

MAHATMA JYOTIBA PHULE: A PIONEER OF THE OPPRESSED SOCIETY

Dr. Suresh Kumar

Assistant Professor

Department of B.Ed/M.Ed.

Mahatma Jyotiba Phule

Rohilkhand University, Bareilly.

Email:sureshkumar11275@gmail.com

Hari Mohan Verma

Research Scholar

Department of B.Ed/M.Ed.

Mahatma Jyotiba Phule

Rohilkhand University, Bareilly.

Email:

Abstract

It is not an exaggeration to say that Mahatma Jyotiba Phule is widely recognized in India as a brilliant social reformer, thinker, educationist, true patriot, revolutionary, seeker of truth, leader, philosopher, writer and pioneer of women's education of the nineteenth century. He laid special emphasis on the upliftment of Dalits, socially and economically weaker sections, widows, exploited people, poor farmers, and empowered the marginalized community. He condemned the influence of Brahmanism in religion and society. Even today, generations are being inspired by his ideology. He broke the barrier of many evils prevailing in Indian society, like the caste system, untouchability, injustice, discrimination, exploitation, inequality, the pitiable condition of farmers, denial of education to Dalits, and remarriage of young widows. He struggled throughout his life to improve their condition. Jyotiba Phule made tireless efforts to promote women's education and empowerment. He was greatly inspired by the book 'Rights of Man,' written by American social activist Thomas Paine, and believed that social justice can be achieved only through education, and no person is great by birth. Rights can be achieved only through education and hard work. He opposed the British for their unfair rules for Indians. He urged the British to enact statutory laws for the right to education for all, and for remarriage of young widows. He provided education to women, widows, children, and the oppressed society. At that time, some Manuvadi Brahmins used to harass Dalits. In 1873, he founded the 'Satya Shodhak Samaj' to raise awareness of Dalits' rights. He led a movement against superstition, untouchability, casteism, and Sati Practice. The British were also impressed by Mahatma Jyotiba Phule's zeal to reform society.

Keywords

Mahatma Jyotiba Phule, Pioneer, Oppressed Society, Marginalized Community, Satya Shodhak Samaj, Human Rights, Sati Practice, Women Empowerment.

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Dr. Suresh Kumar

Hari Mohan Verma

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Introduction

Mahatma Jyotiba Phule was a great philosopher, social reformer, writer, iron man, truth seeker, leader, and educationist in the 19th century. His father Govindrao Phule was a vegetable seller, and he belonged to the Mali community, which was considered socially and economically weak. Phule's family worked as gardeners for the then Peshwa Bajirao II. He was one of the exponents and outspoken leaders of humanitarian ideas. Phule's ideological development was significantly influenced by his foster mother, Sagunabai, who nurtured his intellectual curiosity and commitment to social justice. This strong foundation propelled him to become a pioneer for social and educational reforms. His education, particularly in physical disciplines was under the guidance of his teacher Lahuji Salve. He opposed the caste system, untouchability, child marriage, and the Sati system.

Throughout his life, Phule championed women's education, empowerment, widow remarriage, and the upliftment of Dalits, vehemently opposing the conservative traditions and superstitions that pervaded society. His thoughts were deeply influenced by the writings of social reformer Thomas Paine, which fueled his lifelong struggle for human rights and social equity. A fervent patriot, Phule sought to awaken the consciousness of the nation through his prolific contributions to newspapers, books, magazines, and journals.

Phule was not only a man of extraordinary talent but also one of unwavering energy, duty, and hard work. His actions consistently aligned with his words, demonstrating a profound commitment to the causes he championed. His social, educational, and administrative initiatives played an unparalleled role in catalyzing societal change, leaving an indelible mark on the fabric of Indian society.

