

The Role of Jyotiba Phule in the Upliftment of the Marginalized Sections of Society

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Abstract – Jyotiba Phule is regarded as an important figure in the social reform movement in Maharashtra. He opposed tooth and nail the brahmanical social order which denied a respectable position to the unprivileged sections in social hierarchy. He waged a pitched battle against the fundamentalist forces who conspired with the upper castes to eliminate them from the mainstream of society and forced them to settle to the periphery. They were relegated to the secondary position and their all hopes and aspirations were virtually suppressed. All avenues leading to a better prospect to them were almost brought to a grinding halt. The poor fellows remained mute spectators since they didn't have the courage to raise a banner of protest against the inhuman treatment they were pitted against and succumbed themselves to their feet without showing any resilience. Jyotiba was hurt at heart over the existing socio-political scenario and wanted to bring about a complete overhauling of society in the larger interest of the marginalized sections. He vehemently opposed any discrimination in the name of caste, creed, region, religion, sex and colour of skin which is a blatant violation of the accepted norms and principles of society which don't show any solidarity with these harsh ideologies. Jyotiba decided to take on these divisive forces and expose their real characters for which he had to face stiff opposition from the upper castes who were not ready to make any compromise with the existing situation which ensured their authority over the weaker sections. Jyotiba was not ready to accept his defeat. He was firm on his stand that there was no scope for discrimination in society since all human beings are the offspring of the same creator who showers his blessings equally on them without making any discrimination. He insisted that the narrow domestic wall should be demolished forthwith otherwise society can not thrive substantially. The widening gap between various sections of society must be bridged to enable the marginalized sections to join the national mainstream and contribute their energy for the development of society.

Key Word – Marginalised, Discrimination, Violation, Downtrodden, Suppressed, Oppression, Hardships, Reform, Superstitions, Eliminate, Ideology, Untouchability

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INTRODUCTION

Once he was invited to attend the wedding of one of his Brahmin friends. The relatives of the bridegroom abused and insulted him when they knew that he belonged to an inferior caste. This painful experience proved to be decisive in his life. Jyotiba made up his mind to defy the caste system and provide all necessary assistance to the weaker sections that were deprived of their fundamental rights as human beings. He fought for the emancipation of the downtrodden people throughout his life.

He was the first revolutionary leader of downtrodden, peasants and was supporter of women education. He paved the way for new era of social activism and tried to remove manmade inequality. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar gave his tribute to him saying,

"Mahatma Phule, the greatest Shudra leader 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 is more vital than the independence from the foreign rule." [1]

During that period Maharashtra society or even the entire nation was gripped with outdated customs and practices, irrational faiths, dogmas, superstitions and blind beliefs which caused irreparable damage to the social structure which witnessed untold miseries to the weaker sections of society. They were deprived of the basic amenities of life. All avenues of their joining the mainstream of society were virtually closed with the upper castes ruling the roost. The idea was injected into their consciousness that their poverty is the outcome of the action performed in the previous lives and they were destined to serve the upper class for which no remedial measures are available. They can achieve perfection in life by serving the upper classes. Jyotiba did not have faith in these irrational beliefs. He realised that it is a part

of the game plan of the upper castes to relegate them to the secondary position and to force them to dance at their tune. He realised that illiteracy is the root cause of all evils latent in society. Once they are made literate all the misconceptions in this regard will be automatically removed which will prepare them to drive a wedge against the divisive elements depriving them of their due share. Literacy is the only weapon through which the enemies of the humanities could be inflicted a crushing defeat and their heinous designs could be exposed. He urged his fellow countrymen to mobilise on a single platform to launch a tirade of vilification against the subversive forces trying to grab the lions share and forcing them to bite the dust. With the spread of knowledge they will enable to understand their fundamental rights which is ensured to them as the citizens of the nation which does not permit any discrimination among the citizens in the name of caste ,creed ,religion region ,sex and the colour of their skin .Those who are indulged in these foul practices are bound to face dire consequences since it is deadly opposed to the accepted norms and principles of society .He did not budge an inch from his stand that these inhuman practices should be stopped forthwith .He did not pay heed to the threat warrants issued to him by the fundamentalist forces. Sensing the danger posed to his life for advocating the cause of the depressed sections including the women who too were denied active participation in decision-making, his father urged him repeatedly to give up all such practices since nothing positive could come out of his efforts rather he will have to pay heavy price for his daring act of exposing the hidden agenda of the subversive forces. What is more applicable in this context is to leave the poor fellow to their destiny. No body can apply balm or give a healing touch to their jaded wounds. They should be left at the mercy of God to intervene in their internal affairs to provide necessary assistance to them to tide over their impediments. But Jyotiba was made up of a different soil. He didn't repose faith in the suggestions of his father to leave them at the mercy of God .He set aside the impending danger posed to his life since ensuring a better prospect to the weaker sections accorded top priority in his agenda for which he was ready to make any sacrifice. He realised that he would have to face hurdles or challenges at every step but those hurdles did not deter him from his determination. He moved ahead on his path with redoubled vigour and enthusiasm. His duty was to perform his task and not to watch the consequence of his action which is well beyond his reach Besides this, he too was aware of the fact that those who intend to swim against the tide must be prepared for the upcoming dangers knocking them at their doorsteps. He feared that if he dragged his legs in the backward direction his mission to bring the weaker sections on equal footing of the upper classes will hang in balance and the poor fellows will continue to suffer immense hardships. His wife Savitribai Phule extended him a helping hand in the hour of crisis. She promised him all possible assistance to achieve his most cherished goal to bring

