

## **Lower Caste Movement and the Idea of Social Equality under the Raj: Jyotirao Phule and Maratha Renaissance**

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*Post-Colonial Indian state was fraught with high level of caste discrimination, illiteracy, agricultural failures and many such grimy situations which now partially have been addressed by systematic and strategic planning since 1951. Considering the vastness and incredibly heterogeneous demography of the nation bringing in social equality by eradicating caste hierarchy, education for all and agricultural development policies are the key areas where India has been performing well unlike other South Asian countries of third world. The seed of the idea behind many such policies especially in development of mass education was sown by great Indian thinker Jyotirao Govindrao Phule. In primary and higher education for masses, right to the farmers and the true realization of a just and egalitarian society which would be neither caged under the clutches of foreign rulers nor dominated by hierarchically structured class and caste based Hindu society this erudite Marathi Activist-Writer-Thinker has made commendable contribution. Phule's work brought an era of renaissance which gave voice to the lower caste marginalized population unlike the mainstream upper caste-bourgeois led nationalist movement which failed to include the age old cultural and social deprivation of sudras and untouchables of the land. This article will focus on Phule's view on social reform during mid and late 19<sup>th</sup> century colonial India which later influenced emancipatory movements of lower caste people and their struggle for social equality in Independent India.*

**Keywords:** Social Reform, Caste, Mass Education, Social Rights, Equality.

### ***Introduction***

Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, later widely popularized as Right to Education or agricultural development policies such as Integrated Rural Development Policy (IRDP) are now widely referred to as the key resource mobilizing programmes for uplifting the socio-

economically backward section of the country and eradication of chronic poverty. Most debated yet relevant, the affirmative action of state viz. caste based reservation has been playing a key role since its introduction in fields of education, employment and political representation for inclusive development and establishing social equality. The root of these policies can be traced back in the writings of Jyotirao Phule, much before Ambedkar started asserting legislative rights and embarked on annihilating caste during Indian Freedom Movement. Phule, born in Maharashtra in a lower caste family (*mali*-gardener) was blessed with the opportunity of receiving education from Scottish Missionary Institution and employment under the Raj in Poona Municipality. Missionary education and employment under the British Govt. did not make him contended with life, rather his observation and experience of the social inequality in social and political sphere drove him to bring a revolutionary change in the existing exploitative condition of low caste peasants by fetching some fundamental reforms in the Hindu social system based on caste hierarchy and reinforcing education for the masses. Along with this, he questioned the reluctance of the British governance in alleviating the condition of the peasantry which was subjected to double deprivation, first by the *Bhatjis* and *Sethjis* (village upper caste land owners and moneylenders) and then by the harassment of the [white] Govt. officials as they fail to communicate with them due to illiteracy.

### *Low caste protest: Crafting revolutionary ideology*

Decline of the Peshwas' rule and dominance of the British East India Company brought a fundamental change in the elite structure of Western Indian provinces. Brahmin and the upper caste *Khatriyas*<sup>1</sup> were the predominant elites of the agrarian economy. By the entry of the British rulers they sought the benefits of the writer's job namely the clerical posts in the bureaucracy under the Raj due to their traditional association with the education and access to the government offices of the urban and rural centres. Thus, a little but available hope during Peshwas of upward mobility by improvement of economic situation or by pursuit of higher rituals were gone and the closed society went through a transformation in case of access to education to

somewhat an open society in where the services would be available for all. The Company rule did not help in the process of establishment of educational institutions but the Christian missionaries took it as a fertile ground for carrying out their process of evangelization. But the happy days were soon vanished in thin air when in the practical field the upper castes, as mentioned earlier, started wielding power by assuming administrative positions in the government and influencing the lower caste local masses. Rosalind O'Hanlon has rightly observed: 'Most importantly, they would gain a strategic mediatory position between the Company's government and the larger masses of western Indian society. This dimension of control in administrative institutions - from local educational establishments to the conduct of rent and remission assessments, and even the ability to influence simple administrative procedures in the local courts - impinged forcibly upon local society'<sup>2</sup>(O'Hanlon 1985: 6).

