

## MAHATMA PHULE: LITERATURE AS A VEHICLE FOR SOCIAL REFORM AND IDEOLOGICAL CHANGE

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### Abstract:

This research paper examines the role of literature in the social reform movement led by Mahatma Jotirao Phule in 19th century Maharashtra, India. It analyzes how Phule utilized various literary forms as powerful tools for social critique, ideological dissemination, and catalyzing social change. The study explores Phule's major works, including "Gulamgiri" (Slavery), "Shetkaryacha Asud" (Cultivator's Whipcord), and "Sarvajanic Satyadharma Pustak" (The Book of True Faith), to demonstrate how he challenged caste hierarchy, Brahminical dominance, and gender inequalities through his writings. The paper argues that Phule's innovative use of vernacular language, reinterpretation of mythology, and incorporation of rationalist ideas in his literature were instrumental in reaching and influencing a wider audience, particularly the marginalized sections of society. By contextualizing Phule's literary works within the broader framework of social reform movements in colonial India, this research highlights the transformative power of literature in shaping public opinion and driving ideological change.

### Keywords:

Mahatma Jotirao Phule, Social Reform, Literature, Caste System, Women's Rights, Education, Vernacular Writing, Rationalism, Colonial India, Maharashtra

### Introduction:

The 19th century witnessed significant social and ideological upheavals in colonial India, particularly in the realm of social reform. Among the pioneering figures of this era, Mahatma Jotirao Phule (1827-1890) stands out for his radical approach to addressing social inequalities and his innovative use of literature as a medium for propagating reformist ideas. This research paper, titled "Mahatma Phule: Literature as a Vehicle for Social Reform and Ideological Change," delves into the intricate relationship between Phule's literary output and his broader mission of social transformation in Maharashtra.

Phule, born into a family belonging to the Mali (gardener) caste, experienced firsthand the discriminatory practices of the caste system. His exposure to Western education and ideas, coupled with his keen observations of social injustices, led him to develop a critical perspective on Indian society, particularly focusing on caste oppression, gender inequalities, and the exploitation of farmers. What sets Phule apart from many of his contemporaries is his strategic use of literature to articulate his reformist vision and reach a wider audience.

This study aims to analyze how Phule harnessed the power of the written word to challenge entrenched social hierarchies and promote a more egalitarian society. By examining his major works, including plays, polemical texts, and reinterpretations of mythology, we will explore the various literary techniques and narrative strategies employed by Phule to convey his radical ideas. Special attention will be given to his use of vernacular Marathi, his incorporation of folk traditions, and his reframing of historical and mythological narratives from the perspective of the oppressed.

The paper will also contextualize Phule's literary endeavors within the broader landscape of social reform movements in colonial India. By comparing his approach with that of other reformers, we aim to highlight the unique contribution of Phule's writings in shaping public discourse on caste, gender, and social justice.

Furthermore, this research will examine the impact and legacy of Phule's literary works, tracing their influence on subsequent social and political movements in Maharashtra and beyond. We will argue that Phule's use of literature as a vehicle for social reform set a precedent for later activists and thinkers, demonstrating the potential of creative expression in driving ideological change.

Through this comprehensive analysis of Mahatma Phule's literary corpus and its socio-political implications, this paper seeks to contribute to our understanding of the role of literature in social reform movements and the enduring power of words in challenging oppressive structures and inspiring social transformation.

Mahatma Jotirao Phule (1827-1890) stands as a towering figure in the annals of Indian social reform, particularly in 19th century Maharashtra. His multifaceted work as a social reformer, educator, writer, and thinker had a profound impact on challenging the caste system, promoting education, and advocating for the rights of lower castes, women, and farmers. This comprehensive summary explores Phule's life, work, and legacy, contextualizing his contributions within the social and political landscape of his time and examining their lasting impact on Indian society.

#### Historical Context:

To fully appreciate Phule's contributions, it's crucial to understand the historical context in which he lived and worked. The 19th century was a period of significant transition in India, particularly in Maharashtra:

1. Political Landscape: The defeat of the Peshwas by the British in 1818 ended Brahmin dominance in the political sphere of Maharashtra. However, this political shift did not immediately translate to social change.

