



# Mahatma Jyotirao Phule - The Father of Social Reforms in Maharashtra

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## Abstract

India, being a land of diversity has for years witnessed the oppression of subalterns, especially women and people belonging to lower communities. The common people were more often denied or were even unaware of their rights and the benefits of Education. Under such circumstances, the Indian society has almost always witnessed the emergence of Reformers, who with their consistent efforts have brought about enormous changes in the traditional and superstitious patterns of human life. One such Great Social Reformer who emerged in the State of Maharashtra was Jyotirao Phule, who due to his contributions was related to the status of a Mahatma by the common people of India. Belonging to a low caste from Maharashtra and being aware of the degraded position of the untouchables and non-Brahmin, he waged a life-long struggle against upper caste domination and Brahminical supremacy through his Satya Sadhok Samaj. He pioneered the widow remarriage movement and worked for the education of women in Maharashtra. He was believed to be the first Hindu to start an orphanage for the unfortunate children. He devoted his entire life for the liberation of untouchables from the exploitation of Brahmins.

**Keywords:** Subaltern, Social Reform, Women, Education, Liberation of untouchables

Introduction:

***“Men and Women are born equal and have equal rights”***

*Mahatma Jyotirao Phule*

Reform and Revolution were the by-products of the Colonial system in India. While ‘reform’ was reluctantly supported by the British, the ‘revolutionary’ activities of the Indians were not tolerated, hence repulsed by a heavy hand by them. A galaxy of social reformers and few organisations emerged in the 19<sup>th</sup> century to weed out the social obstacles that stood in the way of normal human development. Especially the individual reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, M.G.Ranade, Jyotirao Phule, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar and E.V.R. Periyar and Organisations like Satya Sadhok Samaj of Jyotirao Phule (Maharashtra) and Self Respect Movement of E.V.R. Periyar (Tamilnadu)<sup>1</sup> have worked for the cause of upliftment of women and Dalits.

One such Great Social Reformer who emerged in the State of Maharashtra was Jyotirao Phule, who due to his contributions was elated to the status of a Mahatma by the common people of India. Jyotirao Phule occupies a unique position among the social reformers of Maharashtra in the nineteenth century. He was the first Indian who worked for the unification of the Dalit and Backward classes and also for the upliftment of women in India. He and his wife Savitribai were pioneers of the women’s education in India. Jyotirao started a school for girls and untouchables (Depressed class) and home for orphans and widows. He also founded the Satya Sadhok Samaj to fight the Brahmin domination and to liberate the lower caste by educating and teaching them about their rights.

Early Life:

Jyotirao Phule was born on 11<sup>th</sup> April 1827 in Bhamburda, Pune belonged to the Mali, gardener caste. His father, Govindrao and his uncle’s served as florists under the peshwas, they came to be known as phules. His mother passed away when he was hardly one year old. After completing his primary education, Jyotirao had to leave the school and help his father by working on the family’s farm<sup>2</sup>. In 1840 at the age of thirteen Jyotirao married the Savitribai was nine in the same Mali caste of Naigaon near Pune. Impressed by Jyotirao’s intelligence and his knowledge, two of his neighbours, One a Muslim teacher (Gaffar Baig) and the Christian gentle (Sir Liggit) persuaded his father Govindrao to allow him to study in a secondary school and also his wife Savitribai encouraged to continue his study. In 1841 he got admission in the Scottish Mission’s High School at Poona. In

this school he met the Sadashiv Ballal Govande, a Brahmin who remained a close friend throughout his life. Both Jyotirao and Govande were greatly influenced by Thomas Paine's famous book "Rights of Man"<sup>3</sup> to do something to the society.

**Upliftment Of Women:**

*Education for Girls:*

Phule was the pioneer in the education of shudra girls in India. He impressed by a school for girls run by American Missionaries in the town of Ahmed nagar<sup>4</sup>, these experiences inspired him, he began educating his wife Savitribai from his home itself and finished her formal teacher training education from pune. In the age of twenties, Phule plan to start the girls' school for low castes himself. Phule started their first girls' school on 15<sup>th</sup> May 1848 at Bhidewada, Pune.<sup>5</sup> The orthodox opponents of Jyotirao were furious and they started a vicious campaign against him. As no teacher dared to work in a school in which untouchables were admitted as students, Jyotirao asked his wife to teach the girls in his school. Stones and brickbats were thrown at her when she was on her way to the school. Though the school had to be closed for sometime due to lack of funds, but Jyotirao re-opened the school with the help of his Brahmin friends Govande and Valvekar<sup>6</sup>. On 3 July 1851 he founded a girl's school in which eight girls were admitted on the first day. Steadily the number of students increased. Savitribai was appointed as the first women teacher in this school, she had to suffer a lot because of the hostility of the orthodox people<sup>7</sup>. Jyotirao opened two more girl's schools during 1851-1852 and also established an indigenous mixed school for the lower classes, especially the Mahars and Mangs. Jyotirao was felicitated by the Department of Education for educational services to the society in 1852. He also established the Night Schools for working people in pune in 1855.

