

Mahatma Jyotiba Phule : A Modern Indian Philosopher

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Abstract

JOTIRAO GOVINDRAO PHULE occupies a unique position among the social reformers of Maharashtra in the nineteenth century. While other reformers concentrated more on reforming the social institutions of family and marriage with special emphasis on the status and right of women, Jyotiba Phule revolted against the unjust caste system under which millions of people had suffered for centuries and developed a critique of Indian social order and Hinduism. During this period, number of social and political thinkers started movement against such systems and methods. These thinkers aimed at upliftment of the status of women socially, economically, educationally and politically. Of these socio-political thinkers Mahatma Phule, Mahatma Gandhi, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, and such other have organized movement for striving equality for dalits, backward classes and women. As such, Mahatma Phule was an earliest leader, who strongly opposed gender inequality. He was in the real sense a great thinker finder of truth. He was of the view that every individual should search for the truth and mould accordingly, only then the human society can remain happy. He said that British rule provided an opportunity for the masses to get themselves liberated from the slavery of the Brahmins. But at the same time, he also criticized the British bureaucracy for its policy of supporting higher education and for its tendency to rely upon Brahmin subordinates. Interestingly, Mahatma Phule nurtured a favourable perspective of the British Rule in India because he thought it at least introduced the modern notions of justice and equality into the Indian society. He also criticized the economic policy of the British rule in many respects it was unfavorable to the poor peasants. He suggested a number of solutions to improve the conditions of the agriculture sector. In place of exploitative Indian social order, Phule wanted to establish a society founded on principles of individual liberty and equality and in place of Hinduism he would have liked to put universal religion. In this paper my attempt is to give an analysis of ideas of Mahatma Phule with his core philosophical outlook.

Key-words: Indian social system, social equality, Women empowerment, education.

THE MAN AND HIS PERSONALITY

Mahatma Jyotiba Phule was born on 11th April, 1827 in Satara district. He was from Mali community. His father was a vegetable vender at Poona. Mahatma Jyotiba Phule's mother passed away when he was hardly one year old. After completing his primary education, Mahatma Jyotiba Phule had to leave the school and help his father by working on the family's farm. In 1841, he got admission in the Scottish Mission's High School at Poona. It was the turning point in his life. Because in that school he came in contact with Brahmin friends and missionaries ideas of humanity. He had painful practical experience when he was invited to attend a wedding of one of his Brahmin friend. Knowing that Jyotiba

belonged to the mali caste which was considered to be inferior by the Brahmins, the relatives of the bridegroom insulted and abused him. After this incident Jyotiba made up his mind to defy the caste system and serve the shudras who were deprived of all their rights as human beings under the caste system. Throughout his life Jotirao Phule fought for the emancipation of the downtrodden people and the struggle, which he launched at a young age ended only when he died on 28th November, 1890.

(a) Some important Facts about Mahatma Jotiba Phule: There are some important facts to consider about this great personality. He is a real inspiration and ideal reformer of India:

- Phule had read biographies of George Washington and Chhatrapati Shivaji. They were source of inspiration for him. Phule was influenced by Thomas Paine's ideas and his book "The Rights of Man". Phule himself has recorded that he was influenced by the ideas of Paine. In place of exploitative Indian social order, Phule wanted to establish a society founded on principles of Individual liberty and equality and in place of Hinduism he would have like to put universal religion.
- Mahatma Phule was the first defender of human equality and rights. We should understand and appreciate the profound significance of his unflinching espousal of the rights of man which remained till the end of his life a major theme of his writings and a goal of his actions.
- He was First revolutionary and leader of downtrodden, peasants and supporter of women's education. He paved the way for the new era of social activism. He established many institutions and tried to remove manmade inequality. He was the first active leader of downtrodden and introduced us to humanity. He was propagator of Human unity and national progress.
- Dr. B.R. Ambedkar said "Mahatma Phule the greatest Shudra of modern India who made the lower classes of Hindus conscious of their slavery to the higher classes who preached the gospel that for India social democracy was more vital than independence from foreign rule."
- Phule's views and philosophy was based on facts, reality, experiences and observation. In that sense his philosophy was not utopian but realistic. He was a source of inspiration for Maharshi Shinde, Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar, Gadgebaba and Sahu Maharaj.
- He was a Founder of many movements - 1) Movement against discrimination (2) Movement of Dalit (3) Movement of women's education. (4) peasant's movement (5) movement against blind faith.¹

