

Jotirao Phule : A social activist of 19th century Western India with a unique sense of history

Abstract :

Jotirao Phule was a pioneering social activist and anti-caste thinker in 19th century Western India. His work for the emancipation of socially and economically deprived sections of the society was instrumental in germinating the seeds of a subaltern consciousness among the masses. At the same time, along with his actual work for the downtrodden which been well documented, the idea of his significance as an intellectual historian of his period is yet in its embryonic stage. This paper attempts to see Phule as a visionary who had a perceptive understanding of everyday history and dealt with even with the most complex philosophical issues of modernity, justice and freedom. In a thematic layout, we come across Phule's lesser known side of sagacity, the craft of polemic and even humour with his razor sharp observations of the quotidian. In today's times where right-wing authoritarian tendencies are in the ascendancy, Phule's uninhibited drive for breaking social barriers along with inculcating a historically informed mind of knowledge formations remains pertinent.

At a time when umpteen atrocities are carried out against the downtrodden sections of our society with brazen impunity, Jotirao Phule's philosophy of deep compassion and solidarity remains of extreme significance. This largely forgotten hero can be rightly termed as the ideological-political founder of anti-caste movement in India. His tireless crusade against the pernicious stranglehold of Brahminism over the lives of the Shudraatishudra continues to have a profound relevance in our complex modern lives. By not simply reading him as a historical figure just for the sake of the past, a concerted effort should be made to revive his egalitarian ideals of self-respect, dignity and most importantly equality in our polarised society.

Phule uses history as a metaphor for liberation and human emancipation. As an imaginative polemic, his primary focus was on doing history, an act that saw him confront the history of upper caste dominance as the only narrative that was meaningful. Interestingly, the polemicist in him got the better of a violent crusader as he sought to rationalize Hindu myths. This, not only to mock and deride elite religious stories but also subsequently to mobilize masses by bringing out fallacies in the same based on pure, accessible logic. A counter-narrative was deemed essential as for galvanizing the conscience of peasant cosmology, a recourse to polemical story-telling was crucial. In this sense, he offered remarkable clarity on the spatial and temporal aspects of his experiential history. (Phule's familial occupation of being florists must have certainly given them a spatial insight into the privileges of caste societies.)For instance, this can even be seen with how he incorporates local folk deities like Khandoba and Mhasoba in his everyday political pantheon along with seamlessly traversing to the Pre- Aryan period arguing for a more rich and sophisticated 'Golden Age' as compared to the Aryan period. This was an exercise in unmasking the pretensions of Brahminical divinity and highlighting the dissonance between elite culture and the rustic, earthy peasant life.

It can be said that Phule, with his emphasis on Satyashodh (Truth-seeking) used it to full effect as the foundational basis in his book called *Sarvajanik Satya Dharma Pustak*. Dharma over here alludes to two important principles. Firstly, with his appreciation for the knowledge imparted by Protestant missionaries, his Satya Dharma was more concerned with a personal, individual centric quest for rational inquiry. As this quest had to fulfil a dual purpose of truth seeking at the personal level and also work as a sharp critique of material, systemic oppression of the Brahmin induced economic hegemony, it perceptibly moved away from the inclusive

yet vague abstractions of Bhakti philosophy. Bhakti is basically, “meant to be against the dichotomous view that upheld duality of existence (debating sterilized abstractions) and those practising mindless rituals.” (Lele, 1980) However, this liberating path also possesses the undercurrents of a Brahmanical spiritual superiority which could have been proven detrimental to Phule’s larger tussle against social hierarchical gradations. Worldly matters and its confrontation through modest tools coming from everyday experiences acted as the lynchpin for the Satyashodh Dharma.

Along with the importance of highlighting its vitality for the Truth seeking movement in general, it also becomes significant in distancing itself, at least theoretically from the then dominating philosophy of *Maharashtra Dharma*. It was popularised especially by M G Ranade in his book *Rise of Maratha Power*, Maharashtra Dharma. Unlike Phule who believed in the merits of the British missionaries and even the British rule for social reform in particular, *Maharashtra Dharma* as espoused by Pandit Ramdas, the spiritual and political guru of the Maratha warrior Shivaji, thrived on the principle of how religion is in constant threat if the country is ruled by other religions. (Gokhale-Turner). These become the principle reasons why *Satyashodh Dharma* was fundamentally antipathetic to *Maharashtra Dharma*. Rather, its currency of providing an alternative corpus of socio-political and moral principles dependent on its shared intimacy of its critique of *Maharashtra Dharma*. With the ambiguous togetherness of Brahmins and Kshatriyas valorising spiritual intellect and physical prowess respectively, Maharashtra Dharma’s core beliefs had to be negated. This he did through various means of storytelling.