the fence sitters back into reckoning which was a distant dream.

Jyotiba initially focussed his attention on educating the women who were imprisoned inside the boundary of their house. Forcing them out of their house was a difficult nut to crack for which herculean effort was required. The reason behind educating women was that once they were educated it will be doubly beneficial for the society. He will be killing several birds with a single shot. Once the women are educated they will impart all necessary assistance to their family. Besides this once the women are educated entire family will reap the maximum benefit .It will help them explore new horizons for their career orientation. It will also provide ample opportunity to them to bring to public their hidden strength which has been completely suppressed. Once the half of the population is awakened from the deep slumber the pace of development will be picked up and the country will achieve new heights. It will also herald an era of resurgence of women' pride which did not perceive its heyday for want of numerous obstacles which crippled their freedom. He wanted to set women free from the narrow circles or chains they were encircled with and allow the fresh ideas to pierce through their consciousness to remove the impurities latent in their personality for which formal education at schools was required and thus he set up schools for women at Pune to give his long cherished desire a concrete shape. The responsibility to impart teachings to women was given to his wife Savitribai Phule whom he imparted formal education who contributed substantially to educate women. She was the first teacher in India by serving as teacher in the first school for girl children started by Jyotiba at Pune in 1848 at Tatya Saheb Bhide's residence. She had to face stern opposition from the orthodox society of the time for teaching girls and people from the unprivileged groups in the school. While laying emphasis on women education Y.V. Satyanarayan has rightly emphasised,

"Man's superiority over woman remains a centuries-old tradition, but with the rise of independence and political institutions, nearly every nation recognised women's liberation, equality, and human rights. Women now have the freedom to live with self-respect and integrity by pursuing different privileges that women have had in the past, and the current impact of these rights on women can be better resolved by empowering women in all areas of social life."2

Jyotiba insisted that equality and oneness is necessary for the development of society. He opposed child-marriage and initiated widow-remarriage to remove the shackles women are tied with and enabled them to come out in the open to make full use of their potentialities which have been largely suppressed. He has himself stated ,

"Nar narisa bhimehnatibano

Parivar ko pale. Anand le

Nit bacho bachi ke padne bhejo."[3]

The official who visited his school passed the following remarks,

"It is pity that the citizens of our country are yet not convinced to the need to educate women."[4]

A judge named Brown who too was present on the occasion said,

"Educating women will strengthen family, happiness and utility of the institution of family."[5]

Jyotiba's efforts soon paid huge dividends. Women began to question age-old customs which relegated them to the secondary position. He expressed the need to provide compulsory, universal and creative education. He also started schools for Mahars and Mangs. The pioneering work done by Phule in the field of women and lower class education was unparalleled in the history of education in India. He urged the British govt. to pay more attention to primary education which has been largely ignored.

He had firm faith in the belief that once they are educated they will fight for their rights. In the introduction to his book *Shetkaryaca Asud*, he asserted his commitment,

"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."[6]

While defining the true purpose of education Jyotiba insisted,

"Real schooling is that which enables one to stand on one's legs. It is that which enables one to prepare oneself for the fight for survival. It is that which brings out strength of character, a sense of philanthropy, and the bravery of a lion."[7]

He was in favour of practical and utilitarian education to cover the needs of society and gave priority to the study of accounts, history grammar ethics, history and agriculture in his agenda to uplift the living standard of the weaker sections of society. To him illiteracy is the genesis of the growing deterioration of the social status of the marginalized sections. Rajni Bala has rightly stated,

"Mahatma Jyotirao Phule emphasised the importance of free education, or education for everyone, regardless of race, creed, colour, sex, or welfare. Jyotirao Mahatma Phule has worked tirelessly to improve humanity during his life. To struggle for the establishment of social equity. As he tells

The aim of the current educational framework is to offer education to all.