One particularly striking episode from his life, recounted in Dhananjay Keer's biography, illustrates his extraordinary character. One night, envious of his growing fame, two hired assassins, Rode and Pandit Dhondiram Namdev, were sent to kill him for a bounty of Rs 1,000. However, upon awakening and engaging them in conversation, Phule's charisma, intellect, and compassion transformed their intentions. Rather than succumbing to violence, he inspired them to abandon their murderous plot, seek forgiveness, and ultimately become his allies. Jyotiba changed the views of the assassins by talking to them, just as the saints did with the robber Valmiki, Gautam Buddha with the robber Angulimal and Mahatma Gandhi with the violent people by making them non-violent. Later, one of the assassins became Phule's bodyguard, and the other became a learned follower of the Satya Shodhak Samaj. He was a strong proponent of non-violence. His unwavering commitment to non-violence and social justice remains a guiding light, ensuring that the legacy of this great social reformer can never be forgotten.

Many research papers and books were studied to make this research paper meaningful and coherent and the following research papers were also reviewed.

Review of Literatures

1. Jyotiba Phule (1827-1890) emerged as a pivotal social reformer in nineteenth-century Maharashtra, championing human rights and advocating for women's education and caste equality. His revolutionary ideas, influenced by Thomas Paine, addressed systemic injustices, positioning him as a key figure in the fight against oppression and a leader for marginalized communities in India. (N. Devula, 2024)
2. This research paper effectively outlines Savitribai and Jyotirao Phule's contributions to education and social reform in 19th-century India, emphasizing women's empowerment and marginalized communities. While clear in purpose, it could benefit from specific examples, a theoretical framework, and contemporary relevance to enhance depth and academic rigor. Overall, a solid foundation. (A. Das, 2024)
3. The text contents highlight Jyotirao Phule's role as a pioneering social reformer in 19th-century India, focusing on his advocacy for social equality and education. It emphasizes his impact on marginalized communities and the lasting relevance of his vision for an inclusive society, providing a strong basis for further exploration. (Asis Mistry, 2024)
4. It portrays Mahatma Jyotiba Phule as a pivotal figure in India's social revolution, emphasizing his advocacy for education among marginalized communities, particularly women, shudras, and untouchables. It highlights his protests against exploitation and his foundational role in inspiring future leaders like Dr. B.R. Ambedkar. Overall, a compelling overview. (Dr. Shreekrishna Chackrawarti, 2023).

Life Biography of Mahatma Jyotiba Phule

Birth and Upbringing

He was born on 11 April 1827, in Katgun, Satara district of Maharashtra. Jyotiba Phule's mother Chimnabai died when he was just one year old. His father was deeply saddened by the poor upbringing of Jyotiba, and his elder brother Rajaram. Govindrao's cousin Sagunabai Kshirsagar, who became a widow at a young age, was thrown out of the house by her in-laws. Since Sagunabai had no siblings or parents, she took refuge in her cousin Govindrao's house and lovingly raised her motherless children. Sagunabai was aware of the importance of education. It is said that Sagunabai instilled values and revolutionary thoughts in Jyotiba.

Education and Marriage

Jyotiba Phule, the younger son of Govindrao Phule, was talented from childhood. He was first admitted to a Marathi medium school at the age of seven, but his early

education was disrupted due to the social taboos. Consequently, he was expelled from school and left his studies to join the profession of his birth. In 1840, when he was only thirteen years old, he was married to Savitribai, the nine-year-old daughter of Lakshmi and Khandoji Nevse Patil of Naigaon village in Satara district of Maharashtra. Recognizing the importance of education, Phule continued to read books at home, even after his marriage. Seeing his enthusiasm, Phule's neighbor Pastor Lezit and Urdu Persian teacher, Gaffar Beg Munshi, persuaded his father to enroll him in school. After wasting 3 years of primary education, in 1841, his father enrolled him at Scottish Missionary High School, where he completed his 7th standard in first division in English medium.

Heir-at-law

Mahatma Jyotiba Phule saved the life of a pregnant widow, a Brahmin woman named Kashibai, who was on the verge of committing suicide and was being exploited by her own family members. Jyotiba not only brought her to his home, but also ensured her successful delivery and made her illegitimate child his heir by the name of Yashwantrao Phule. He raised him with great love and care, educated him and made him a renowned and able doctor.

