

Indian and World Social Reformers and Revolutionaries - Thought and Works

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Mahatma Phule's Contribution in Social Reforms in India

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Abstract

Jyotiba Phule, a lower caste social reformer of the 19th century Maharashtra developed a critique of Indian social order and Hinduism. He pointed out that when Brahmins migrated to this land of the Shudras and Atishudras (untouchables) they systematically devised an exploitative caste system. They fabricated a totally false mythology and scriptures to support that system. The enlightened British rule provided an opportunity for the masses to get themselves liberated from (his) slavery of the Brahmins. But at the same time. He criticized the British bureaucracy for its policy of supporting higher education and for its tendency to rely upon Brahmin subordinates. He also criticized the economic policy of the alien rule since in many respects it was unfavourable to the poor peasants. He suggested a number of solutions to improve the conditions of the agriculture sector.

Key Words: Migrated, Exploitative, Fabricated, Enlightened, Bureaucracy Etc.

1. Introduction

Jyotiba Phule (1827-1890) a mali by caste was a leading social reformer, educationist, peasant and Dalit Leader of the 19th century. Being a Shudra he was a victim of Hindu Orthodoxy, untouchability and caste barriers in his youth at Pune. A pioneer of anti-caste movement, he started the non-Brahmin movement in Maharashtra which awakened the dehumanized and socially abused classes. He founded the Satya Shodhak Samaj and carried out the movement of social transformation of society. He was the first Dalit Leader who started a chain of Girls Schools at Pune in 1850 for untouchables' education. In 1863 he founded a fondling home to care for the unwanted children of Brahmin widows, a shelter home for neglected widows and orphanage for the poor women. He also condemned child marriage, sati tradition and favoured widow remarriage. Phule led the struggle against rigid caste distinctions, age-old practice of untouchability and advocated the grievances of the exploited peasants. His educational efforts, movement of social transformation and writings were highly appreciated among the leading social reformers, educationists and social thinkers of the day. He was greatly assisted by his upper caste friends

and wife Savitribai Phule. The present study is all about his entire social and educational contribution. He became a legend and pioneer of social transformation and Dalit liberation in his lifetime.

2. Objectives of the Study

1. To study the ideology of Mahatma Phule.
2. To study the contribution of Mahatma Phule in Social Reforms in India.

3. Methodology of the Study

The present study has been descriptive; the data for this study were obtained from secondary sources. The secondary data has been collected from various references which already existed in published form; part of the paper is based on literature review, the method comprising of collecting all the available papers relating to the theme and selecting relevant papers/books for the review purpose. Selection of the paper is done on the basis of their relevance and contribution to the body of knowledge. The author has made an attempt to do primary reading of the selected papers which will constitute the core of this review study.

4. Ideology of Mahatma Jyotiba Phule

A social revolution in Indian society began in 1848 as a result of an incident that

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motivated Jyotiba to fight against the social injustice of caste discrimination. Jyotirao received an invitation to one of his friends' wedding who was from a high caste Brahmin family. But when the bridegroom's family learned about Jyotiba's roots, they humiliated and tortured him at the wedding. Mahatma Jyotirao fled the ceremony because he was determined to oppose the existing caste system and social constraints. He made it his life's mission to relentlessly push against social majoritarian dominance and worked toward the emancipation of all people who were affected by this social injustice. The traditional Brahmins and other upper castes were attacked by Mahatma Jyotirao and labeled as "hypocrites." He ran an anti-authoritarian campaign and exhorted the "peasants" and "proletariat" to resist the limitations placed on them.

He welcomed guests of different backgrounds and castes into his home. He supported gender equality, and he put his views into practice by including his wife in all of his social reform initiatives. He thought that religious figures like Rama were used by the Brahmin to oppress the lower caste. The society's traditional Brahmins were incensed by Jyotirao's actions. They accused him of corrupting societal rules and regulations. He was charged with representing the Christian Missionaries by many. However, Jyotirao was adamant and chose to carry on the movement. It's interesting to note that Jyotirao had several Brahmin acquaintances who lent their support to the movement's success. Thomas Paine's beliefs had a big impact on Jyotirao after reading his well-known book, "The Rights of Man." He thought that the only way to tackle social ills was to educate women and members of lower castes.

5. Contribution of Mahatma Jyotiba Phule

In India during the nineteenth century, Jyotirao "Jyotiba" Govindrao Phule was a well-known social reformer and thinker. He served as the movement's leader against India's widespread caste system. He

fought for the rights of peasants and other people from lower castes and revolted against the Brahmins' rule. According to Phule's biographer Dhananjay Keer, Vithalrao Krishnaji Vandekar, a fellow reformer from Bombay, gave Phule the title of Mahatma. Throughout his life, Mahatma Jyotiba Phule battled for the education of girls and was a pioneer for women's rights in India. He is credited with founding the first Hindu orphanage for unfortunate children.

