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MAHATMA JYOTIBA PHULE'S CONTRIBUTION AS A SOCIAL REFORMER



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EARLY LIFE:

Mahatma Jyotiba Phule was born on 11 April, 1827 in Satara district. He was from Mali community. His father was a vegetable vender at Poona. Mahatma Jyotiba Phule's mother passed away when he was hardly one year old. After completing his primary education, Mahatma Jyotiba Phule had to leave the school and help his father by working on the family's farm. In 1841, he got admission in the Scottish Mission's High School at Poona. It was the turning point in his life. Because in that school he came in contact with Brahmin friends and missionaries ideas of humanity. He had painful practical experience when he was invited to attend a wedding of one of his Brahmin friend. Knowing that Jyotiba belonged to the mali caste which was considered to be inferior by the Brahmins, the relatives of the bridegroom insulted and abused him. After this incident Jyotiba made up his mind to defy the caste system and serve the shudras who were deprived of all their rights as human beings under the caste system. Throughout his life Jotirao 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 28 November, 1890.

Works of Mahatma Jyotiba Phule:

Mahatma Jyotiba Phule 's philosophy found in his following books:

•Brahmanacha Kasab (1969):

In this Phule has exposed the exploitation of downtrodden by the Brahmin priests.

•Gulamgiri (1873):

In this book he has given a historical survey of the slavery of lower castes. Narrate the history of Brahmin domination in India. He advised the people that religious epics are made by men and do not tolerate exploitation on the name of religion.

•Shetkaryancha Asud (1883):

In this book he has written on exploitation of peasants. He has analysed how peasants were being exploited in those days.

•Sarvajanic Satyadharma Pustak (1891):

In this book he put forward the concept of universal religion and throws light on blind faiths.

•Asprushyanchi Kaifiyat (1893):

In this book he discussed about crisis in Agriculture and suggested solutions of the agrarian problems.

In all these books his method of writing was very aggressive and courageous. His writing was a reaction against the social and religious system of Maharashtra. He said in the social system there was a domination of upper caste and they were enjoying privileges. There were differences on the basis of caste, sex. No human rights to downtrodden, only sufferings, inferior treatment, injustice, exploitation was there in the Society. This type of social system was supported by religious puran and Vedas. Hence Phule showed strong reaction against this. He sought to create a new culture in the society which is based on equality, justice and humanity.

As we stated earlier he wanted to create a new social system in India based upon equality, justice, liberty and fraternity. In the history of India he was the first person who spread women education by opening girl schools and opened orphanages for widow women and their children. He was the first Indian who was honoured by British Govt for his noble work. He was severely criticized by Brahmin samaj for his noble work and attacked by them. But he continued with his movement. He sacrificed his life for the upliftment of untouchables, peasants and women. Mahatma Jyoti Rao Phule is regarded as the most important figure of social reform movement in India. He is regarded as the father of Indian social revolution.

FEMINISM AND WOMEN EMPOWERMENT:

Mahatma Jyotiba Phule and his wife, Savitribai, were remarkable personalities, especially for their times. He started women education from the education of his wife and trained her for the school. Savitribai was the first women teacher in India. He started the first school for girls at Pune, in the year 1848. He advocated education for female students from the downtrodden (Shudras/Atee Shudras) communities and adults. He started schools. He established institutes like the 'Pune Female Native Schools' and the 'Society for Promoting Education for Mahar, Mangs'. More important, he engaged in his education at home too. Jyotiba prepared his wife, Savitribai, to teach in the girls' school, with a view to educating the women first, in order to bring in the value of equality at home. Savitribai had to face bitter opposition from the orthodox society of the time for teaching girls and people from the underprivileged groups in the school. Despite this bitter opposition, Jyotiba and Savitribai continued their work with sincerity.