As the fundamental mediatory agency between the government and the newly born civil society the upper caste working class started asserting political power as well, establishment of *Pune Sarvajanic Samaj* in 1870. We need to remember that these were the first traces of the so called nationalist movement which later fully realized by the establishment of INC (Indian National Congress) in 1885. However, sociologically speaking, Phule and his colleagues viewed these so called "reform" activities as purely upper caste - upper class oriented political endeavors. The establishment and practicing of upper caste reforms were, in Phule's view, aimed at revitalizing the old Hindu social system [moral and ethical codes] as the moral and spiritual base on which the modern Western liberal economy could be bestowed upon. The upper-caste-led movements aimed to keep caste hierarchy intact by accepting the Aryan theory of race and identifying with the alien rulers and by the pseudo-scientific justification of linking *varna* to race (Omvedt 1971: 1969). Phule's ground of revolutionary reformation was clear on the fact that the upper caste led nationalistic transformative movements refused to consider the existing inner contradiction of traditional Hindu society where the dominance of Brahmins over the Shudras and land lords over serfs were more ethnic than freeing Indian political-economy from the exploitative bonding of the English rulers. Phule successfully identified the dominant elite class of the society and

not specifically colonial rulers only which traditionally ascertained their class position and cultural hegemony in a society. Therefore, instead of “nationalist revolution” he propagated a non-Brahminic social transformation by overthrowing the dominant authoritarian caste and religious traditionalism and vouched for *Sarvajanik Satya Dharma* or the true religion of the common people. In this regard it must be mentioned that Phule was influenced by the works of Thomas Paine who stated: ‘Human rights originate in Nature, thus, rights cannot be granted via political charter, because that implies that rights are legally revocable, hence, would be privileges’<sup>3</sup> in support of French Revolution and overthrowing hereditary monarchical rule which is very much similar to Indian hereditary caste privileges. Hence his ideology is distinctive since it embodies equalitarianism and rationality.

As we can now locate the background and core of Jyotiba’s ideas on social equality during the development of early nationalist movement, our point of departure would be to have glimpses of his views on mass education and condition of the peasantry.

#### *Connecting condition of the peasantry with slavery (Goolamy)*

Phule closely observed the condition of the peasantry and developed an understanding of the practice of slavery and deprivation. Phule saw *Baliraja*, who has been depicted in traditional Marathi as the lord of the land or of the peasants, not only as village leader but as common man unlike the Patils who were mentioned as the village headman by most of his contemporaries (Omvedt 1971). His scathing remark on Brahminic anti-equalitarian view can be related to the upper class exclusionary nationalism in colonial India. Jyotirao essentially attached religious preaching of the cunning Brahmin class for blinding and blunting the intellectual faculty of the cultivators. Before that he had chronologically shown how the West Indian present *shudra-atishudra* caste was losing their land, belongings and socio-economic agencies to the Brahmins. In support of this analysis he has given arguments on Brahminical brainwashing which made even the traditional *samsthaniks* (Rulers of princely states in colonial India) convinced and remain ignorant to knowledge and virtue: ‘blinded by religion and incapable of

governing their kingdoms on their own, they throw their lot in hands of fate and depend entirely on their Brahmin administrator; and generate virtue by donations of cow during the day and progeny by night.<sup>4</sup>(Deshpande 2002: 118) The psychological blockade of considering “the Brahmin is the one I worship” thus killed all the possibilities of improving “the lot of their brothers”. In such a situation, the Brahmins assumed superior position not only in the social hierarchy but in the administrative governance as well. Further, he explains in work “Cultivators Whipcord”, how peasants were toyed between white government officers and Bhatjis/Shethjis of the villages: ‘Oh Lord!, please open your eyes. So many times, have I given money to [God] so that [the Devil] should not harm you, and that too sometimes without your knowledge, selling of grains and have made the Brahmins sit with his rosary in front of [the deity] and fed so many Brahmin women!! Dear Child so many times I have spent money without telling you so that god speak through the collector’s mouth today, and allow you to pay the taxes in installments?’<sup>5</sup> (Deshpande 2002: 161) O you cunning Brahmans, from the very birth of my dear child you have threatened me with ill-favoured stars and taken money from me, where is all the virtue that you collected? O, you have cheated me so much in the name of *dharma* that with that money I could have saved my child’s neck!’ (Deshpande 2002: 162).

