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## A HUMBLE BEGINNING AND AN EXTRAORDINARY GOAL: A SOCIOLOGICAL UNDERSTANDING OF JOTIRAO PHULE'S HUMANITY PROJECT

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### ABSTRACT

*Jotirao Phule was born to do something extraordinary. The Hindu social structure and its oppressive features engendered in him a zeal to undertake some reforms to cleanse it of such aspects. He faced insurmountable challenges in his mission, but resolute as he was, he never wavered from his path. He critiqued Brahminism and the caste system in a very scathing way giving rise to non-Brahmin movement in Maharashtra. This paper tries to analyse and understand his beginning, the journey and his penchant for engendering a socio-cultural milieu, anchored in the principle and practice of rights and equality. In other words, this paper is an attempt to understand his humanity project.*



**KEYWORDS:** Brahminism, slavery, gender equality, non-Brahmin Movement, widow marriage, Satya Shodhak Samaj.

### INTRODUCTION

Jotirao Govindrao Phule came from a humble family with no known contribution to the field of ideas. So, Phule was supposed to grow into a normal/ordinary individual but turned out to be an extraordinary person, being an exception like many great men are. His ideas, vision and action had transformative potential aimed at radical restructuring of Indian (Hindu) society. Indian society, juxtaposed with caste system, based on graded hierarchy and purity-pollution principle, on the one hand and religious bigotry and superstitions on the other hand, needed reforms of serious magnitude and Phule's advent provided the requisite leadership to push for such reforms. As Rosalind O'Hanlon (2002: 3) says, "Phule's antecedents were not such as to suggest any great aptitude in the field of ideas, or for commanding the loyalties of large numbers of men. Yet his initiative set off a broad and very active movement of the lower castes..." The Hindu social structure and prevailing values and traditions created, sustained and reinforced many immoral, reprehensible and unjust practices. Phule probably sensed the crying necessity of an intervention and took up the historical role of initiating changes to engender a better society.

### OBJECTIVE

Given the structure of Hindu society, Jotirao Phule found it necessary to contribute to change some of its nature and practices to give it a humane face. With this backdrop, this paper would attempt to elucidate why, what and even how Phule undertook his humanity project so that Hindu society regains its humane potential.

### METHODOLOGY

This paper is an analytical paper and tries to analyse Phule's ideas, vision and action drawing on some published/secondary sources. Even though critique of Hindu religion and Hindu social structure was already done previously by Christian missionaries and even by some western educated Indians through

Anglo-Marathi press, Phule's critique holds much significance because his views were quite radical for the period. It is because even though modern values/ideas/principles were already gaining ground in the western world post-Enlightenment and post-French Revolution, but they were struggling to find feet in the Indian society. It is also because Phule was from the Shudra community unlike others who were from the upper caste community. His challenge to Brahminism, and social and religious hierarchies engendering a lower caste protest or non-Brahmin movement in the nineteenth century Maharashtra was predominantly influenced by his belief in the discourse of rights of man and human equality.

### BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

A biographical sketch will help us appreciate Jotirao Govindrao Phule's contribution in a proper perspective. Phule was born in 1827 into a Mali (gardener - lower caste) family of flower-fruit-vegetable growers in Pune. The Malis belong to the last *varna*- Shudra. However, according to O'Hanlon (2002: 105), "In the local caste hierarchy, however, they appear to have occupied quite a respectable position, roughly equivalent to that of Maharashtra's large grouping of peasant, land-holding, and cultivating castes, the Maratha-*kunbis*." Jotirao was the younger of two sons of Gobindrao and Chimnabai and went to a local Marathi school for his primary education (Ibid.). After completing his primary education, he had to leave the school and help his father by working on the family's farm (CWMJP, Vol.1 1991: xv) and later on, because of his intelligence and love of knowledge, in 1841, he was admitted into the Scottish Mission's High School at poona (Ibid.: xvi). This school exposed Phule to inspiring experiences that shaped his personality. He developed friendship with three Brahmin students who stood by him in all his activities and got an opportunity to read Thomas Paine's *The Rights of Man*. In 1847, he completed his high school, but a year later, in 1848, a specific personal caste experience determined the future course of action for him. He attended the wedding of a Brahmin friend but was humiliated and abused by his relatives during the wedding procession after they came to know about his inferior caste background. This incident made him aware of the agonizing aspect of caste inequities and made him resolute to challenge this caste system. He subsequently became a determined critique of Brahmins and Brahminism and dedicated himself to the cause of the Shudras and Ati-Shudras and was for the education of the masses, including women.