Physical Training

Lahuji Salve, a wrestler from Pune, who belonged to the Mang-Matang caste, had an arena where he used to train wrestling, weapon handling, archery, horse riding, etc. Prominent revolutionaries Balwant Phadke, Bal Gangadhar Tilak, and Jyotiba Phule also trained under him. Phule too had to defend himself using wrestling on many occasions. He was a thoughtful and far-sighted man, knowing that only good physical and mental health can lead to achievement.

Expulsion from house

Fearing the threat of social boycott, Govindrao Phule expelled his son, Jyotiba Phule, and daughter-in-law, Savitribai Phule, from the house. After being evicted from his father's home, the Phule couple started living on rent in the Ganjpeth area of Pune. To earn money, Phule worked as a laborer, built roads and bridges and gradually began taking contracts for building small and large houses. In 1868, Govindrao Phule fell seriously ill due to separation from his son and daughter-in-law. He suffered from a serious illness. When Jyotiba Phule learned of this, he went with his wife to care for his father. He brought his father to their home with great respect. When his relatives learned of this, they socially boycotted him. After the death of his father, Jyotiba Phule performed his last rites according to the Satyashodhak method without a Brahmin.

Salvation

The Great Era Man, Mahatma Jyotiba Phule, died due to a paralysis attack on 28 November 1890, in Pune.

Oppression of the Shudras

At the time of Phule's birth, two classes in Maharashtra were struggling for identity, with the lower class seeking to escape atrocities and live freely. During the Peshwa's rule, the Brahmins committed extreme atrocities against the Dalits. According to the religious text Manusmriti, in the Peshwa state, Brahmins had the right to usurp the wealth of the Shudras. In 1848, Phule was excited to be invited to the wedding of his Brahmin friend. He walked in the wedding procession with his friend. This displeased some orthodox Brahmins, who made derogatory remarks about Phule's caste, opposing his equality with them. This incident opened Phule's eyes to the realities of caste discrimination. The fifth category included untouchables, excluding Brahmins (priests, teachers, and scholars), Kshatriyas (warriors, kings, and governors), Vaishyas (artisans, agriculturists, and traders), and Shudras (servants, laborers, and service providers). It was believed that they polluted the land by spitting and touching. As a result, they were forced to perform extremely challenging and inhuman work, and suffered severe physical abuse.

Women's Education and Their Empowerment

Savitribai Phule was illiterate at the time of her marriage; however, she once brought home a book from the Shirwak fair and tried to understand it by looking at the pictures, as she could not read or write. Jyotiba empathized with her and decided to teach her. By 1847, he taught his wife, Savitribai Phule, to read and write at home and arranged for her teacher training. Noble-minded Jyotiba Phule, conversant Savitribai Phule, and public welfare worker Gopal Hari Deshmukh devoted their entire lives to strengthening the position of women. Phule opposed gender inequality. In 1848, he opened his first girls' school in Bhidewada, Pune, and made his wife the first female teacher in India. Lahuji Salve enrolled his niece, Mukta Salve, in Jyotiba's girls' school. Many times, cow dung and mud were thrown at her, and she was subjected to obscene jokes. Some people even tried to sexually exploit her, but due to her strong will, awareness, and physical strength, no one dared. Jyotiba Phule and Savitribai Phule were completely dedicated to their works.

Inspiration and Thinking

He and his wife were inspired by Cynthia Farrar's institute in Ahmednagar, Maharashtra. They faced a social boycott of women's education. They taught lower-caste girls and women. He believed that educating a man benefits the individual, while educating a woman benefits the whole family. He was greatly inspired by the book 'Rights of Man' written by American philosopher and social activist Thomas Paine. His ideology was rooted in egalitarianism, freedom, and socialism. He believed that social justice can be established through education. He often said that knowledge without action is useless, and action without knowledge is insufficient; both are

complementary. He drew inspiration from the biographies of George Washington and Chhatrapati Shivaji. He tried to put the teachings of Buddha into practice. The Phule couple remained childless, but this did not deter Jyotirao Phule from adhering to his principles. Despite societal pressure, he refused to remarry, demonstrating his commitment to equality and rejection of patriarchal norms that condoned multiple marriages. He believed in the equality of men and women and took on the challenge of reforming societal inequalities. He was particularly vocal against the growing Brahminical influence.