In his well-documented story of the Baliraja, his connection with the everyday life can be seen in the way Asura, otherwise a demon king, is exalted to a position of utmost reverence. The theological parallels with Christianity are striking as he is equated with Christ himself, calling him the 'Bali of the West'. His meticulously constructed history was also informed largely by the social milieu of his childhood days, a milieu which had a substantial Muslim population. His two principal ideological pillars of rationality and equality were realised by him in this community which can also be seen by a poem he wrote on Prophet Muhammad , eulogising his message of brotherhood between all human beings. It would be intellectually reductive to consign Phule only in the academic realm of social history. Even if he fails to provide historically accurate documentation of past events (as was the case with him pointing out the reasons for the Aryan invasion to begin with), he does make use of certain key facets associated with the pedagogy of the discipline of history like critical thinking. In this way, to have him as an influential presence in the world of historiography opens our horizons to the minds of those people who were ridiculed for being too preoccupied with their daily plight and sufferings and thereby not having or caring to have any sense of history. One of the long lasting legacies of Phule's thoughts is his systematic deconstruction and reconstruction of history. He managed to convincingly put forward an alternative history through the lens of the *Dalit- Bahujan* community in general. For instance, by giving a systematic symbiotic and historically materialist reasoning for the emergence of caste, he was one of the first ideologues to dismiss the then hitherto dominant notion of it being a social institution that has existed since time immemorial.

Phule was a multidimensional personality who had a radical, progressive take on practically all the social elements of our life. As his biographer Rosalind O' Hanlon would put it - we can analyse his philosophy through various vantage points, namely - as a Dalit activist, a Maratha patriot, a militant feminist, a union organiser or even as a proto communist. (Hanlon, 2012) Phule, in more cases than one, was remarkably prescient in his thoughts about social issues.

Almost a century before Kimberley Crenshaw coined the term 'intersectionality', Phule had seen the dynamics between caste, class, patriarchy and authoritarian rule which divides the society into two opposing camps. For him, the onslaught of majoritarian domination was winning the battle because of their ascriptive social hierarchy whereas the lower castes were deprived of the same along with a gross lack of education which had been historically prohibited for them. In this context, Phule has been a pioneering social reformer and a political ideologue who worked for the emancipation of all who were at the receiving end of this subjugation.

Like Gandhi, Phule championed the art of communicative deliberation, a dialogic form of engagement which is most emphatically brought out by his trenchant critique of Brahminism in his text *Gulamgiri*. Brahminism, as V.Geetha argues in her essay *Brahminism and its Anxieties of History*, need to be understood as an ideology that reflects a murky consciousness, a conspiracy of deceit, informed by hegemonic self-representations and its relationship to material context. (Geetha, 2015) By situating it in the materiality of the then existing social context, Phule seeks an amicable assimilation of the abstractness of his polemical language and the worldliness of the masses that he unflaggingly attempts to retrieve from oblivion. One important way by which he formulates this is by his unwavering conviction in the emancipatory role of education. By using Marxist terminology, it has been argued that Caste in this particular context, belongs both to the Base and Superstructure in the peculiar Indian case. (G.P.Deshpande, 2012). This argument can be stretched further by connecting it to the role education plays in Phule's social and political thought. The power of knowledge making at the production level (Base) and the kind of hegemonic influence it can have in the ideological sense (Superstructure) was perceptibly understood by him.

As he himself prophesied, " Without education, wisdom was lost ; without morals, development was lost; without development, wealth was lost and without wealth, the shudras were ruined. " Anticipating John Dewey in his *Moral Principles in Education* nearly two decades ago, Phule internalised the idea of education as primarily that of a public business and only secondarily as a specialised vocation. (Dewey, 1909) Education, in a hyper active manner was engagement in social life and not merely preparing for the exigencies of social life. He strongly believed this was made possible with the new nomadism of education under Colonialism, providing new tangible avenues of realizing a genuine autonomous time and space for living for the masses. Gail Omvedt sums up the role of education in his philosophy by saying how , " Education and not any idea of nation or territory, was his swadeshi or patriotism. " (Omvedt, 1971)