### ANALYSING PHULE AND HIS HUMANITY PROJECT

From the biographical sketch, it becomes apparent that after his personal experience of caste-based ill-treatment, Phule embarked upon a long, arduous journey of serving the downtrodden and disprivileged. In other words, he embarked upon his humanity project, but, during this long journey, many facets of his personality got manifested, which will be recapitulated here.

#### As a Great Thinker

Jotirao Phule was a great thinker. He was thinking ahead of his time: a traditional/conservative society that was not ready for his new ideas. Orthodox people and society have always been hostile to changes and transformations. As a consequence, he had to bear the brunt for his conviction, ideas and action. However, many look at him as "...the first leader and most influential theoretician of the movement of lower caste protest in nineteenth-century Maharashtra... (O'Hanlon 2002: 10). His book *Slavery* (1873) generated huge controversy which contained scathing indictment of Brahmins and Brahminism. "It was severely criticized for its 'venomous propaganda' against the Brahmins" (CWMJP, Vol.1 1991: xviii). In this, he talked of Brahmins being outsiders who came as conquerors and subjugated the original inhabitants and established their supremacy. In other words, he gave a theory of the origin of Brahmins and Brahminism and talked of the tyranny of Brahmins. Phule said that lower caste people suffered from not only physical slavery but also mental slavery as Brahmins kept them uneducated and dominated. He blamed the Brahmins for the ignorance and miseries of the low castes. Between 1869 and 1873, Phule was engaged in writing and his writings predominantly constructed a new critique of orthodox religion and the Hindu social structure. His two major writings of this period were: *Priestcraft Exposed* (1869) and *Slavery* (1873).

### As a Great Reformer/Activist

According to Gail Omvedt, “While he (Phule) was for a time inclined to nationalism, he quickly became disillusioned with its Brahman leadership, and instead embarked on a career as social reformer intending to awaken the ‘Shudras and Ati-Shudras’ to the reality of their slavery and their destiny” (Omvedt 2003: 228; bracket added). He was against untouchability. He believed in equal rights of all. So, as a reformer and activist, in 1868, he decided to give access to the untouchables to a small bathing tank near his house (CWMJP, Vol.1 1991: xviii). Even in his controversial book *Slavery*, he included a manifesto which declared that he was willing to dine with all regardless of their caste, creed or country of origin (Ibid.). He refused to regard the *Vedas* as sacrosanct. He opposed idolatry and denounced the Chaturvarnya (CWMJP, Vol.1 1991: xix). During his time, widow marriages were prohibited and child marriages were common among the Brahmins and other upper castes. Because of these two practices, many young girls became and remained widows. Some of these young widows, who failed to follow strict orthodox practices, ended up getting pregnant and such widows either resorted to abortion or left their illegitimate children on the streets. “Out of pity for the orphans, Jotirao Phule established an orphanage, possibly the first such institution founded by a Hindu” (CWMJP, Vol.1 1991: xviii). He also provided protection to pregnant widows and their illegitimate children. It was in this orphanage that a Brahmin widow gave birth to a boy in 1873 and Jotirao adopted him as his son (Ibid.). He was also engaged in the 1860s in liberalizing attitude towards widow marriage. So, one may very well discern that Phule was not only a preacher but also a practitioner. He was like an activist reformer.