Women empowerment is an essential concept these days as Y.V. Satyanarayana rightly said, "The dominance of men over women is an age-old practice, but after the advent of democracy and democratic institution, almost every nation recognized the freedom, equality, and human rights of women. Now, women are entitled to live with self-respect and dignity by exercising various rights to women in the past and its ongoing effects in the present should be properly addressed by way of empowering women in all spheres of social life."

Jyotiba believed in the equality of men and women. He stressed on women's education, emancipation of women. He brought women in public life. He said equality and oneness is necessary for the development of the country. "In order to empower women he opposed child marriage. He initiated widow-remarriage and started a home for widows. In that time widow remarriage were banned and child-marriage was very common among the Brahmins and in the Hindu society. Many widows were young and not all of them could live in a manner in which the orthodox people expected them to live. Some of the widows resorted to abortion or left their illegitimate children to their fate by leaving them on the streets. Realizing the dangers of a widow giving birth to a child conceived in unfortunate circumstances after her husband's death, he opened a home for newborn infants in 1863 to prevent infanticides and suicides." Phule vehemently advocated widow-remarriage and even got a home built for housing upper caste widows during 1854. He requested people all the time to send their children in schools he opened for downtrodden and women.

He stated,

Nar nari sabhi mehnati bano.

Parivar ko pale. Anand le.

Nit bacho bachi ko padne bheje.

On 17th Feb. 1852, Mahatma Jyotiba Phule's school was publicly inspected. The officials passed the following remark. "It is a pity that the citizens of our country are not yet convinced of the need to educate women."

A judge named Brown who was present on the occasion said, "Educating women will strengthen family happiness and utility of the institution of the family." Mahatma Jyotiba Phule's bold efforts to educate women, Shudras and the untouchables had deep effect on the values, beliefs and ideologies. His efforts unleashed the forces of awakening among the common masses. Education made women more knowledgeable. They became conscious of what is right and wrong in the light of science. Women began to question the age-old customs which degraded them.

IDEAS ON SOCIAL JUSTICE AND EQUALITY

Phule made a powerful plea to abolish untouchability and the entire caste-system. He revolted against the unjust caste-system under which millions of people had suffered for centuries. The Dalit at that time did not have any political, social, educational and economic rights. He condemned dual morality of the Brahman system. He said equal opportunity should get to all people. He said by birth all are free and equal. All human beings have natural rights. He was a militant advocate of human rights to the downtrodden.

He protested against man-made inequality which was rooted in

Hindu caste-system and varna-vyavastha. He struggled fearlessly to implement the reforms in the Hindu society. He tried to remove inferiority complex from the minds of the people. He made aware to shudras. He advised them take education and acquire power, they are not slave but human beings. As T.L. Joshi said, "Jotiba Phule was one of the first persons to rebel against the traditional social system in India. From where did he find the inspiration for this revolt considering that the prevailing social laws had taken a firm hold on the Indian mind for thousands of years? The answer is that Jotiba was a Satyashodhak—a seeker of truth—the moral truth of human life. The manifestation of that perennial truth was his belief in man's freedom in the universe, as upheld by modern western civilisation."

Mahatma Jyotiba Phule established the Satyashodhak Samaj which sowed the seeds of development of the masses and propounded the spread of rational thinking. The movement carried on by the samaj was the first of its kind to reach the remote villages. He carried on the social reform movements based on social equality. Phule believed in the equality of men and women. He did not merely stress the equality of men but also equality of men and women. For Phule equality in the society was meaningless. Without equality of man and woman in the family. He propagated universal humanism based on values of freedom, equality and universal brotherhood. He criticised the caste system through the books "Gulamgiri" and "Brahmanache Kasab". He established the Satyashodhak Samaj. He sowed the seeds of development of masses.

We can emphasise on his ideas by these words to lead the social change in the society, "Phule believed in overthrowing the social system in which man has been deliberately made dependent on others, illiterate, ignorant and poor, with a view to exploiting him. To him blind faith eradication formed part of a broad socioeconomic transformation. This was his strategy for ending exploitation of human beings. Mere advice, education and alternative ways of living are not enough, unless the economic framework of exploitation comes to an end... Shudras became conscious of their caste identity and started claiming equality with higher castes in all areas of life. In short, Mahatma Jyotiba Phule liberated women and Shudras from the control of religious vested interests and laid the foundation for a Backward Class Movement in India."

PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION

Mahatma Jyotiba Phule do not want to be a religious thinker, religious guru or a philosopher of religion. Also he was not interested to prove the existence of God, relation of God and the world etc. His intention was to show the dilemma created by religious authorities who bound man in religious rituals and made people's enemy of each other. His thinking was that Hindu religion not only give spiritual knowledge to man but also bound his social and personal life in religious bigotries. He wants that religion which gives man a true freedom to grow socially and spiritually. Phule influenced by radical religious ideas of Thomas Paine could succeed in doing this kind of a theoretical exercise. Phule believed in one God (Nirmik). He regarded God as a creator of this world and all men and women his children. There are thirty-three articles in the Sarvajanik Satyadharma, which define the rules for the creation of a world-family based on basic human rights as well as the social and intellectual attitudes essential for it. The gist of these articles, in more or less Jotirao's words, is as follows:

- All men and women should live together unite on this earth as one family, with honesty and without discrimination, no matter to which village, province, country, continent or religious beliefs they adhere to.

- The Creator created man to be independent and capable of enjoying equal rights as others. The Creator has given freedom to all men and women to express themselves freely, but without causing harm on account of their thoughts or views. This is known as true (righteous) conduct.
- The Creator has endowed everyone with human rights. Hence it follows that an individual or a group cannot dominate another. To follow this principle is to practice righteous conduct.
- The Creator has given all men and women religious and political freedom. One who does not harm another in any way and does not usurp another's rights is a practitioner of righteous conduct. Conduct which will please the Creator is public truth (virtue). The honest behaviour of any human being towards his fellow human beings may be termed as morality.

The basic characteristics of his philosophy of religion given below:

- Phule discarded idolatry, ritualism, asceticism, fatalism and the idea of incarnation. No intermediary between God and devotee was considered essential by him. Phule never believed that any book was God ordained.
- Phule visualised Sarvajanic Satya Dharma (Public True Religion) to take place of Hinduism. His true religion broke from Hindu tradition altogether. He severely criticised the mythology and sacred books like Smritis and Vedas of Hindu. He tried to prove that the history of Hinduism was in fact, the history of Brahmin domination and slavery of Shudras. He found cunningness, selfishness and hypocrisy in sacred scriptures than discussion of true religion.
- The elite reformers criticized the contemporary degenerated form of Hinduism, while Phule attacked it from its very inception and showed that Brahmins had deceived lower castes throughout history. Phule interpreted Hinduism as a relation based on Varna and caste system devised by the cunning Brahmins to deceive the lower castes.
- He dismissed Hinduism altogether, he did not reject the very idea of religion or dharma. He tried to put in its place universal religion based on principles of liberty and equality. His Sarvajanic Satya Dharma put emphasis on truth seeking without the aid of any Guru or text. His religious ideas were definitely influenced by Christianity but he never advocated conversion because he was also influenced by the radical religious argument of Paine, who had shown a number of defects in Christianity.
- His universal religion was liberal and in many respects very different from traditional religions. His religion was mainly and primarily concerned about secular matters. Phule had visualised a family where each member of that family might follow his own religion. In this ideal family a wife might embrace Buddhism while her husband might be a Christian and children might follow other religions because Phule believed that there might be some truth in all the religious texts and scriptures and therefore one of them could not claim the ultimate truth.
- He thought that the government should not close its eyes to inhuman religious customs or unjust traditions and practices of Hinduism. At one place he criticised the colonial government for its policy of continuing the practice of giving grants to temples, since he claimed that the money had been collected from lower castes in the form of tax. Thus there was no place for any communalism or unwarranted neutralism in matters of religion so far as Phule's religious ideas were concerned.

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