### *Educating masses*

Observing the miserable condition of the farmers and their duped condition by the religious dogma Phule urged on changing the social structure by educating the masses through which the non-Brahmins lower caste peasants could come on par with the Brahmins. His view here is strikingly similar to the way Syed Ahmed Khan urged the large Muslim masses to go for modern western education who were otherwise backward than the Hindus (Guha 2012: 78). However, Phule stands out distinctively different from Khan who under the influence of Rammohan Roy testified the Education Commission of 1882. Jyotirao was aware that the upper caste rich Brahmins ripped the benefits of Western education and eventually assumed the administrative position under the company rule, which widened social inequality along the caste line. He criticized that the education system that was

heavily funded and administered by the colonial government educated only the upper caste although, he argued: ‘...It is an admitted fact that the greater portion of the revenues of Indian Empire are derived from the ryot’s labour – from the sweat of his brow.’ (Deshpande 2002: 103) While rejecting the colonial education which was essentially for the upper castes he strongly advocated for the mass education administered by the sufferers themselves.

#### *Views on educating the poor peasantry through community initiative*

Phule questioned the moral and intellectual foundation of the advancement policy pursued by the British which specifically educated and helped raises the standard of education of the upper castes. With hegemony over the education and intellectual practices the Brahmans systematically excluded the lower castes from the opportunities of employment and upward mobility. It is not that the British did not establish any facility for primary education for the masses but again the teachers and the school administration were full of the Brahmans. Thus, de facto, the schools were meant for the upper caste children. Thus, unless the Shudras taking control over the education and other development initiatives there would be little or no possibility for them freeing them from the ‘trammels of bondage which Brahmins have woven around them like the coils of serpent.’

In carrying forward his ideas Phule stressed on several policy implementations which would trigger change in the way certain professions are tagged with the practice of *varna*. He points to the social mechanism by which certain castes and classes turn apathetic and disrespectful towards certain jobs like cultivation or sanitation. As the students and teachers in the primary schools primarily represent upper castes they develop a clear inclination towards government/administrative services and an aversion for the conventional works which involve hard physical labour and low-status. Phule viewed that if both the teacher and students come from the lower and “untouchable” castes who also represent the cultivating classes there would be a continued interest in agriculture and sanitation and thus the stigma and the “purity-

impurity" divide due to the nature of profession could be removed. Phule condemned the privatization of education which, he argued, would make the middle and lower-class people suffer unlike the wealthy classes representing the Brahmins and *Purbhoos* who had an opportunity to live by the pen. Being in an administrative profession under the Raj, he, unlike the nationalists, never advocated a total overthrow of the existing system of governance. The real problem was not essentially the alien rulers but the native upper caste-upper class combine which had institutionalized its hegemony over all the means of production, land and education in particular, and also on the fruits of labour of the untouchable castes. The upper-caste-class combine accorded social and ideological legitimacy to a system which was iniquitous and exploitative by manufacturing concocted religious teachings and falsification of knowledge. To him, the bourgeois nationalist revolution was meant to mere circulation of elite while keeping the low-caste exploited masses mere flag bearers of the elite in power. Phule was able to verify and understand the issue of exploitation and connect it to the revolutionary values of equality and rationality and successfully problematized the path of social transformation.

### *Conclusion*

Phule was the first amongst his contemporary thinkers/reformer to advocate structural change to overthrow the hegemonic culture built by the Brahmins and the upper classes. He challenged the predominant discourse of his time that the human beings are arranged in a hierarchy of caste order ordained by divine dispensation. He was the one who pointed out that the arrangement of exploitation is primarily based on the socio-economic construct of what is fair or just. While the Marxists believe that the quantum of labour used in production determines the value of a commodity, in *laissez-faire* economy it is the market. The theory of exploitation fails to objectively determine the phenomenon if it is taking place in a given exchange guaranteeing agreement between theory and the perception of the ones who are taken as exploited. This was precisely what was happening to the lower caste peasants under the Raj-Brahminical collaborative dominance. Phule explored the area of false consciousness which

