

JYOTIBA PHULE: GLOBAL PHILOSOPHER AND MAKER OF MODERN INDIA

Archana Malik-Goure*

Abstract: Jyotiba Phule (1827-1890) initiated social change in nineteenth century India especially in Maharashtra through his philosophy. The nineteenth century was an era of social criticism and transformation that focused on nationalism, caste and gender. All major questions taken up by the reformers were connected with women's issues such as female infanticide, child marriage, ban on women's education, Sati, tonsuring of widows, ban on widow remarriage etc. At the same time, reformers concentrated more on reforming the social institutions of family & marriage with special emphasis on the status & rights of women. Jyotiba took up the issue of gender and caste. He revolted against the unjust caste-system under which millions of people had suffered for centuries. His revolt against the caste system integrated social and religious reform with equality. He emerged as the unchanged leader of the depressed classes in Maharashtra and was recognized as a leader of downtrodden class in allover India. He was influenced by American thinker Thomas Paine's ideas of Rights of Man.

This paper is an attempt to discuss Jyotiba Phule as global philosopher in 19th century. He raised the problem of women's oppression and his thoughts on resolving women's oppression through their own efforts and autonomy makes him join the company of other nineteenth century Western Philosophers and male feminists like J.S. Mill and F. Engels. In this small work I would like to focus on philosophical aspect of his thought will conclude with remark on contemporary relevance of Jyotiba Phule's philosophy.

Jyotiba Phule (1827-1890) one of the "Mahatmas" (Great Soul) of India, occupies a unique position among social reformers of Maharashtra in the nineteenth century India. He was first teacher of oppressed, critic of orthodoxy in the social system after Buddha and a revolutionary. The task of bringing concerning socio-religious reform in nineteenth century was not so simple. Social reformers had made tremendous effort for social and religious change in Indian society during this period. Phule played a remarkable role in this area. In order to remedy the problems of gender and caste oppression, he contributed with a constructive suggestion. This was by way of a new image of religion which was known as universal religion. He started reflecting critically about the ground realities of the huge majority of rural masses. He read broadly on American Democracy, the French revolution and was stuck by the logical way of thinking in Thomas Paine's "Rights of Man". Influenced by Thomas Paine's book on "Rights of Man", (1791), Phule developed a keen sense of social justice, becoming passionately critical of handicap caste system. Besides being a leader and

*Dr. ARCHANA MALIK-GOURE, Assistant Professor, Department of Philosophy, University of Mumbai. Email: archmalik@gmail.com.

organizer of the underprivileged class movement, Phule was a philosopher in his own right with several books and articles to his credit. Throughout his life, Jyotiba 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. He was a pioneer in many fields and among his contemporaries he stands out as one who never hesitated in his mission for truth and Justice.

Exploitation of women and underprivileged class and protection of human rights all these issues and their rational humanist treatment was the agenda of the philosophy of Phule.

I. Jyotiba Phule: A Contemporary Indian Philosopher

Jyotiba Phule was one of the makers of modern India. He was the philosopher, leader and organizer of the oppressed castes. He always practiced what he preached. He fought for the rights of the untouchables and women and work for their emancipation. He identified and theorized the most important questions of his time. These include religion, the *Varna* system, ritualism, British rule, mythology, and the gender question, the condition of production in agriculture and the lot of the peasantry. In 1848 Jyotiba began his work as a social reformer interested in education of lower caste boys and girls. He encouraged his young wife Savitribai to read and write. At home he began educating his wife Savitribai and opened a first girl's school on 15th May, 1848 in Pune. No female teacher was available to teach in the school. As no teacher dared to work in school in which untouchables were admitted as students Jyotiba asked his wife to teach in the school. The orthodox opponents of Jyotiba were furious and they started a vicious campaign against him. They refused to give up their noble endeavor and choose the interest of the larger society over their personal comfort. He also took keen interest in establishing a network of institution through which it would be possible to educate the masses. He opened two more schools for girls in 1851, he was honored by the Board of Education for the work he did for girl's education in 1852. By 1858, he gradually retired from the management of these schools and entered into a broader field of social reform. He turned his attention to other social evils.