### As a Great Iconoclast/Radical

He defied the caste system and attacked the pre-eminence of Brahmins in the Hindu social structure. He was for worshipping the creator but without the Brahmins as the mediators- an influence of Tukaram - the 17<sup>th</sup> century *Bhakti* poet. However, *Bhakti* tradition never challenged/critiqued the role of Brahmins as a mediator between god and believers or interpreters of scriptures, but Phule did this: he critiqued Brahmins and Brahminism. He fearlessly “...attacked the stranglehold of the Brahmins, who prevented others from having access to all the avenues of knowledge and influence. He denounced them as cheats and hypocrites. He asked the masses to resist the tyranny of the Brahmins” (CWMJP, Vol.1 1991: xvii). Even his reading of Thomas Paine’s *Age of Reason* might have influenced him in this regard in which he argues “... God is one...and that there is never any need for an intermediary in order to worship him...” (O’Hanlon 2002: 112). As stated earlier, he was not only against child marriage (he himself was married off when he was not even thirteen years of age), he was also in favour of widow marriage – ideas which were antithetical to the prescriptions of an orthodox society that the Hindu society was. In his book *Sarvajanic Satya Dharma Pustak* published in 1891 (posthumously), as Omvedt states, “In it he gave a savage critique of the Vedas, the Ramayana and Mahabharata stories, and undertook the effort to formulate a religious alternative” (Omvedt 2003: 232). In regard to alternative, as Omvedt opines, “All of Phule’s writings give indications of several important criteria: a true religion should be universal; it should be founded on reason and truth and rejection of superstition, i.e., it should be suitable for a scientific age; it should be anti-ritualistic; it should be ethical; it should be equalitarian, not recognising caste or ethnic differences, and especially admitting the equality of women” (Ibid.). Phule also believed in a monotheistic religion. His radicalism alienated even some of his friends. According to Omvedt, “His general anti-Brahman cultural radicalism was too much for significant numbers of people in his time; even his closest Mali companions, Bhalekar and Lokhande, worked apart from him, Lokhande focusing on workers in Bombay, and Bhalekar becoming alienated and trying to form an organization concentrating only on education and reforms” (Omvedt 2003: 233).

### As a Great Educationist & Institution Builder

He understood the importance of education and hence he was for the education of the masses and more specifically for women and untouchables. Denial of education to women and untouchables were, as O’Hanlon argues, “the consequence of social and religious practices badly in need of reform” (O’Hanlon

2002: 112). This realisation had already dawned on him. So, even though he completed his high school in 1847, by 1848, he was ready with a girls' school. Before that, he visited the American mission school for low caste girls in Ahmadnagar in 1848, which might have inspired him. To begin with, he tutored his wife Savitribai Phule at home. He and his wife, including his father had to bear a lot of retaliation from the orthodox opponents for promoting education of women and lower castes. Savitribai started teaching in this school because no teacher dared to work in a school of untouchables. Because of paucity of funds, this school was closed only to be reopened with the help of Phule's Brahmin friends of school years in 1851 (CWMJP, Vol.1 1991: xvii). He opened two more girls' schools during 1851-52 (Ibid.). "In a memorial addressed to the Education Commission (popularly known as the Hunter Commission) in 1882, he described his activities in the field of education, 'A year after the institution of the female school I also established an indigenous mixed school for the lower classes, especially the Mahars and Mangs. Two more schools for these classes were subsequently added. I continued to work in them for nearly nine to ten years'" (Ibid.). He even said, "Let there be schools for the Sudras in every village; but away with all Brahmin school-masters!" (CWMJP, Vol.1 1991: xxxix). He was in favour of education for the masses. Apart from schools, he also established organizations. On 24 September 1873, he formed Satya Shodhak Samaj (Society of Seekers of Truth) with his followers and admirers and became its first president and treasurer (Ibid.: xix). The main objectives of the organization were to liberate the Shudras and Ati Shudras and to prevent their exploitation by the Brahmins. All the members of the Satya Shodhak Samaj were expected to treat all human beings as children of God and worship the Creator without the help of any mediator (Ibid.). As Omvedt argues in the context of the Satya Shodhak Samaj, "... (it) was his answer to the various organised groups, such as the Prarthana Samaj and the Brahmo Samaj of the elite. Its purpose was to fight priestly domination, especially by organizing social-religious ceremonies without them; it also encouraged the education of both boys and girls and promoted gender equality with a quite radical version of the marriage ceremony" (Omvedt 2003: 228; bracket added). One of his friends started a weekly called *Dinabandhu* in 1879 as the organ of the Satya Shodhak Samaj to articulate the grievances of the peasants and workers (CWMJP, Vol.1 1991: xix). Thus, Phule was not only an educationist but also an institution builder.