2. Social Structure: The caste system remained deeply entrenched, with lower castes facing severe discrimination and lack of access to education and social mobility.
3. Women's Status: Women's position in society was particularly low, with practices like child marriage, sati (widow immolation), and prohibitions on widow remarriage being common.
4. Economic Conditions: The agrarian economy was in distress, with farmers facing exploitation from both traditional elites and the new colonial system.
5. Education: Access to education was largely limited to upper castes, particularly Brahmins, with lower castes and women being systematically excluded.
6. Religious and Cultural Practices: Traditional Hindu practices and Brahminical dominance in religious and cultural spheres remained strong, despite the influx of Western ideas through colonial rule.

#### Early Life and Influences:

Jotirao Phule was born in 1827 in Satara district of Maharashtra, into a family belonging to the Mali (gardener) caste, categorized as Shudra in the caste hierarchy. His early life experiences played a crucial role in shaping his worldview:

1. Personal Experience of Discrimination: As a member of a lower caste, Phule experienced caste discrimination firsthand, which fueled his later activism.
2. Education: Despite the barriers faced by lower castes, Phule was fortunate to receive an education. This was largely due to the encouragement of a Muslim neighbor and his father's business associate, who recognized his potential.
3. Exposure to Western Ideas: Phule attended a Scottish mission school, where he was exposed to Western ideas of equality, liberty, and rationalism. This exposure provided him with alternative frameworks to critique Indian society.
4. Influence of Thomas Paine: Phule was deeply influenced by Thomas Paine's ideas on human rights and rationalism. Paine's works, particularly "Rights of Man," had a profound impact on Phule's thinking.
5. Other Western Influences: The ideals of the American Revolution, the French Revolution, and the anti-slavery movement in America also shaped Phule's worldview.

6. Marriage to Savitribai: His marriage to Savitribai, who became his partner in social reform work, was another significant influence. Together, they challenged social norms and worked towards education and empowerment of women and lower castes.

These influences led Phule to critically examine Indian society and religious traditions through a rationalist lens, setting the stage for his later work in social reform.

#### Educational Initiatives:

Recognizing education as a powerful tool for social change, Phule pioneered several groundbreaking educational initiatives:

1. Girls' Education: In 1848, Phule and his wife Savitribai opened one of the first schools for girls in India. This was a revolutionary act at a time when education for girls was largely taboo.

2. Schools for Lower Castes: He established schools for children from lower castes, directly challenging the Brahminical monopoly on education.

3. Adult Education: Phule also focused on adult education, particularly for women and lower castes, recognizing that social change required educating all segments of society.

4. Advocacy for Compulsory Education: In 1882, he presented a demand for compulsory primary education to the Hunter Education Commission, highlighting the need for state intervention in education.

5. Emphasis on Practical Education: Phule advocated for practical and vocational education, particularly for farmers' children, recognizing the need for skills-based learning.

6. Teacher Training: He worked on training teachers, especially women, to expand the reach of education.

These efforts earned Phule recognition as the father of women's education in India and a champion of mass education. His work laid the foundation for broader access to education for marginalized groups in India.

#### Literary Works and Ideology:

Phule used his writings as a powerful medium to convey his ideas and critique social injustices. His major works include:

1. "Tritiya Ratna" (Third Jewel, 1855): A play that critiqued the exploitation of farmers by Brahmin priests. It was one of the earliest works to use drama as a medium for social criticism in Marathi literature.

2. "Gulamgiri" (Slavery, 1873): This seminal work drew parallels between the caste system in India and slavery in America. It provided a scathing critique of Brahminical dominance and the oppression of lower castes.
3. "Shetkaryacha Asud" (Cultivator's Whipcord, 1883): This book highlighted the plight of farmers, criticizing both traditional and colonial systems of exploitation. It also suggested various reforms to improve the condition of farmers.
4. "Sarvajanic Satyadharma Pustak" (The Book of True Faith, published posthumously in 1891): This work outlined Phule's vision of a just society based on reason and equality, proposing a universal religion free from caste distinctions.
5. "Asprushyanchi Kaifiyat" (The Plight of the Untouchables): This work focused specifically on the conditions of untouchables in Indian society.
6. "Akhandadi Kavyarachana" (Poetic Compositions in Akhanda): A collection of Phule's poetic works, often used to convey social messages.