Jyotiba's activities were extended beyond the field of education. The drinking water tank in his house was thrown open to untouchables. This would be considered a brave act even today. In 1868, it was revolutionary. He believed that revolutionary thought has to be backed by revolutionary praxis.¹ He analyzed the structure of Indian society and identified the *Sudra-atishudra* as the leading agency of social revolution. According to him, the *Sudra-atishudra* will lead the revolution on behalf of the whole society, to liberate the entire people from restricts of Hindu tradition. Thus, Phule's ideas and work had relevance for all Indians. As cognition of his great work for the lower castes, he was felicitated with title "*Mahatma*" (Great Soul) by the people of the erstwhile Bombay in 1888. He belongs to the first generation of social reformers in the 19th century. Dhananjay Keer, his biographer, rightly described him as 'the father of Indian social revolution.'

¹Deshpande, "Selected Writing of Jotirao Phule", p. no. 9

Phule can be called as Modern Indian Philosopher as Descartes. Rene Descartes (1596-1650) was a French Philosopher, has been called as ‘the father of Modern Philosophy’, and is often regarded as the first thinker emphasizes the use of reason to develop the natural sciences. For him the philosophy was a thinking system that embodied all knowledge. He employs the method called metaphysical doubt or methodological skepticism. He rejects the ideas that can be doubted and then reestablishes them in order to acquire a firm foundation for genuine knowledge. So like Descartes Phule can be known as ‘Modern Philosopher’. Descartes spirit of questioning traditional claims to authority can be discerned in Phule. Like Descartes, Phule exercised his capacity from freedom for thinking freely to question obscure and violent social customs. The Cartesian spirit was extended by Phule from natural science to social science.

II. Practical Aspect of Jyotiba Phule’s Philosophy

Jyotiba Phule can be interpreted as an Indian philosopher who transformed traditional philosophy by turning to the practical and social problems of inequality and oppression. One can read him as a thinker who separated himself from the metaphysical roots of Indian systems of philosophy like Yoga, Vedanta and Buddhist Philosophy to give these systems social meaning from the point of view of the ordinary person.

Yoga philosophy has a practical emphasis where it believes that mental-concentration and control leads to individual transformation of the mind and body. Although Jyotiba’s philosophy would not agree with some of the metaphysical assumptions in Yoga such as the *satva*, *rajas* and *tamas*, his philosophy has some similarities with Yoga. For Jyotiba mental concentration is replaced by social concentration on problems that distract society from its democratic ideals. He recommends the practice of values like *Samata*, *Badhutava*, and *Svatantrya* to transform the whole social structure. In yoga philosophy transformation is individual but in Jyotiba philosophy transformation is not for individual but for all.

Vedantic philosophy makes a distinction between *maya* and reality. Once again Jyotiba would reject its Brahminical otherworldly roots and outlook. However, there is a way in which he has transformed Vedanta as well. According to him *Maya or illusion* does not apply to the empirical social world. Rather in social relations there is the *maya* of caste and superstition that causes *avidya* or ignorance about social reality should remove from the mind of every individual. Once this *avidya* is replaced by true knowledge there will be *ananda* or pleasure of egalitarian social relations.

As Buddha said ‘suffering (*Dukha*) is ultimate truth and the cause of sufferings is ignorance about the reality, reality of our-self (I or ego). Once this ignorance remove through true knowledge person will get freedom from their sufferings, he or she will enjoy ultimate state of mind / peaceful state of mind or *Nibana*. Similarly Jyotiba also believed that suffering is the central problem, however this suffering is not a historical. It is due to the social structure of Indian society. Demolishing this structure will lead to liberation and an affirmation of values such as freedom, equality and solidarity.

Religion in eighteenth and nineteenth centuries faced two differences of opinions. One was the notion of God, Soul, Hell and Heaven, Vice and Virtue.

These notions were all important in the building of a religious edifice, and yet, none of these could be proved to exist at the level of reasons. The meaning and purpose of life, the meaning of death are explained by most religions in terms of an omnipotent and omniscient God, whose will is the source and justification of human existence.²

The other difference of opinion that religion faced, was the existence of a multiplicity of faiths, a plurality of Gods, of concepts of virtue and vice, of what awaited man when he died. The path of the religious and dutiful man was carted differently by different religions, when they came to an analysis of the details of daily life, thought they might agree on some fundamentals. They differed in what they considered the appropriate Book to read in matters of religion, the appropriate prayers to say, the appropriate food to eat and the laws of personal morality to observe.³

Many years Jyotiba Phule spoke on religious and practical issues. Through debate he has removed illusions from the people's minds. He has written books and dedicated them to the people. He has discussed and continues to discuss these issues in newspapers. He has instructed the public through many poetic compositions. He has inculcated in people the habit of inquiring into the veracity and cause and effect of religious matters. He has demonstrated what is right and what is wrong with respect to particular customs. He has disapproved the practice of idol worship and upholder monotheism. He has refuted beliefs that would cause harassment to people in matters of religion, duty and everyday activities. A false religion, idol worship and the caste system have together created destruction in India; this has been well described in his book *Sarvajanik Satya Dharma*.