All should have access to schooling. Following his teacher's lead, Dr. Ambedkar drafted the constitution.

We have provisions for affordable and compulsory tuition, as well as universalization of healthcare.

Article 45 of the constitution mentions schooling, but the article's aim is yet to be determined.

which was supposed to be completed in ten years from the start of the project "Constitution"[8]

Phule worked tirelessly to abolish untouchability and the caste system. He repeatedly spread out the message to the masses that they were not destined to be untouchable rather it is the outcome of the conspiracy hatched by the fundamentalists who need to be given a befitting reply. Jyotiba Phule was a great revolutionary. He had firm faith in the belief that if a social structure fails to cater to the interest of masses it should be outright rejected and replaced by a more competent one which looks into the interest of the masses without showing any favour to a particular section. A society based on this egalitarian principle is bound to thrive by leaps and bound. But a society which is preoccupied with certain biases or prejudices is unlikely to explore new horizons and is bound to meet a premature death.

Jyotiba was deeply influenced by the 18th century British political thinker Thomas Paine who contributed significantly during the American and the French revolution as well through his aggressive speeches and writings. He wrote several pamphlets during the mass uprisings against the suppressive policies of the two governments which were sold like hot cakes. The prominent among them being *Rights of Man*, *The Age of Reason* and *The Common Sense* in which Paine has given vent to his revolutionary ideas. He was of the opinion that it is the responsibility of the govt. to look into the interest of each and every citizen of his nation. Those who fail to remain committed to their stand no longer enjoy the moral right to remain in the office. They should either quit the office forthwith for failing to comply with the assurance given to the masses after assuming the office. In case they refuse to quit the office it is the responsibility of the masses to take to the streets protesting the policies of the govt. and if required overthrow the incumbent govt. and replace it by a people friendly govt. which gives top priority to

the interest of the masses in its agenda. The masses must take recourse to all possible measures available to them to see that their interest is properly safeguarded. Discrimination in any manner should not be practiced by the authorities concerned. It is bound to affect the interest of a particular section adversely. The govt. which fails to read the writings on the Wall is all set to meet the dire consequence. In order to avoid the impending danger the possibility of which can not be ruled out the govt. must agree in principle to abide by the accepted norms of society and ensure them all possible assistance to keep their interest intact.

Paine had firm faith that once the masses are mobilised on a single platform to press for their demand the incumbent govt. would succumb itself to the feet of the masses. Those who underestimate the power of common man are all set to meet their doomsday. No power on earth can survive against the mass uprisings. According to Paine this is the only way to restore normalcy in society and to force the govt. to realize the commitment which it had earlier made to the masses. The duty of the govt. is not to cater to the interest of a handful of people. It must shower its blessings on each and every individual otherwise the problem might balloon out of proportion causing irreparable damage to it for which no remedial measure is available. Change of guard is the only option before the people once the govt. turns the interest of the masses a deaf ear. It is like a volcano which remains very calm and quite at the outset but once it erupts it turns into a graveyard a large chunk of area falling within its ambit. The govt. must not disturb the hornet nest otherwise it will have serious repercussions which can thrash it either by hook or by crook. Paine's revolutionary ideas left a deep and potent influence on the mind of Jyotiba Phule. He expressed solidarity with Paine saying that the govt. must work round the clock to see that the interest of the masses is not jeopardized. He realized that no substantial change can be made in society so long as the existing social order continues to flourish. The existing social structure is muddled on such a framework which ensures more benefits to the upper classes who have grabbed the lion's share. There is no scope for the marginalized sections to elevate their standard to a new height and to reap the maximum benefits by virtue of their efforts. It has done a great injustice to them. There is hardly any ray of hope for them in it which is preoccupied with certain prejudices and see things with a jaundiced eye. It does not have a full proof programme to bring smile on their marooned faces. For them the way ahead is full of thorns and it is very difficult to move on the curved path. Illiteracy poses a major threat to them since they believed that their pitiable condition is the outcome of the divine curse and no body should be held responsible for their plight. It is well beyond their reach to intervene into the divine game plan. It amounts to severe violation of the command of the Providence. It will be better to wait for the mercy of God to bring some respite to them from the perennial sin they have been

subjected to instead of putting a blame on others which in turn might earn them the ire of the God.