Social and Educational Work

He attacked the bourgeoisie of the upper castes, calling them hypocrites for always exploiting the downtrodden. Phule is believed to have coined the term 'Dalit' for the lowest class. He laid special emphasis on the upliftment of Dalits, socially, and economically weaker sections, widows, and exploited poor farmers. In 1854, he started a shelter for destitute and helpless young widows, where he, along with his spouse, educated and supported them, providing a ray of hope in their lives. There were many evils in society, so he campaigned against the caste system, dowry, untouchability, injustice, exploitation, inequality, illiteracy, the pitiable condition of farmers, widows, and girls, and the lack of the right to education for all. He made people aware of their rights and conditions, so that their lives could improve. He inspired the Dalits and taught them to neither commit nor tolerate injustice, fostering a sense of brotherhood among them. He abolished slavery and the practice of Sati with British support. In 1868, he built a common bathhouse for all and dug a well from which people of all castes could drink water. He opposed child marriage and promoted widow remarriage. He also established a library for widows, women, and Dalits. He undertook many initiatives to end female foeticide, promote widow remarriage, stop child marriage, and advocate for women's education. He established numerous educational institutions. Continuing his social and educational work, Jyotiba Phule opened the second and third schools in Rastapeth and Ganjpeth, respectively. In one school, his aunt Sagunabai taught, while in the other, Usman Sheikh's sister, Fatima Sheikh, educated girls. Thus, Fatima Sheikh became the first Indian Muslim woman teacher. A new school was opened in Nanapeth to educate the untouchables. During a ceremony, the Duke of Connaught, son of the Queen of England, toured Pune. The prince's welcome ceremony was held at Raipur Hariraoji's mansion. Jyotiba Phule, present at the reception, made a deep impression on the Duke by clearly depicting the plight of the people and farmers of the country. He spoke to the Queen of England, seeking her mediation to address the country's problems.

Establishing Society and Newspaper Publishing

Jyotiba Phule founded the Satya Shodhak Samaj on 24 September, 1873. The main objective of the Satya Shodhak Samaj was to eradicate the evils prevalent

in society. Any person from the society could join the Satya Shodhak Samaj. To raise awareness, he published the newspaper 'Satya Shodhak' with the assistance of Sayajirao Gaekwad of Baroda. To highlight the indifference of the British government towards society, another weekly newspaper, Deenbandhu, was started, with Krishnarao Bhalekar as its first editor.

Administrative Work

As a member of the Pune Municipal Council (1876-1882), Mahatma Jyotiba Phule advocated for sanitation, public health, and the welfare of marginalized communities. He promoted education for girls and lower castes, addressed famine relief, and championed social reforms, challenging the caste system and striving for justice and equality.

Sense of Patriotism

On 5 September, 1875, Mahatma Jyotiba Phule's workers fully supported Dayanand Saraswati's procession and helped chase away the miscreants who attempted to disrupt it. The Maratha and Kesari newspapers were published by freedom fighter Bal Gangadhar Tilak. The Kesari newspaper was published on 4 January, 1881, with Gopal Ganesh Agarkar as its first editor. An article titled 'Country's Misfortune' published in the Kesari newspaper criticized the policies of the British government. While criticizing the state minister, Bal Gangadhar Tilak and Gopal Ganesh Agarkar were arrested. Jyotiba Phule secured their release from jail by paying a bail amount of ¹ 10,000. Mahatma Jyotiba Phule was a revolutionary and a true patriot.