(b) Works of Mahatma Jyotiba Phule :Mahatma Jyotiba Phule 's philosophy found in his following books:

- *Brahmanacha Kasab (1969)*: In this Phule has exposed the exploitation of downtrodden by the Brahmin priests.
- *Gulamgiri (1873)*: In this book he has given a historical survey of the slavery of lower castes. Narrate the history of Brahmin domination in India. He advised the people that religious epics are made by men and do not tolerate exploitation on the name of religion.
- *Shetkaryancha Asud (1883)* :In this book he has written on exploitation of peasants. He has analysed how peasants were being exploited in those days.
- *Sarvajanik Satyadharma Pustak (1891)* :In this book he put forward the concept of universal religion and throws light on blind faiths.
- *Asprushyanchi Kaifiyat (1893)*: In this book he discussed about crisis in Agriculture and suggested solutions of the agrarian problems.

In all these books his method of writing was very aggressive and courageous. His writing was a reaction against the social and religious system of Maharashtra. He said in the social system there was a domination of upper caste and they were enjoying privileges. There were differences on the basis of caste, sex. No human rights to downtrodden, only sufferings, inferior treatment, injustice, exploitation was there in the Society. This type of social system was supported by religious puran and Vedas. Hence Phule showed strong reaction against this. He sought to create a new culture in the society which is based on equality, justice and humanity.²

As we stated earlier he wanted to create a new social system in India based upon equality, justice, liberty and fraternity. In the history of India he was the first person who spread women education by opening girl schools and opened orphanages for widow women and their children. He was the first Indian who was honoured by British Govt for his noble work. He was severely criticized by Brahmin samaj for his noble work and attacked by them. But he continued with his movement. He sacrificed his life for the upliftment of untouchables, peasants and women. Mahatma Jyoti Rao Phule is regarded as the most important figure of social reform movement in India. He is regarded as the father of Indian social revolution.³

MAHATMA JYOTIBA PHULE AS A PHILOSOPHER

We can define "Philosopher a person who establishes the central ideas of some movement, cult, etc., or a person who regulates his or her life, actions, judgments, utterances, etc., by the light of reason." There are several other titles which can be used for Mahatma Jyotiba

Phule like educationist, social revolutionary, humanist, feminist and so on. But if we can use only single word for him it cannot explain his enlightening personality. Since we can find several ideas related to metaphysics, epistemology, ethics, socio-political philosophy in his writing, so here we used the title “Philosopher” for him. A philosopher is that person who contributed in more than one knowledge discipline. In modern Indian philosophy we can consider him and also include in the core philosophical courses which can be teach at graduation and postgraduate level. This is the tragedy of our Indian education system that those thinkers who really contributed in the educational, socio-political and other aspects of Indian peoples are remained far from core academic environment. This is the real need of our education system that ideas of revolutionaries like Mahatma Jyotiba Phule , Dr. B.R.Ambedkar and Shaheed Bhagat Singh should be reached to every Indian. Here we will discuss Mahatma Jyotiba Phule ’s ideas with the titles which have been already established:

A. Feminism and Women Empowerment

Mahatma Jyotiba Phule and his wife, Savitribai, were remarkable personalities, especially for their times. He started women education from the education of his wife and trained her for the school. Savitribai was the first women teacher in India. He started the first school for girls at Pune, in the year 1848. He advocated education for female students from the downtrodden (Shudras/Atee Shudras) communities and adults. He started schools. He established institutes like the ‘Pune Female Native Schools’ and the ‘Society for Promoting Education for Mahar, Mangs’. More important, he engaged in his education at home too. Jyotiba prepared his wife, Savitribai, to teach in the girls’ school, with a view to educating the women first, in order to bring in the value of equality at home. Savitribai had to face bitter opposition from the orthodox society of the time for teaching girls and people from the underprivileged groups in the school. Despite this bitter opposition, Jyotiba and Savitribai continued their work with sincerity.

Women empowerment is an essential concept these days as Y.V.Satyanarayana rightly said, “The dominance of men over women is an age-old practice, but after the advent of democracy and democratic institution, almost every nation recognized the freedom, equality, and human rights of women. Now, women are entitled to live with self-respect and dignity by exercising various rights to women in the past and its ongoing effects in the present should be properly addressed by way of empowering women in all spheres of social life.”⁴

Jyotiba believed in the equality of men and women. He stressed on women's education, emancipation of women. He brought women in public life. He said equality and oneness is necessary for the development of the country. “In order to empower women he opposed

child marriage. He initiated widow-remarriage and started a home for widows. In that time widow remarriage were banned and child-marriage was very common among the Brahmins and in the Hindu society. Many widows were young and not all of them could live in a manner in which the orthodox people expected them to live. Some of the widows resorted to abortion or left their illegitimate children to their fate by leaving them on the streets. Realizing the dangers of a widow giving birth to a child conceived in unfortunate circumstances after her husband's death, he opened a home for newborn infants in 1863 to prevent infanticides and suicides."⁵ Phule vehemently advocated widow-remarriage and even got a home built for housing upper caste widows during 1854. He requested people all the time to send their children in schools he opened for downtroddens and women.