### As a Great Modernist & Humanist

He was an iconoclast, a radical but not a militant or self-centered intellectual. He thought of ushering human values to Hindu society; purging itself of certain practices that were not compatible with the modern ideals of equality, liberty and fraternity, wrought in by the French Revolution and by then beginning to become global ideals. He was for building Indian (Hindu) society on the solid pedestal of such ideals. He had a tremendous sense of human sympathy – for women, widow, pregnant widow, orphans, untouchables, workers, peasants and the poor. He also talked of gender equality/parity. In his book *Sarvajanic Satya Dharma Pustak* published in 1891 (posthumously), Phule argued that "both men and women were entitled to enjoy equal rights and it was a sin to discriminate between human beings on the basis of sex" (Ibid.).

### DISCUSSION AND CONCLUDING REMARKS

Jotirao Phule, as discussed above, was a person of extraordinary vision and, at the same time, he was also a person of action. Through his activism, he brought to the fore certain seminal ideas – idea of representation, self-respect, freedom from bondage as well as freedom of press, education as an emancipator of the downtrodden, gender equality, rights of man, etc. He highlighted the issue of monopoly of all the higher offices under the British Government by the Brahmins, thereby giving the lower caste movement a different nomenclature in Maharashtra – the non-Brahmin Movement. A simple question arises in mind: Why did Phule take up the path of reform and activism? It may not be so simple to find an answer to this question, but an attempt may be made. During his school years, Christian missionaries were very active in critiquing *Bhagvat Gita*, *Rig Veda* and Hindu religion and published their views in Anglo-marathi press. Thus, the anti-Brahman ideas of Christian missionaries and the critique of Brahminism by moderate and high caste reformers like Bal Shastri Jambhekar, Gopal Hari Desmukh, etc. provided the intellectual

milieu and influenced Phule's ideas. Along with these, as stated earlier, he read Thomas Paine's famous book "The Rights of Man." All these things developed in him a genuine concern for human emancipation, especially the emancipation of the disprivileged. He had a deep sense of commitment to human values and, hence, he revolted against injustice and suffering of people. To put things differently, we may state that there are local and global aspects to his evolution as an extraordinary man. The local in his case is personal – the personal experience of caste ill-treatment at a Brahmin wedding reminding him of the pernicious nature of socio-religious hierarchies – which kindled in him a yearning to work for their dismantling. The global aspect springs from the personal and develops in him the feeling of compassion for others and, hence, he worked for women, widow, pregnant widow, orphans, untouchables, workers, peasants and the poor. Therefore, the local and the global are intermeshed to build the personality of Jotirao Phule. He eschewed political activism and resorted to cultural critique of Hindu society. In the words of Omvedt, "Though Phule had an all-around approach, political and economic as well as cultural, he came back constantly to religious and cultural themes. His critique of Brahmanic Hinduism attacked not only the caste divisions that it created and maintained, but also its ritualism, legends, sacred books and festivals" (Omvedt 2003: 232). What was underlying in his critique was a sense of commitment to engender a better society for all. This was his humanity project and we all know the project remains incomplete and unfinished since socio-religious hierarchies and injustice and atrocities continue to show tenacity and resilience, even in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century India.

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