Gail Omvedt mentions in her book "Culture Revolt in a Colonial Society", that Phule's thought represented the fulfillment of the renaissance desire for social transformation along revolutionary lines. In sociological terms it makes good sense that he, rather than later and more widely known elite thinkers, should be seen as the primary renaissance figure. Any culture, after than later and more widely known elite thinkers should be seen as the primary renaissance figure. Any culture after all, rests upon the class society and the dominance of a particular class. Hence the total transformation of culture requires the destruction of this dominance. In terms of India, Hindu culture and the caste system rested upon Brahmanism. Hence Phule, who aimed for the complete destruction of caste, superstition and inequality, linked thought with a movement of opposition to the Brahmin elite. Non-Brahmanism in India, therefore, represents not simply communalism or a result of British divide and rule policies; it traces its origin to the Indian renaissance and represents the first expression of social revolution in India.⁴ The life of Jyotiba Phule has become a new source of learning and a new source of inspiration for modern generation. His life provided an example and an inspiration to the oppressed masses of humanity, supreme courage, sincerity, selfless sacrifice.

²M.S. Gore, Vitthal Ramji Shide, Biography, p. 74.

³Ibid, p. 75.

⁴Gail Omvedt, "Culture Revolt in a Colonial Society", P. no.100.

III. Phule's Social Reform Movement

The history of nineteenth century is the story of the impetus for social reform in which the introduction and spread of modern education was an important element. Schools which taught English language were opened not so much to educate the masses but to groom Indian people to run the British government. Christian missionaries opened a Marathi school in Pune for the public. During this transitional phase, even though education was open to masses, the common person was not aware of its importance. Jyotiba has worked for the masses and made them aware of education as a vehicle for social change.

19th Century was a period of social problems like *Varnasystem*, mythology, caste-system, ignorance about human rights etc. In oppressed castes great-grandparents and grand-parents did their community work which involved hard menial labour. They were not permitted social mobility other permissible for them. They were not even aware of their rights; illiteracy was very high in the society. Jyotiba shows the light of hope, to free from these problems of society. He revolted against the unjust caste-system and upheld the cause of education of women and lower castes. He started primary education and higher education and fought for their rights. Thus, he ushered in primary education as a tool in perceiving the work of the oppressed castes as dignified labour that was exploited by society.

In 20th Century people belongs to oppressed castes their parents had opportunity to get undergraduate education which they could also impart to their children. This was a period when oppressed castes struggled to enter institutions and make their presence visible in the context of nation-building. It was also a period when they had an understanding of their rights and responsibilities.

In the late 20th century and the beginning of 21st Century oppressed castes to an extent have entered into institutions of higher learning and have started producing knowledge that questions inequality and reconstructs identity from the theoretical point of view. They are ready to face the challenges of their time. We can see the growth of education from 19th to 21st century India. 19th century the focus on primary to higher education, then in 20th century system focused on Undergraduate level education, and now in 21st century high level research on social sciences is available for the generation. The present position is better because of education which has given them self respect, made them aware of their rights, organizations to voice their feelings.

IV. Phule's Feminist Thought Comparable to J.S. Mill and F. Engels

Jyotiba was global philosopher in 19th century; he raised the problem of women's oppression. Jyotiba did not spell out a theory of patriarchy or a fundamentally inequality between man-woman like John Stuart Mill (1806-1873)⁵ or Friedrich Engels (1820 –1895)⁶. But his thoughts on resolving women's oppression through their own efforts and autonomy makes him join the company of other nineteenth

⁵John Stuart Mill, "The Subjection of Women". 1869.

⁶F. Engels, "The origin of the Family, Private Property and the state", New York, 1972.

century male feminists like Mill and Engels. Phule differed from other Indian male reformers who were his contemporaries in that he did not see women's oppression as an excuse to objectify them under the control of male norms. Rather, he believed that women have to, through their own struggles, evolve ways of living with dignity. In this, education played a very big role for Phule.