He stated,

Nar nari sabhi mehnati bano.

Parivar ko pale. Anand le.

Nit bacho bachi ko padne bheje.⁶

On 17th Feb. 1852, Mahatma Jyotiba Phule 's school was publicly inspected. The officials passed the following remark. "It is a pity that the citizens of our country are not yet convinced of the need to educate women."⁷ A judge named Brown who was present on the occasion said, "Educating women will strengthen family happiness and utility of the institution of the family."⁸ Mahatma Jyotiba Phule's bold efforts to educate women, Shudras and the untouchables had deep effect on the values, beliefs and ideologies. His efforts unleashed the forces of awakening among the common masses. Education made women more knowledgeable. They became conscious of what is right and wrong in the light of science. Women began to question the age-old customs which degraded them.⁹

B. Philosophy of Education

Phule suggested compulsory, universal and creative education. Education of women and the lower caste; he believed, deserved priority. Hence at home he began educating his wife savitribai and open girl's first school in India in August 1848. Only eight girls were admitted on the first day. Steadily the number of students increased. Jotirao opened two more girl's schools during 1851-52. He also started a school for the lower classes, especially the Mahars and Mangs. Thus the pioneering work done by Phule in the field of female and lower castes education was unparalleled in the history of education in India. Phule was the first Indian social reformer who repeatedly urged the alien government to pay attention to primary education which was neglected. All the time he was making people aware about the education and compelling the British govt to make arrangement for education of all people of India. He fought for the right of education equally for all the people regardless of the caste and class. He knew once the people are educated they would fight themselves for their rights without any outside help and support. He said that

progress of individuals was possible only with education. Jotirao says in the introduction to the book "Shetkaryacha Asood":

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.¹⁰

He gave new meanings to education: He said, "The education which does not help the common mass of people to equip themselves for the struggle for life, which does not bring out strength of character, a spirit of philanthropy, and the courage of a lion.....real education is that which enables one to stand on one's legs."¹¹ In the curriculum of primary education, preliminary knowledge about agriculture and health should be included. The curriculum of primary education should be reoriented to provide the demands of rural areas. There should be clear demarcation between the curriculum of rural and urban area. Education should be utilitarian and practical so as to cover the needs of the society. A scheme of ideal farming should be implemented on a small scale. Practical knowledge is superior to bookish knowledge hence primary knowledge in Modi (a special Marathi script)(regional languages were supported) , accounts, History, Grammar, Agriculture, Ethics and Health should be imparted. Quantitative growth in Primary school is no doubt important but it should not be considered at the cost of qualitative one.¹²

Whatever may be the trajectory of subjection of the lower castes their liberation rests primarily on education. He emphatically laid down on education. He emphatically laid down the lack of education as the root cause of the degradation of lower castes, as stated previously. "Mahatma Jyoti Rao Phule stressed on universalisation of education i.e. education for all irrespective of caste, colour, creed, sex and poverty. Mahatma Jyoti Rao Phule had done a lot in his life to reform society, to fight for establishing equality in society. As he wanted education for all, same is the motto of present education system, to provide education to all. 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 in the art 45 but the target of this article is yet to be achieved which was to be achieved within 10 years from the commencement of the constitution."¹³ So Mahatama Jyotirao's ideas on education are very important for discussion and implementation.