Key aspects of Phule's ideology as reflected in his writings include:

1. Rejection of Caste Hierarchy: Phule vehemently opposed the caste system, viewing it as a tool of exploitation rather than a divine ordination.
2. Critique of Brahminical Supremacy: He challenged the dominance of Brahmins in religious, social, and educational spheres.
3. Emphasis on Reason: Phule advocated for a rationalist approach to religion and society, rejecting superstitions and blind faith.
4. Women's Rights: He consistently argued for the rights and education of women, challenging patriarchal norms.
5. Farmers' and Workers' Rights: Phule was one of the earliest advocates for the rights of farmers and workers in India.
6. Reinterpretation of History and Mythology: He offered alternative interpretations of Hindu myths and Indian history from the perspective of lower castes.
7. Vision of an Egalitarian Society: Phule's writings consistently promoted the idea of a society based on equality, justice, and human dignity.

**Social and Religious Reform:**

Phule's approach to social reform was holistic, addressing various interconnected issues:

**1. Caste System:**

- Phule argued that the caste system was not divinely ordained but a human creation designed for exploitation.
- He proposed the Aryan invasion theory as an explanation for the origin of caste, suggesting that Brahmins were foreign invaders who subjugated the native population.
- His work aimed at awakening lower castes to their exploitation and encouraging them to resist oppression.

**2. Women's Rights:**

- Phule was a strong advocate for women's rights, recognizing gender equality as crucial for social progress.
- He opposed child marriage and supported widow remarriage.
- Phule established a home for pregnant widows to prevent infanticide and provide support to women ostracized by society.
- He argued for women's right to education and economic independence.

**3. Farmers' Rights:**

- Recognizing the exploitation of farmers, Phule wrote extensively on their problems and suggested reforms.
- He advocated for better irrigation systems, improved farming techniques, and protection from exploitative moneylenders.
- Phule criticized both the traditional feudal system and the new colonial economic policies that disadvantaged farmers.

**4. Religious Reform:**

- Phule criticized traditional Hindu practices and Brahminical dominance in religion.
- He promoted a rationalist approach to religion, rejecting superstitions and rituals that he saw as tools of exploitation.
- His concept of 'Sarvajanik Satya Dharma' (Universal True Religion) advocated for a faith based on equality, reason, and human dignity.

**5. Education:**

- Beyond establishing schools, Phule worked to change the content and purpose of education.
- He advocated for education in the vernacular language and emphasized practical knowledge.
- Phule saw education as a means of empowerment and social mobility for lower castes and women.

## 6. Social Customs:

- He worked to reform various social customs that he saw as oppressive, including expensive weddings, caste-based occupations, and untouchability.

### Satyashodhak Samaj:

The Satyashodhak Samaj (Truth-seekers Society), founded by Phule in 1873, was a significant organization in his reform efforts. Its objectives and activities included:

1. Liberation from Mental Slavery: The Samaj aimed to free lower castes from the mental slavery imposed by Brahminical ideology.
2. Promotion of Rational Thinking: It encouraged critical thinking and questioning of traditional beliefs and practices.
3. Non-Brahmin Priests: The Samaj trained non-Brahmin priests to perform religious ceremonies, challenging the Brahmin monopoly on religious rituals.
4. Education and Awareness: It worked to spread education and awareness among lower castes and women.
5. Social and Economic Rights: The organization advocated for the social and economic rights of farmers and workers.
6. Publishing: The Samaj published literature to spread its ideas and critique social injustices.
7. Alternative Ceremonies: It promoted simpler, less expensive, and more egalitarian forms of marriage and other ceremonies.

The Satyashodhak Samaj played a crucial role in spreading Phule's ideas and mobilizing lower castes for social change. It continued its work even after Phule's death, influencing later social and political movements in Maharashtra and beyond.