*Widow Remarriage and Home for the Destitute Widows:*

After a spate in Schools, Jyotirao turned his attention to other social evils, Child Marriage was the norm in Society, particularly among the 'upper' castes. Young girls were married to old men and more often than not became Child widows and treating a widow as an impure social outcaste was rigidly practiced<sup>8</sup>. The ill treatment

of widows not tolerated by Jyotirao so, he initiated the widow remarriage in 1860. Savitribai headed the women's unit of Samaj, she organized many widow remarriages and inter-caste marriages.

Some of the delinquent widows restored to abortion or left their illegitimate children to their fate by leaving them on the streets. Out of pity for the orphans, Jyotirao established the orphanage, possibly the first such institution founded by a Hindu. In 1863, he set up a home for widows who were often forced to kill their children. Jyotirao gave protection to pregnant widows and assured them that the home would take care of their Children<sup>9</sup>. It was in this orphanage run by Jyotirao that a Brahmin widow gave birth to a boy in 1873 and Jyotirao adopted him as his son who was names Yashwant and made him their legal heir. They educated him to be a doctor<sup>10</sup>.

#### Birth Of Satya Sadhok Samaj:

On 24<sup>th</sup> September 1873, Jyotirao convened a meeting of his followers and admirers and it was decided to form the Satya Sadhok Samaj means "*Truth Seeking Society*". The main aim of the organisation was to liberate the Sudras and Ati Sudras and to prevent their exploitation and injustices by the Brahmins.<sup>11</sup>

#### *Background*

An incident in 1848 made him aware of the inequities of the caste system and the pre-dominant position of the Brahmins in the social setup. He was invited to attend the wedding of one of his Brahmins friends. As the bridegroom was taken in a procession, Jyotirao accompanied him along with the relatives of his Brahmin friend. Jyotirao belonged to the Mali caste which was considered to be inferior by the Brahmins, the relatives of the Bridegroom insulted and abused him. Immediately he left the procession and returned home<sup>12</sup>. After this incident Jyotirao made up his mind to defy the caste system and serve the sudras who deprived of all their rights as human beings under the caste system.

The Brahminical patriarchal system which put women under fetters also banished so-called untouchables to the margins of society where they led a sub-human existence. They could not cross the path of the upper caste nor have access to the water bodies in the villages<sup>13</sup>. In 1868, Jyotirao decide to give access to the untouchables to a small household water tank near his house. In his major book called "*Ghulamgiri*" (Slavery) published in June 1873, was severely criticized for its 'venomous propaganda' against the Brahmins. Jyotirao argued that the Sudras

were the sons of the soil while the Brahmins came from outside and usurped everything that was possessed by the Sudras. He also claimed that what he had described in his book was ‘not one hundredth part of the rogueries’ that were generally practiced on his ‘poor, illiterate and ignorant Sudra brethren’<sup>14</sup>. In 1877 the first newspaper of the Movement was founded, “*Din Bandhu*” under the editorship of his young Mali colleague Krishnarao Bhalekar. From 1880 onwards, Narayan Meghaji Lokhande took over the management of *Din Bandhu* which was published from Bombay.<sup>15</sup>

### *Ideology of the Movement*

The main purpose of Samaj was to assert the worth of man irrespective of caste. Comparatively militant in nature and it carries on an open campaign against the Brahmin dominated caste system. Through his writings and practice he led a revolt against the hegemony of Brahmins in caste systems.

### *Challenged to the supremacy of the Brahmins*

Jyotirao tried to fight against Brahmins domination into different ways

- He upheld to the non-Brahmin caste not to engage any Brahmin priest to conduct their marriage rituals.
- He tried to reduce the enormous ritual system into simple procedure.
- He was concerned with the eradication of untouchability, illiteracy, exploitation of Non-Brahmins by Brahmins and Non-Brahmins in service in local bodies.
- He extended the membership was open to all caste with available evidence proves that some Jews were admitted( In 1876 there were 316 members of the Samaj)
- He campaigned vigorously the Social equality and abolition of caste.<sup>16</sup>

### *Ideological justification to fight against Brahmin domination*

Jyotirao was searching for an ideological justification to fight against Brahmin supremacy. He realized that to unify the masses it was necessary to attack Brahmin domination. The “Aryan-theory” of Race which was very popular at the time. He stated that Sudras were the original inhabitants of the country and they were enslaved and exploited the conquering Aryans who formulated a caste based Hinduism. He attacked the blind faith of the Vedas.

He opposed idolatry and denounced the Chaturvarnya. In his book *Sarvajanik Satya Dharma Pustak*, a posthumous publication in 1891<sup>17</sup>, his views on religious and social issues are given in the form of dialogue. According to him, both men and women were entitled to enjoy equal rights and it was a sin to discriminate between human beings on the basis of gender. He stressed the unity of man and envisaged a society based on liberty, equality and fraternity<sup>18</sup>.

