX, p.2
- <sup>xiv</sup> Saravjanik Satydharm Pustak, pp. 159-60
- <sup>xv</sup> Later Ambedkar realized the ideals of Phule in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.
- <sup>xvi</sup> Jotirao Phule, p. 300
- <sup>xvii</sup> Ibid., p.280
- <sup>xviii</sup> Gulamgiri Introduction, Jotirao Phule Samgra Granth, Adhikari Prakashan, Poona, 1963, p.274
- <sup>xix</sup> Satyashodhak Samajach Travarashik, 1876
- <sup>xx</sup> Satya Shodhak , p. 182
- <sup>xxi</sup> Ibid., p.207
- <sup>xxii</sup> Shekhar Bandyopadhyay – From Plassey to Partition: A History of Modern India, Orient Longman, New Delhi, 2004, p. 346
- <sup>xxiii</sup> Rosaland O’Hanlon – Cast, Conflict and Ideology: Mahatma Jotirao Phule and Low Caste Protest in Nineteenth-Century Western India, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1985, p. 265
- <sup>xxiv</sup> P. Constable – The Marginalization of a Dalit martial races in late nineteenth and early twentieth century western India. Journal of Asian Studies 60 (2) quoted by Shekhar Bandyopadhyay, p. 347
- <sup>xxv</sup>, p. 343
- <sup>xxvi</sup> M. N. Srinivas – Social Change in Modern India, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1966, p. 90
- <sup>xxvii</sup> Shekhar Bandyopadhyay, pp. 343-344
- <sup>xxviii</sup> A.R. Desai – Social Background of Indian Nationalism, Popular Prakashan, Bombay, 1981, p. 254
- <sup>xxix</sup> Gulamgiri, p.118
- <sup>xxx</sup> Gail Omvedt – Cultural Revolt in a Colonial Society: The Brahmins Movement in Western India 1873-1930, Scientific Socialist Education Trust, Bombay 1976, pp.245-247