The usage of the term 'masses' and its invariable characterisation of shudra-atishudra was deliberate and strategic. One key element of this 'masses' was women and their issue of emancipation. This gets reflected in how he later went on to address this group as *Stree Shudra tishudra*. The centrality of the women question gets reflected in his thought most evocatively in his *Satya Dharma Pustak* where the underlying political message is of *Ekandar Stree Purush*. (All Women and Men together). It can be argued that he makes a clear distinction between 'society' and 'cultural system' where the former stands for equalitarianism and the latter as a moral perversion of reason and rationality. With his firm belief in the practicality of the power of a 'rational insult', deployed through various means, it becomes a pertinent tool in the hands of the masses to attack the naturalization of this cultural system and being Hindu or in a latter version of it as being an 'Indian'. (Chaudhary, 2017) He envisioned the limitations of critical enquiry if it has to be framed in the rubric of one overarching idea of a society. (akin to the compulsions and limitations of an institutionalised democracy in the post-colonial world.)

A social provocateur at heart, he distanced himself from the ambiguous language of an all-encompassing reformist world epitomised later by the Congress and found merit in the 'social revolution' which was more inward-looking; aware of the fallacies of an imagined unity as espoused by the liberal elite class. This dovetails well with the ambiguity of the language of Bhakti as was mentioned earlier. Phule's involvement was in a sense a unique religious experimentation of retaining the framework of religion and jettisoning faith which claimed superior spirituality. However, this subversive messaging got later submerged within the broader umbrella of anti-colonial nationalism. This, so much so that his Truth-Seeking society virtually became a non-entity in urban areas of Western India which was once its stronghold. Phule's persuasion for critiquing the inherent vices of Brahmanical religious worldviews got substituted by a bureaucratic style critique limited only for political institutions. In a way, especially starting with his death in 1890, his repertoire of the history of ideas got dissipated in the tussle for political power between the Brahmins and Kshatriyas. The Non-Brahmin movement members, who got swamped and absorbed by the rising idea of Kshatriyahood (manliness), were equally complicit in blunting the original radical ideas of Phule. Consider the following example to grasp this originality which was conspicuous by its absence in the latter stages of the Non Brahmin movement. (His iconoclasm emerged from the quotidian and intriguingly found it significant to positively reflect even upon the scatological practices, to underscore the rootedness of their lifestyle.) This particular vivid depiction can be seen from the following lines from *Shetkaryacha Asud* (The Cultivator's Whipcord) :

At some other place a patch of white ash where a child's turd has been cleaned up. Several corners of the house are red and dark from tobacco spit. In one corner sits a large grinder, to be worked by three or four women, in another there is a large pestle and mortar, and near the door, under the broom, all the dirt pushed there after sweeping the floor....on top, a rag which was used to clean a baby's arse.

One of Phule's central ideas in his social movements was to construct a robust regional identity among the low castes of Maharashtra. The idea being that along with the realization of individual freedom, one should make sure that it concomitantly strengthens your entire community without the traits of Brahminism. For Phule, there is a difference between Brahminism and Brahmins as he feels that the former is what needs to be collectively resisted. He unravels this domination with a poignant rationale that focuses on the basis of power being knowledge, or a hegemonic control over education in a broader sense. This was exactly what Max Weber had to say when he states that the Brahminic priestly power is based on knowledge. Phule, along with being a radical ideologue is also a classic polemicist who knows how to deftly deal with the reactionary elements of his society. Without falling in the trap of ad hominem attacks, he moves one step further by showcasing his communicative skills to mobilize the low castes. He manages to bring a cohesion to his polemic by envisioning the society into a 'dichotomous conception of Hindu social structure' (G.P.Deshpande, 2009). This framing of the two Varna or Dvaivarnic structure instead of the classical four Varna system allows him to sharpen his attack specifically on Brahminism. This bipolarity is similarly used for incorporating other issues, most notably for locating the class conflict struggle along with caste. In this way, generating solidarity among an otherwise disparate group of people is one of his greatest achievements.

Being fully mindful of the mass illiteracy of his society, Phule took a positive recourse to symbols and metaphors through widespread usage of it in popular plays, dramas, prose and poetry to reach as many people as was possible. As Braj Ranjan Mani would say, "Most

ingenious was his attempt to link the subversive reading of the past with symbols and stories from the contemporary local milieu". (Mani, 2015) Symbolism over here need not be religious all the time as the more stringent method was to make use of everyday tools or objects, having resonance that transcended all types of societal fissures. What 'salt' was for Gandhi, 'water' was for Phule, most emphatically seen by his act of opening the well in the compound of his house to all the untouchables. A normal tendency in the present day context is to ridicule these 'ignorant' masses.