#### Other Services:

In 1876, Jyotirao was nominated as a member of the Poona Municipality. He tried to help the people in the famine stricken areas of Maharashtra when a severe famine in 1877 forced people in the rural areas to leave their villages. Some of them had to leave their children and an appeal issued on 17<sup>th</sup> May 1877 by Jyotirao indicates that Victoria Orphanage<sup>19</sup> was founded under the auspices of the Satya Sadhok Samaj to look after these unfortunate.

In 1880, Jyotirao along with N.M Lokhande (Father of Trade Union Movement in India) addressed the meetings of the textile workers in Bombay. In 1883 he wrote *Shetkaryaca Asud*, and in 1885 he wrote *Ishara (warning)*<sup>20</sup> based on the religious and economic exploitation of peasants and addressed mass meetings of Malis, Talis and Other Castes.

Hari Raoji Chiplunkar, a friend of Jyotirao arranged a function on 2<sup>nd</sup> March 1888, in honour of the Duke and Duchess of Cannought. Jyotirao dressed like a peasant attended the function and made a speech. He commented on the rich invitees who displayed their wealth by wearing diamond- studded jewelry and warned the visiting dignitaries that the people who had gathered there did not represent India. He suggested that he must to visit some nearby villages as well as the areas in the city occupied by the untouchables. He requested the Duke of Cannought who was the son of Queen Victoria to convey his message to her and made a strong plea to provide education to the poor people<sup>21</sup>.

Reformers from Mumbai, Rao Bahadur Vithalrao Krishnaji Vandekhar gave Jyotirao Phule the title of “*Mahatma*” in May 1888 in recognition of his selfless services to humanity. Throughout his life, he fought for the emancipation of the downtrodden people and the struggle which he launched at a young age ended only when he

died on 28 November 1890 at Pune<sup>22</sup>. He was a pioneer in many fields and among his contemporaries he stands out as one who never wavered in his quest for truth and justice.

### Conclusion:

Jyotirao says “Both men and women are equally qualified to enjoy all human rights in equal manner”. He was the first man to revolt against social slavery in India. Belonged to the Mali caste his thought and reforms still influential and relevant in today world. He was exemplary role model for the Modern Indian reformer. His attack on Brahmin domination, social evils, ignorance, illiteracy and all the oppressive features of Hinduism had made him a historic figure. Phule has been commemorating numerous times in Maharashtra as well as other parts of India.

### EndNotes:

<sup>1</sup> B.S.Chandrabau, *Battered Women of Madras*, Emerald Publishers, Chennai, 1998, p. 41.

<sup>2</sup> Dr. Har Mohinder Singh, *History and Development of Dalit Leadership in India*, Sarup and Sons, New Delhi, 2008, p.2.

<sup>3</sup> Y.D.Phadke, *Social Reformers of Maharashtra*, Maharashtra Information Centre, New Delhi, 1985, p.12.

<sup>4</sup> Ramachandra Guha, *Makers of Modern India*, Penguin Viking publications, New Delhi 2010, p.75.

<sup>5</sup> Lalitha Dhara, *Savitri Jothirao Phule*, Women Development Cell, Dr.Ambedkar College Unit, Mumbai 1982, p. 9.

<sup>5</sup> G.P.Deshpande, *Mahatma Phule and the Gender Question*, Women Development Cell, Dr.Ambedkar College Unit, 1982, Mumbai, p.35.

<sup>7</sup> Dhananjay Keer, *Mahatma Jyotirao Phule*, Popular Prakashan, Bombay, 1974, p.21.

<sup>8</sup> *Op.Cit.*, Lalitha Dhara, p.11.

<sup>9</sup> *Op.Cit.*, Y.D.Phadke, p.14.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p.13.

<sup>11</sup> B.L.Grover and S.Grover, *A New look at Modern Indian History*, S. Chand and Company Ltd, New Delhi, 2004, p.288.

<sup>12</sup> *Op.Cit.*, Dr.Har Mohinder Singh, p.58.

<sup>13</sup> *Op.Cit.*, Lalitha Dhara, p.13.

<sup>14</sup> *Op.Cit.*, Y.D.Phadke, p.15.

<sup>15</sup> *Op.Cit.*, Dr. Har Mohinder Singh, p.84.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p.89.

<sup>17</sup> *Op.Cit.*, Ramachandra Guha, p.83.

<sup>18</sup> Jaswandi Wamburkar, *Locating the gender related work of the Phules within Women's Reform Movement of 19<sup>th</sup> century Maharashtra*, Women Development Cell, Dr.Ambedkar College Unit, Mumbai, 1982, p. 6.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p.10.

<sup>20</sup> *Op.Cit.*, Dhananajay Keer, p.32.

<sup>21</sup> *Op.Cit.*, Y.D.Phadke, p.18.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p.18.