explained why the subjective feeling of the peasant class failed to understand the root of their misery. The claim of equal right was thus first located by Jyotiba much before other stalwarts ventured into the area which empowered the peasants from the lower castes to have a moral claim over the village resources and challenge the traditional elites. A peasant or an exploited person born into a society and culture that provide him with a set of moral values and more or less stable set of social relationships which, in turn, generate in him expectation about others' behavior.<sup>6</sup> Phule, being born much before the era of academic theorization of power and exploitation understood that the moral universe and notion of justice that people share collectively make them loyal to the order, thus blunting the possibility of a radical social transformation. By identifying "nation" and "nationalism" as Hindu derived from the Vedic times he identified them as the creation of the Arian people. By exploring the historical origin of the caste system, he propagated better policy formulation by the Raj for the eradication of caste system. His project was bringing enlightenment amongst the illiterate and helpless lower caste farmers without being aligned with the mainstream anti-Raj nationalist movement. For him the need of the day was an all-out anti-Arian movement which was later popularized by another legend leader Ambedkar.

Ambedkar claimed through his prolific writings such as *Annihilation of Caste* that the Hindu caste system does not allow change of occupation even when it is required in an industrializing society. Hence, caste system which advocates 'division of labourers than division of labour' is actually the root cause of poverty. Phule, had little faith on the Hindu reformists and the nationalists rather he appealed to the colonial government for educational and agricultural policy reformation to make lower caste people capable and place them on par with the upper caste Brahmins. He had no doubt that with proper access to modern education the low caste people would be empowered enough not only to access white collar jobs they would also be conscious and empowered enough to fight caste hierarchy. They would be able to fight the hegemonic power under the guidance of their organic leadership. Ashwini Deshpande has supported the policy of positive discrimination arguing that this would indeed alter the composition of the elite positions in the society (Deshpande 2013: 8). The structural process

of exclusion is now approached through affirmative action in the form of Constitutional as it would have been absurd to expect that the upper castes would have sacrificed their position like the Samurai Patriots of Japan.<sup>7</sup> Ambedkar justly referred to this in the speech protesting the ban on drinking water from the lake of *Mahad* by untouchables.

The reason for bringing the contemporary argument on eradication of caste and state's policy on reservations in education and employment is basically to show that the revolution which Phule wanted to bring. He was convinced that a sudden overthrow of existing government only because they are *white* or foreigners was not the solution to end caste-class oppression or systemic exclusion. Phule, being a government employee of Pune Municipality, called for changes staying within the system, as he knew that the ousting of existing govt. from power would not liberate the *shudra-atishudras*' rather it would only be a replacement of the *white sahibs* with the *brown sahibs*. He was the harbinger of change in the system of governance not through lofty ideals and social theories but through policy intervention, attacking the root cause of the misery. His approach thus was an eye opener to the later statesmen of Modern India.

### Notes

1. *Kshatriyas* and *Vaishyas* are the intermediary castes between Brahmins and Shudras and untouchables, traditionally the warrior and businessmen, absent in the then Maratha provinces. The role was thus played by the Gujar (Gujarati) and Marwaris of Rajasthan who were the moneylenders of the low caste peasants.
2. See O'Hanlon, Rosalind, 1985. *Caste, Conflict and Ideology: Mahatma Jotirao Phule and Low Caste Protest in Nineteenth-Century Western India*. Cambridge University Press, p. 6.
3. *Rights of Man (1791)*, a book by Thomas Paine, including 31 articles, posits that popular political revolution is permissible when a government does not safeguard the natural rights of its people. Using these points as a base it defends the French Revolution against Edmund Burke's attack in *Reflections on the Revolution in France (1790)*.

4. See Prologue, *Cultivator's Whipcord*, Selected Writings of Jotirao Phule, Edited by G P Deshpande 2002, Left Word New Delhi, p. 118.
5. See Chapter four, *Cultivator's Whipcord*, Selected Writings of Jotirao Phule, Edited by G P Deshpande 2002, p. 161.
6. For details see James Scott, *Moral Economy of the Peasants* (1976).
7. From Arjun Dangle (ed.), *Poisoned Bread: Translated from Modern Marathi Dalit Literature* (Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 1992), pp. 223-33.

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