In this case, he urges people to respect their overall intellect and interact with their production based communicative language. Staying true to his egalitarian virtue of equality, he can be called a master when it comes to reconciliation of virtually intractable issues. He used to provide practical, logical solutions to the issues between employers-employee, rural- urban, local-central, Brahminical patriarchy - feminism and most importantly between community and nation. His use of hermeneutics, the interplay of modernity in 'inner' cultural lives and a peculiar historiography play a crucial role in unlocking the conundrums of this vexed conjunction of community and nation.

One of these conjunctions came to fruition from the role religion played in Phule's philosophy. He was more concerned with the theological, abstract values and an inclusive ethos that would sustain it than with genuflecting to the virtues of a theological character. In a way, his religious philosophy is closer to the Deism school of thought which does believe in a God who created the universe but does not believe in his intervention directly with the created world. At the same time, there is a significant exception to this which gets clear in the way he underscores his support for Muslim rulers, who by his polemical rationalising, were sent by the Providence to resist Brahmin hegemony. He also invokes parallels in the wider global context by supporting the act of Marcus Brutus killing the mighty Julius Caesar, where the latter was identified as a destroyer of democracy. One important way by which he imagines both the regional and the Western examples as part of one universal narrative is by situating them under the common category created by one single Creator or Nimata or Nirmic. In this context, the Deist influence is particularly significant.

A universe of miracles and revelation is jettisoned for a firm belief in the power of reason and observation. Enlightenment was the base of his Deist philosophy. This can be observed most palpably in the way his everyday, colloquial language was shaped by the ordinary struggles and hardships. In this worldview, dominated by the ethos of physical labour, there was no place for 'revealed truth' detached from the material moorings of society. This is a perceptive distancing from the quintessential idea of religion suffused with rituals and practices. Staying true to his modern way of living, the focus was more on how to resolve the present day economic and social predicaments than with an extensive drive of ruminating on the metaphysical. His influence of Thomas Paine's writings is discernible as Paine had an enormous impact on workers, leading class-conflict struggle in his own social context. In this way , the Class angle in Phule's Deist thought gets juxtaposed with Caste as it made its appearance in India. (Bagade, 2009)

Taking a cue from this, it was deemed essential to purge certain terms from his everyday vocabulary. He acutely problematises the terms 'Maratha', 'Hindu', 'Maratha-Kunbi' and 'Maratha Traditions' among others. His refusal to use Maratha and Hindu also in a way signifies the extent to which Brahminical hegemony has interspersed in the collective non- Brahmin psyche. The radical nature also reflected in his vexed relationship with his relatives and his own wider Mali community as he systematically detached from associating himself with a

romanticization of communitarian, religious values. His public image was no different than what he practised in his private life, unlike certain reformist Brahmins who manufactured and tried to sustain a false binary of a progressive public and a traditional private.

His position on religion and its significance for an ethical life seems to mirror the thoughts of Ambedkar by the way he saw it as a moral core of a society. At the same time, the two differ on the issue of conversion in a subtle yet substantive manner. Ambedkar believed in emancipation to be possible only with a conversion to other religion whereas Phule, agreeing with the contradictions within Hinduism, feels the need to fight from within the religion itself. Given the existing social churning, he is more enchanted with the idea of a radical self-critique that has been made possible by the incoming of both Colonialism and Christian missionary. To expose the existing crisis of his religion, this new language of critique was assumed to play a role in bringing forth the diversity of worldly experiences. In a derivative sense, non-conversion is deployed as a stinging critique of Brahmin traditionalism as it relegates its dominance to a retrograde world devoid of the utmost humanistic traits of rationality and equality.

There is certainly a need to make more sense of not just these ideas but many more like the interplay of religion and morality and the role education plays in reshaping our fluid modern identities. His thoughts ultimately contribute immensely to that one question which has remained a bone of contention between politicians, civil society activists, bureaucrats and our political society at large which is - Should social reform precede political reform? A dynamic renaissance thinker of a peculiar social ilk, his inclination toward the latter was self-evident. His legacy begets taking him out from the oblivion largely considered as inconsequential to help shape our hugely unstable and chaotic lives.

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