It is worth comparing Phule's perspective on gender and modernity with that of Mill, the British philosopher, economist, moral and political theorist, and administrator. Mill was one of the most influential English-speaking philosophers of the nineteenth century in Maharashtra. Several thinkers like Ranade, Agarkar and Ambedkar have been influenced by his philosophy. Mill's views reflect the need for reforming the socio-political body from the liberal political view of society and culture. The overall aim of his philosophy is to develop a positive view of the universe and the place of humans in it, one which contributes to the progress of human knowledge, individual freedom and human well-being. It is in this context that he suggests the need to reform the condition of women through their education in which rationality plays a central role. Phule similarly believed that society has to adopt a liberal philosophy, in which orthodox customs are abolished. Like Mill he maintained that women have a crucial role to play in the creation of such a society through the development of their rational faculties through education.

However, Phule's normative ground for social criticism differed from Mill. He critiqued caste-based and gender based oppression on the basis of his commitment to equality and freedom. Thus Phule did not advocate Mill's Utility principle – of greatest happiness for greatest number – as a foundation of social reform. Rather Phule was committed to the equal worth and freedom of all human peoples. Hence, for Phule differences that come from hierarchic caste and gender should be rooted out.

Since Friedrich Engels, German social scientist and political philosopher, published his work on women's oppression *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* in 1884, it is worthwhile to compare his position with that of Phule.⁷ This work systematically set out to provide a social explanation for the emergence of women's oppression with the development of the social institutions of the patriarchal family and private property at a particular historic period. Such an explanation stood as a direct challenge to the dominant religious view that women's inferior status rested on God-ordained biological, physical, intellectual and moral inferiority. Even as science and scientific methodology gained credibility as the basis for the pursuit of knowledge during the 19th century, the explanation for gender difference and the inequality of women shifted from being based on religious to a very similar explanation that such inequality was based on natural difference. Nature, not God, determined this difference and this provided the rationale for inequality. Engels disputed this type of explanation, arguing that such views determined women's oppression as timeless and unchangeable, something they refuted with their materialist analysis of the rise of exploitation and the development of class society and with it, the emergence of systematic oppression of women. Liberation from gender oppression, like liberation from

⁷Engels wrote *The Origin* after Marx's death, but it was a joint collaboration, as he used Marx's detailed notes along with his own.

class oppression, was possible for Engels by transcending the material inequalities of society. Like Engels, Phule understood women's oppression as a material problem that is linked to caste (for Engel's it is related to class). He related some aspects of women's position to the Brahmanical social order. Though he did not say so explicitly, he seemed to imply that the end of Brahmanical domination would end the exploitation of women. According to Phule, Brahmin woman was much *shudra* as a *shudra* woman. In this sense, he was remarkably modern, and femininity view, which saw gender itself, and not *Varna*, as the basis for the oppression that women faced.

In the modern age, hierarchy between men and women has been explicitly questioned with rise of women's freedom movements all over the world. As a result women are quite confident of their ability to achieve their goals in this life. Today we find that women have proved to be quite otherwise and are holding highest positions in every field of life. Jyotiba and his wife Savitribai amidst the women's reform movement of the nineteenth century Maharashtra. Vitthal Ramji Shinde, Mahatma Gandhi and Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar were the real successors of the feminist movement of Jyotiba's thought, which they developed further in the twentieth century.

V. Contemporary Relevance of Phule's Philosophy

According to William A. Haviland, "Although India's national constitution of 1950 sought to abolish cast discrimination and the practice of untouchability, the caste system remains deeply entrenched in Hindu culture and is still widespread throughout southern Asia, especially in rural India. In what has been called India's "hidden apartheid", entire villages in many Indian states remain completely segregated by caste. Representing about 15 percent of India's population—or some 160 million people—the widely scattered Dalits endure near complete social isolation, humiliation, and discrimination based exclusively on their birth status. Even a Dalit's shadow is believed to pollute the upper classes. They may not cross the line dividing their part of the village from that occupied by higher castes, drink water from public wells, or visit the same temples as the higher castes. Dalit children are still often made to sit in the back of classrooms⁸.