Jyotiba did not have faith in these worthless ideologies which no longer justify the plight of the marginalized sections. He sensed it merely a game plan of the fundamentalist forces to keep them at bay from power which was a distant dream to them so long as this social structure continues to rule the roost. They have deliberately hatched the conspiracy to force them to remain a mute spectator and not to raise the protest against the atrocities they were subjected to.

Jyotiba decided to expose the heinous designs of the subversive forces using all the weapons available in his arsenal. He expressed stern opposition with millions of citizens are affected by an oppressive caste structure have suffered for centuries. They did not have any social, political, economic and educational rights. His was against the dual morality of the Brahmanical system. He stated in clear terms that by birth all are equal. He was a zealous champion for the oppressor's civil rights.⁸ He vehemently opposed man made inequality which was deeply rooted in Hindu caste system and varnashram-vyavastha. He strived hard to implement certain basic changes within the broad framework of Hindu society. He repeatedly urged Shudras to use education as a weapon to acquire power and to defeat the designs of the subversive forces. He opposed tooth and nail any attempt to treat them as slaves or bonded labourers. Rajni Balahas rightly emphasised,

"Jyotiba Phule was one of the first people in India to challenge the conventional social order. Where did he get the idea for this revolt, given that the Prevailing Postal Laws have had such a strong hold on the Indian mind for thousands of years? Jyotiba was a satyashodhak—a seeker of truth, specifically the moral truth of human life. Datt's conviction in man's equality in the cosmos, an era maintained by modern Western society, was the embodiment of his perennial reality.' [9]

Jyotiba Phule promoted universal humanism founded on the principles of liberty, dignity, and brotherhood. In his books *Gulamgiri* and *Brahmanand Kasab*, he slammed the caste structure as harshly as he could. Shanabasappa and Bamman have mentioned it correctly,

Phule believed in overthrowing the social structure that made man reliant on others by making him illiterate, weak, and weak in order to oppress him.

To him, the abolition of naive trust is part of a larger socioeconomic change. This is a clear illustration.

was a tactic for bringing an end to sexual trafficking.

Education and recommendations alone are inadequate.

Alternative ways of life are insufficient until the economic foundation for discovery is in place.

ends... Shudras were aware of their caste identity and norm, demanding equality within caste in all aspects of existence. In brief, Mahatma Phule rescued women and Shudras from religious special powers, setting the foundations for India's backward class movement.”[10]

Phule was more concerned with justice and equality of the downtrodden and admired British rule since he saw a ray of hope in it which might take positive steps for the welfare of the weaker sections. In his book *Shetkaryacha Asud*, he has presented a graphic picture of exploitation of the untouchables by the upper caste Brahmins, “since the white 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 cruelty allows Brahmins employees to dominate over government departments. Between the two farmers are so much looted that they have no bread to fill their stomachs are clothes to cover their bodies”[11]

Phule's concern for the condition of the weaker sections is also reflected in his economic policy. Instead of industrialisation he reposed faith in agricultural sector which need to be given special attention since majority of the weaker sections earned their livelihood through agriculture. He also wanted to impose restrictions on the practices of money lenders and Brahman officers of revenue and irrigation department who join together to inflict harsh oppressions on the Dalits. He was also opposed to the inflow of the British goods to the farthest region of the country which caused heavy losses to the local business. They were forced to close down their business which further aggravated Unemployment in rural areas is a serious issue. In order to overcome this problem posed to those involved in the agriculture sector he suggested certain agricultural reforms which include ensuring adequate water to the farmers by providing irrigation facilities. He also urged the government to reduce taxes on agriculture to help the farmers get profits out of their products.

Phule had shown deep inclination for British Raj and considered it far superior to the Peshwa Raj in which the lower class people have to suffer in immensely whereas in British Raj emphasis was laid on racial equity and fairness and thus no discrimination was made with the lower caste people. He feared that once independence was given to India the Brahmins will continue to rule the roost and inflict numerous hardships on the weaker sections and women. He welcomed British rule as the divine dispensation and viewed it as God's. The oppressed were rescued from the clutches of the Brahmin demons using this tool. He questioned whether freedom meant political

independence or the independence of the upper castes. He feared whether equal rights be granted to the Shudras after independence.