Phule was influenced by Thomas Paine's book titled *The Rights of Man* and believed that the only solution to combat the social evils was the enlightenment of women and members of the lower castes. In 1848, he taught his wife how to read and write, after which the couple opened the first indigenously run school for girls in Pune where they both taught. The school welcomed girls from diverse sections, religions and socio-economic backgrounds to come and study. Phule and his wife were ostracized. The couple was, however, welcomed by their friend Usman Sheikh at the latter's home from where the girls' school operated. In 1852, the Phules had established three schools but all of them had shut by 1858 due to the shortage of funds after the Revolt of 1857. Phule vehemently opposed child-marriage and supported widow remarriage. In 1863, he, along with his friend and wife, opened an infanticide prevention centre where pregnant widows could safely give birth and care for infants. They ran the centre until the mid-1880s.

Jyotirao attacked the Orthodox Brahmin and other high-ranking castes, calling them "hypocrites". He fought the authoritarianism of upper castes and called on "farmers" and "proletariats" to resist the restrictions imposed on them. He believed that religious icons such as 'Rama' or 'Krishna' were used by the Brahmin as a means of conquering lower castes. The orthodox Brahmin of society was furious at Jyotirao's activities. They accused him of violating social norms and regulations. Many had accused him of acting on behalf of

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Christian missionaries. However, Jyotirao remained firm and resistant to them and decided to continue the movement started by him. Interestingly, Jyotirao was assisted by some of his Brahmin friends who expanded their support for the success of his movement.

He believed in gender equality and embodied his belief by involving his wife in all social reform activities. He witnessed how a young widow had to shave her hair and had to reject all kinds of joy in her life. He saw how untouchable women were forced to dance naked. And then, he decided to educate women by witnessing all these social ills that promote inequality. Jyotirao's quest to give women and girls the right to education was supported by his wife, Savitribai Phule. One of the few educated women of the time, Savitribai, received her literacy instruction from her husband, Jyotirao. In 1851, Jyotirao founded a girls' school and asked her wife to teach girls at school. He later opened two more schools for girls and indigenous schools for lower castes.

In his time, society was patriarchal and the status of women was particularly dire. Female infanticide and child marriage were two main stigmas in society. Girls were sometimes married to much older men. These women often became widowed before even reaching puberty and were left without family support. Suffering from their plight, Jyotirao founded an orphanage or ashram in 1854 to protect these unfortunate souls from the cruel hands of society. And eventually became an advocate of the widow's remarriage idea.

In 1873, Jyotiba Phule founded Satya Shodhak Samaj (Society of Truth Seekers). He embarked on a systematic deconstruction of existing beliefs and history, only to rebuild a near-equal version. Jyotirao Phule denounced the ancient Hindu scriptures of the Vedas. He traces the history of Brahmanism through several other ancient texts and revealed it as an exploitative and inhumane practice to maintain their social dominance by suppressing the "shudra" and

"antishdra" of society. He blamed Brahmin for enacting the law. The purpose of Satya Shodhak Samaj was to decontaminate society from caste discrimination and to remove the stigma that was inflicted by the Brahmin. Jyotirao Phule was the first person who used the word "Dalit" which refers to all those who the Brahmin considered untouchable and lower caste. Satya Shodhak Samaj membership was open to everyone, regardless of caste or rank. Several written records even show that they welcomed the participation of Jews as members of Samaj, and in 1876 "Satya Shodhak Samaji" boasted 316 members. In 1868, Jyotirao decided to set up a common aquarium in front of his house to show his comprehensive attitude towards all and wanted to have dinner with everyone, regardless of caste.

6. Conclusion

Jyotiba Phule, a lower caste social reformer of the 19th century Maharashtra developed a critique of Indian social order and Hinduism. He pointed out that when Brahmins migrated to this land of the Shudras and Atishudras (untouchables) they systematically devised an exploitative caste system. They fabricated a totally false mythology and scriptures to support that system. The enlightened British rule provided an opportunity for the masses to get themselves liberated from the slavery of the Brahmins. But at the same time. He criticized the British bureaucracy for its policy of supporting higher education and for its tendency to rely upon Brahmin subordinates. He also criticized the economic policy of the alien rule since in many respects it was unfavourable to the poor peasants. He suggested a number of solutions to improve the conditions of the agriculture sector.

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