C. Ideas on Social Justice and Equality

Phule made a powerful pleas to abolish untouchability and the entire caste-system. He revolted against the unjust caste-system under which millions of people had suffered for centuries. The Dalit at that time did not have any political, social, educational and economic

rights. He condemned dual morality of the Brahman system. He said equal opportunity should get to all people. He said by birth all are free and equal. All human beings have natural rights. He was a militant advocate of human rights to the downtrodden.¹⁴

He protested against man-made inequality which was rooted in Hindu caste-system and varna-vyavastha. He struggled fearlessly to implement the reforms in the Hindu society. He tried to remove inferiority complex from the minds of the people. He made aware to shudras. He advised them take education and acquire power, they are not slave but human beings. As T.L.Joshi said, "Jotiba Phule was one of the first persons to rebel against the traditional social system in India. From where did he find the inspiration for this revolt considering that the prevailing social laws had taken a firm hold on the Indian mind for thousands of years? The answer is that Jotiba was a Satyashodhak—a seeker of truth—the moral truth of human life. The manifestation of that perennial truth was his belief in man's freedom in the universe, as upheld by modern western civilisation."¹⁵

Mahatma Jyotiba Phule established the Satyashodhak Samaj which sowed the seeds of development of the masses and propounded the spread of rational thinking. The movement carried on by the samaj was the first of its kind to reach the remote villages. He carried on the social reform movements based on social equality. Phule believed in the equality of men and women. He did not merely stress the equality of men but also equality of men and women. For Phule equality in the society was meaningless. Without equality of man and woman in the family. He propagated universal humanism based on values of freedom, equality and universal brotherhood. He criticised the caste system through the books "Gulamgiri" and "Brahmanache Kasab". He established the Satyashodhak Samaj. He sowed the seeds of development of masses.¹⁶

We can emphasize on his ideas by these words to lead the social change in the society, "Phule believed in overthrowing the social system in which man has been deliberately made dependent on others, illiterate, ignorant and poor, with a view to exploiting him. To him blind faith eradication formed part of a broad socioeconomic transformation. This was his strategy for ending exploitation of human beings. Mere advice, education and alternative ways of living are not enough, unless the economic framework of exploitation comes to an end... Shudras became conscious of their caste identity and started claiming equality with higher castes in all areas 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."¹⁷

D. Philosophy of Politics and Economics:

Mahatma Jyotiba Phule 's political ideas are related with his social ideas. Phule said British raj is not a curse but a boon. It is better than Peshwa's raj. British established rule of law, equality of laws. The new rulers opened the opportunities in education. He hoped that the new government which believes in equality between man and man would emancipate lower castes from the domination of the Brahmins. He welcomed the British rule as "Divine Dispensation" for the viewed it as God's instrument to rescue the oppressed from the clutches of Brahman demos. Phule raised the question that what do you mean by independence of the country? Freedom means political freedom? Freedom means uppercaste freedom only. After independence will uppercaste allowed shudras for equal rights? Though Phule preferred British rule, he was aware of shortcomings of the former and he never hesitated to point them out openly. Thus Phule was committed not to the Britishers but for the justice and equality of downtrodden. Phule's criticism of the British government emanated out of his concern for the welfare and the status of the lower castes in contemporary society.¹⁸

Phule was not economic theorist but he had a keen observation about the exploited class. The first chapter of *Shetkaryacha Asood* describes in detail how in the name of religion Brahmins were persecuting the Sudras from the cradle to the grave. There was no limit to the religious rites and rituals imposed by Brahmins on the Sudras. The chapter also describes how the Brahmins who could not acquire higher education, under the garb of a sanyasin, exploited the ignorant and the uneducated. He also said, "Since the white government bureaucrats are mostly in a stupor due to their life of luxury, they have no way of getting any information about the true condition of the farmers, and their overall carelessness allows Brahman employees to dominate all the government departments. Between the two, the farmers are so much looted that they have no bread to fill their stomachs or clothes to cover their bodies."¹⁹ He was concerned about the status of shudras, untouchables and women in Indian society, while in economic terms he was interested in peasantry and its problems. According to him following points are important about Indian economy :-

- a) The high caste nationalist viewed industrialisation as the only solution to the economic problem of India. Phule on the other hand talked from the point of view of improving agriculture since he perceived Indian economy primarily as the agricultural economy.
- b) Second thing is farmers were being exploited by the moneylenders and Brahmin officers of the revenue and irrigation departments.
- c) Another problem faced by the rural economy was that of the unfair competition by the British goods. Because of the inflow of these cheap and superior goods, the indigenous craftsmen of the villages and town's suffered great losses and in many

cases they had to close down their hereditary business. It increased unemployment in the rural areas.