Honors and Educational Institutes

On May 11, 1888, social worker Vitthalrao Krishnaji Vandekar conferred the title of 'Mahatma' upon him. Constitution maker Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar was influenced by the policies, ideas, and contributions of Mahatma Jyotiba Phule towards Dalits and women, and he considered him his godfather. Jyotiba Phule is also known as Jyotirao Govindrao Phule. His reformist work for women can never be deemed futile. We can immortalize his legacy by making his educational, social and administrative work relevant in the current perspective and by giving more importance in the coming years through various awards, social institutions and research centers and by following the path shown by him. Influenced by his inspiring works and educational and social ideas, the following institutions were formed in the society:

- Mahatma Jyotiba Phule Education Trust (MJPET), Rajgurunagar, Pune.
- Mahatma Jyotiba Phule Rohilkhand University (MJPRU), Bareilly, Uttar Pradesh.
- Mahatma Jyotiba Phule Shodh Peeth, MJPRU, Bareilly.
- Mahatma Jyotiba Phule Research and Training Institute (MAHAJYOTI), Nagpur, Maharashtra.

- Mahatma Jyotiba Phule Shikshan Sansthan, Sikar, Rajasthan

For the upliftment of Dalits, many great men like Periyar, Dayanand Saraswati, Mahatma Gandhi, Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar, Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar, Raja Rammohan Roy, Bal Gangadhar Tilak etc. started movements for social and educational reforms from time to time. Saint Dnyaneshwar, a great saint, thinker, poet, and writer of Dnyaneshwari, was the guru of Mahatma Jyotiba Phule. He played a leading role in the Bhakti movement and started the anti-Bhakti movement. There was no difference between Jyotiba Phule's words and actions. He also put his conduct into practice. On 16 November 1852, Major Candy along with the Governor of Mumbai honored Jyotiba Phule by giving him a shawl and flowers, impressed by his educational and social work. Which Jyotiba Phule very politely informed the government about their responsibility to educate the Dalits and girls.

Important Books, Journals and Magazines

To raise awareness among the downtrodden, he wrote some gumptious and tactical journals, magazines, and books, some of which are listed below:

- *Tritiya Ratna*, published in 1855, is a drama that depicts how people of the leading caste exploited those of the lower caste.
- *Gulamgiri*, written in 1873, is a seminal work that critiques various myths.
- *Shetkarayacha Aasud* (Cultivator's whipcord) published in 1881, is based on the suffering of poor farmers.
- *The Satsar* journal was published in 1885 in two parts, delineating the Prathana Samaj, Brahm Samaj, casteism, and women's status.
- *Ishara* published in 1885, focuses on the caste system as a barrier to building a good nation and its progress.

Conclusion

Mahatma Jyotiba Phule was not only a social reformer, but also a man of the era. He removed many social evils prevalent in India at that time. The condition of Dalits in the society was very pathetic and painful. And they did not even have the right to study and write. Dalits were considered untouchables and forced to live in contempt. The condition of farmers and young widows was appalling. Dalits were not allowed to use public drinking water, inns or public resources. Young widows were forcibly killed in the name of Sati Practice. In this situation, Jyotiba Phule emerged as a beacon of hope for the lower-class community. He not only made the weak, oppressed, deprived, and lower-class people aware but also made tireless efforts to educate them. He believed that only an educated woman could raise children well. He and his wife Savitribai Phule had to face humiliation many times, yet they did not give up. He worked closely with the British for the upliftment

of the marginalized people of the society. In the year 1848, he opened his first girls' school, where his wife Savitribai Phule had the distinction of being the first Indian female teacher. He established community baths, wells, libraries, schools etc. for the marginalized people. In 1873, he founded the Satya Shodhak Samaj to promote social equality and rational thinking. He also wrote many books and magazines to keep people away from superstition and ostentation. His social work was appreciated by the British many times and he was also honored on many occasions. A social worker Vitthalrao Krishnaji Wandekar gave him the title of Mahatma in a huge public gathering. Even though this preacher of Dalits died on November 28, 1890, in Pune at the age of 63, his thoughts continue to inspire and will always be remembered for the upliftment of Dalits.

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