Whereas the world has entered in the third millennium and is progressing towards accomplishing the goals and liberty and equality and fraternity still India has failed to eradicate untouchability and caste and descent-based discrimination. Sincerely believe that the caste problem is not the problem of Dalit one but also the problem of entire nation and without the annihilation of caste and the elimination of other primordial identities, India will not truly progress. Today dalits have positive identity. Some Dalits reaching higher levels in professions, business and politics, some are economically well off. But some Dalits still suffer from social stigma and reactionary political discrimination. Discriminations against Dalits typically manifest itself in the private sector with respect to employments and social mobility. Dalit and prejudices against dalits are

⁸William A. Haviland, *Anthropology: The Human Challenge*, 10th edition, Thomson Wadsworth, 2005, p. 575.

reinforced by casteist views. These have been known to obvious themselves in caste-related violence. Dalits are often denied the basic rights of education, housing property rights, freedom of religion, choice of employment and equal treatments in many parts of country. Till today caste-mind set exist in our country. This kind of mind set should be removed from the society. Internal change can be made by women, through education. Charles Fourier, "Social advances and changes of periods are brought about by virtue of the progress of women towards liberty, and the decadences of the social order are brought about by virtue of the decrease of liberty of women... the extension of privileges to women is the general principle of all social progress."⁹ Every woman should be educated in society then only our society will progress. This important of education and freedom Jyotiba saw and he did work for that. We have to make our mind to spread knowledge of Mahatma Phule as a philosopher of emancipation to all the oppressed anywhere in the world, and to fulfill the assurance.

Savitribai was the first biographer of Jyotiba Phule Savitribai internalized the vision and philosophy of Jyotiba and a devoted supporter of his work. In her literature she has repeated the distress, aspirations, and feelings of modern, liberated woman of India. Her composition also reflected to anger of the new emerging woman of India who wanted to be treated as a human being and not just as an object of male-lust. One of her composition she described the good man. According to her, "one who looks after his family with care and responsibility, one who is always industrious and inquisitive, who has quest for knowledge, one who is worship of freedom, one who is compassionate towards family, one who is caring, sacrificing and dedicated is truly a good man". In Savitribai's thought Jyotiba was good human and husband and he precisely passed the mission of humanism.

Jyotiba Phule's social thoughts are based on humanism. It is based on the values like equality, Justice and tranquility. He spread value based system through his work and thought. Our country is independent still independent values are not there in our society. Reason is Varna and caste system is still follow in some part of our country. Jyotiba's humanism is true and modern. In modern civilization every individual should follow his humanism.

Today education has been reduced to transmitting information. There is a fear of examination because of bookish education. Little bit we have to be practical in system, we have to brought life-oriented education. In this context, Phule's education system is still very relevant. For him knowledge was not just information. It involves questioning, understanding critiquing knowledge. Interpretation, critique and values all three are central to Phule who way back in the 19th century gave an alternative to the information approach to knowledge. For him, "Education is the power to think clearly, the power to act well in the world's work, and the power to appreciate life". For Phule knowledge matters because it can question, change and transform the individual and society. Thus for Phule, like John Dewey education can empower and make society more democratic. It can help in reconstructing, rethinking, interpreting tradition. This aspect of Phule is extremely relevant in the paradoxical context of caste in contemporary India-where despite constitutional provisions, caste discrimination is widespread.

⁹Selected Writings of Charles Fourier, Design for Utopia, 1971.

References

- Dhara, Lalitha (Ed.). 2011. *Phule's and Woman's Question*, Dr. Ambedkar College of Commerce and Economics, Mumbai.
- Engels, F. 1972. *The origin of the Family, Private Property and the state*, New York.
- Joshi, Laxman Shastri. 1996. *Jotirao Phule*, National Book Trust, New Delhi.
- Keer, Dhananjay. 1997. *Mahatma Jotirao Phule, Father of the Indian social revolution*, Popular Prakashan. Mumbai.
- Mill, John Stuart. 1869. *The Subjection of Women*, first ed., London.
- Omvedit, Gail, (Ed.). 2002. *Jyotiba Phule Ani Stree Muktica Vichar*, Lokvangmay Group, Mumbai.
- Phadke, Y.D, (Ed.). 1991. *Complete Works of Mahatma Phule*, (in Marathi) Publisher. Maharashtra Rajya Sahitya and Sanskruti Mandal, Mumbai.
- Radhakrishnan, S. 1952. *History of Philosophy, Eastern and Western*, volume I and II, Allen and Unwin, London.
- Rao, Anupama (Ed.). 2003. *Gender and Caste: Issues in Contemporary Feminism*, Kali for Women, New Delhi.
- William A. Havilland. 2005. *Anthropology: The Human Challenge*, 10th edition, Thomson Wadsworth, Belmont: United States.