Phule recast the prevailing Aryan invasion theory insisting that the Aryans were the barbaric suppressors of the indigenous people. They had imposed the caste system as a framework for subjugation and social division that ensured the pre-eminence of their Brahmin successors. He saw the subsequent Muslim conquest of Indian sub-continent as an extension of the separation practices earlier. But the advent of the British, whom he found to be comparatively enlightened and who did not believe in the previous invaders' Varnashrama dharma scheme, gave him hope. Gulamgiri praised Christian missionaries and British colonists in his book for teaching the oppressed castes that they are deserving of all civil rights.[12] The novel, which dealt with women, caste, and revolution, is devoted to those in the United States who participated in the abolition of slavery.[13]

Rama, the hero of the Indian epic Ramayana, was used by him as a sign of tyranny resulting from the Aryan invasion.[14] He considered the Vedas, the most fundamental text of the upper caste Hindus merely a false consciousness.

He maintained that man was made to be self-sufficient and to have the same privileges as other creatures. He has granted rights to both men and women without harming them because of their beliefs or opinions. Idolatry, ritualism, and the concept of incarnation were also dismissed by him. He was a harsh opponent of myths and religious texts such as the Vedas and Smritis. He attempted to show that Hinduism's origin was really the past of Brahmin dominance and bondage of the Shudras, and he visualised sarvajani satyadharma, a public true religion, to take Hinduism's position. Despite his dismissal of Hinduism, he did not condemn the concept of faith or Dharma. In its place, he attempted to establish a new religion founded on the ideals of liberty and equality. His theological beliefs were unmistakably affected by Paine's progressive views, which sought to correct a variety of flaws in Christianity. His universal faith was secular and differed from orthodox religion in several ways. He chastised the colonial government for continuing the tradition of granting grants to temples, claiming that the revenue had been raised by taxes from the lower castes.

On 24th September 1873 Jyotiba along with his followers formed the Satya Shodhak Samaj, truth seekers society to ensure equal rights to people from exploited class. The membership of this society was available to anybody irrespective of the religious faith he practices. The society worked for the upliftment of the Satyashodhak Samaj, espoused a mission to educate and enhance social rights and political

access to unprivileged groups particularly the women, Shudras and dalits in Maharashtra.

Initially it tried to reach out to the masses through lectures but very soon numerous problems cropped up before it in connecting with the peasants. The lectures too failed to yield positive results. Thus the samaj resorted to tamasha, popular folk dances to communicate their messages to the masses. The tamashas followed the traditional format but subverted the pro-brahman elements of the dramas. The tamasha began with the invocation to Ganpati, traditional Brahman I God but added an explanation that the actual meaning of the word came from gana, people and pati, leader. The invocation of Ganpati was concerned with the invocation to the people. The plays revolved round the issues pertaining to the discussion of Brahman tyranny which followed the story dealing with attempt by the Brahmins to cheat peasants. In certain areas of Maharashtra, the indoctrination of Satya shodhak and non-Brahmin philosophy among the peasant masses culminated in revolt. Tenants revolted against their brahmin landlords in Satara in 1919. The Vijay Maratha newspaper went into great depth about the event, stating,

"The Brahman land rate had risen significantly... The peasants were left with little advantage... On Brahman lands, they did not want such a low deal. Satyashodhak Sama thereby liberated them from all forms of Brahman slavery." [15]

Phule's efforts were considered sacrilegious and anti-nationalist by the Brahmins. Vishnushastri Chiplunkar claimed that brahmins have often admired great saints and holy men who were born into a lower caste and rose by the ranks through merit. Chiplunkar argued, citing figures such as Tukaram, a 17th-century poet-saint born into a kunbi-Marath cultivating household,

"Brahmins had always sung of the superiority of saints and holy men born into the lowest of castes, and just paying heed to merit, they exalted them to a supreme status and making them their equals, what boldness and what dedication to government and reality do these tough guys like Phule display in barking at brahmins at licking their lips a scraps that could be towed at their feet?" [16]

For Chiplunkar, the samaj's attempts to reveal brahmins were little more than a slavish bid to gain the British government's favour. The brahmins often challenged Satyashodhak samaj's theological structure, which they found to be loosely linked to Christian beliefs that all creatures were given universal rights at birth by a generous and caring god. They said that Phule was attempting to establish a modern religion that lacked any ethical or religious goals. They believed that Phule's arguments were inconsistent. They were firm in their opposition to his assertion that brahmins were Aryan immigrants who developed a religion and social structure in order to gain themselves and retain their control. They also said that

Phule lacked the authority to change history. He lacks the authority to contradict the Ramayana and the Bhagavad Gita.

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