- d) Phule suggested certain solutions to these problems. The first and the most important solution to the problem of the poverty of the farmers which Phule suggested was construction of bunds, tanks and dams so that sufficient water was made available to the farm. He asked the government to reduce the burden of taxes on farmers in order to make agriculture profitable.²⁰

E. Philosophy of Religion:

Mahatma Jyotiba Phule do not want be a religious thinker, religious guru or a philosopher of religion. Also he was not interested to prove the existence of God, relation of God and the world etc. His intention was to show the dilemma created by religious authorities who bound man in religious rituals and made peoples enemy of each other. His thinking was that Hindu religion not only give spiritual knowledge to man but also bound his social and personal life in religious bigotries. He wants that religion which gives man a true freedom to grow socially and spiritually. Phule influenced by radical religious ideas of Thomas Paine could succeed in doing this kind of a theoretical exercise. Phule believed in one God (Nirmik). He regarded God as a creator of this world and all men and women his children. There are thirty-three articles in the Sarvajanic Satyadharma, which define the rules for the creation of a world-family based on basic human rights as well as the social and intellectual attitudes essential for it. The gist of these articles, in more or less Jotirao's words, is as follows:

- All men and women should live together unite on this earth as one family, with honesty and without discrimination, no matter to which village, province, country, continent or religious beliefs they adhere to.
- The Creator created man to be independent and capable of enjoying equal rights as others. The Creator has given freedom to all men and women to express themselves freely, but without causing harm on account of their thoughts or views. This is known as true (righteous) conduct.
- The Creator has endowed everyone with human rights. Hence it follows that an individual or a group cannot dominate another. To follow this principle is to practice righteous conduct.
- The Creator has given all men and women religious and political freedom. One who does not harm another in any way and does not usurp another's rights is a practitioner of righteous conduct. Conduct which will please the Creator is public truth (virtue). The honest behaviour of any human being towards his fellow human beings may be termed as morality.²¹

The basic characteristics of his philosophy of religion given below:

- Phule discarded idolatry, ritualism, asceticism, fatalism and the idea of incarnation. No intermediary between God and devotee was considered essential by him. Phule never believed that any book was God ordained.
- Phule visualised Sarvajanic Satya Dharma (Public True Religion) to take place of Hinduism. His true religion broke from Hindu tradition altogether. He severely criticised the mythology and sacred books like Smritis and Vedas of Hindu. He tried to prove that the history of Hinduism was in fact, the history of Brahmin domination and slavery of Shudras. He found cunningness, selfishness and hypocrisy in sacred scriptures than discussion of true religion.
- The elite reformers criticized the contemporary degenerated form of Hinduism, while Phule attacked it from its very inception and showed that Brahmins had deceived lower castes throughout history. Phule interpreted Hinduism as a relation based on Varna and caste system devised by the cunning Brahmins to deceive the lower castes.
- He dismissed Hinduism altogether, he did not reject the very idea of religion or dharma. He tried to put in its place universal religion based on principles of liberty and equality. His Sarvajanic Satya Dharma put emphasis on truth seeking without the aid of any Guru or text. His religious ideas were definitely influenced by Christianity but he never advocated conversion because he was also influenced by the radical religious argument of Paine, who had shown a number of defects in Christianity.
- His universal religion was liberal and in many respects very different from traditional religions. His religion was mainly and primarily concerned about secular matters. Phule had visualised a family where each member of that family might follow his own religion. In this ideal family a wife might embrace Buddhism while her husband might be a Christian and children might follow other religions because Phule believed that there might be some truth in all the religious texts and scriptures and therefore one of them could not claim the ultimate truth.
- He thought that the government should not close its eyes to inhuman religious customs or unjust traditions and practices of Hinduism. At one place he criticised the colonial government for its policy of continuing the practice of giving grants to temples, since he claimed that the money had been collected from lower castes in the form of tax. Thus there was no place for any communalism or unwarranted neutralism in matters of religion so far as Phule's religious ideas were concerned.²²

In the end, it is also added that various great personalities were inspired by the personality of Mahatma Jyoti Rao Phule who brought great changes in social and economic fields of India. Dr. Babasaheb Bhim Rao Ambedkar, first law minister of the Republic of India and the architect of Indian Constitution was inspired by his noble work towards humanity and

he followed the philosophy of Mahatma Jyotiba Phule based upon justice, equality, liberty and fraternity. He followed all the suggestions given by Jyotiba as right to education to all, special provisions for women, minorities, downtrodden etc. It is also important to note that Mahatma Phule has left, grappling with issues that we have still not resolved more than 125 years after his death in 1890, he could have deserved better recognition in the society. Government should have to make proper provisions of Mahatma Jyotiba Phule books in schools and colleges. Mahatma Jyotiba Phule's philosophy of education, human rights, women empowerment, socio-political and religious ideas needs to be initiated actively in the society for its betterment.

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