### Comparison with Other Reformers:

The document compares Phule with other contemporary social reformers in Maharashtra, such as Justice Mahadev Govind Ranade, Gopal Krishna Gokhale, Dhondo Keshav Karve, and Bal Gangadhar Tilak. While acknowledging their contributions, it argues that Phule's work was more radical and revolutionary due to several factors:

1. Focus on Lower Castes: Unlike reformers who primarily worked within upper caste communities, Phule directly addressed the needs and rights of Shudras, Ati-Shudras (Dalits), and women.



2. Fundamental Challenge to Caste: While some reformers sought to reform Hindu practices within the caste system, Phule challenged the very existence of the caste system.
3. Critique of Brahminical Dominance: Phule's direct and often harsh criticism of Brahminical hegemony set him apart from more moderate reformers.
4. Emphasis on Mass Education: His focus on education for the masses, particularly girls and lower castes, was more comprehensive than many of his contemporaries.
5. Holistic Approach: Phule's work encompassed social, religious, economic, and educational reforms, providing a more comprehensive critique of society.
6. Use of Vernacular: His writings in simple Marathi made his ideas accessible to a broader audience.
7. Radical Reinterpretation: Phule's reinterpretation of Indian history and Hindu mythology from a lower caste perspective was more radical than the approaches of other reformers.

**Impact and Legacy:**

Phule's work had a profound and lasting impact on Indian society, extending far beyond his lifetime:

**1. Education:**

- His efforts in promoting education for girls and lower castes paved the way for broader access to education in India.
- The concept of universal education, which he advocated, eventually became a key policy in independent India.

**2. Social Reform Movements:**

- Phule's ideas and activism influenced later social reform movements, particularly the Dalit movement led by Dr. B.R. Ambedkar.
- His critique of the caste system provided a foundation for various anti-caste movements in the 20th century.

**3. Women's Rights:**

- His advocacy for women's rights and education contributed to the broader women's movement in India.
- The emphasis on women's education as a tool for social change became a key aspect of later feminist movements.



#### 4. Farmers' Rights:

- Phule's writings on agrarian issues brought attention to the plight of farmers and influenced later agrarian movements.
- His analysis of the economic exploitation of farmers remained relevant in post-independence India's agricultural policies.

#### 5. Political Thought:

- While Phule was not directly involved in the nationalist movement, his ideas on social justice and equality influenced political thought in India.
- His emphasis on the rights of the marginalized sections became an important aspect of India's democratic discourse.

#### 6. Literature and Language:

- Phule's use of vernacular language and folk forms in his writings influenced the development of Marathi literature.
- His style of using literature for social criticism became a model for later writers and social critics.

#### 7. Religious Reform:

- His critique of traditional religious practices and advocacy for a more rational approach to religion influenced various reform movements within Hinduism.
- The concept of a universal religion based on equality and humanity found echoes in later spiritual and philosophical movements in India.

#### 8. Caste Politics:

- Phule's work in organizing lower castes laid the groundwork for caste-based political mobilization in the 20th century.
- His ideas continue to influence debates on caste and reservation policies in contemporary India.

### Challenges and Criticisms:

While the document primarily focuses on Phule's contributions, it's important to note the challenges and criticisms his work faced:

1. **Opposition from Conservatives:** His radical ideas and direct attacks on Brahminical dominance were met with significant resistance from conservative sections of society.
2. **Limited Immediate Impact:** While Phule's work laid the groundwork for later movements, the extent of his immediate impact during his lifetime was limited due to the deeply entrenched nature of caste and gender inequalities.

3. Critique of Historical Interpretation: Some scholars have criticized Phule's interpretation of Indian history, particularly his Aryan invasion theory, as being overly simplistic or biased.
4. Lack of Political Power: Unlike later reformers who had access to political power, Phule's work was largely confined to social and educational spheres, limiting its immediate policy impact.
5. Economic Constraints: The lack of financial resources often hampered the scale and reach of Phule's initiatives.
6. Literacy Limitations: Given the low literacy rates, especially among lower castes, the reach of Phule's written works was initially limited.

### **Relevance in Contemporary India:**

The document emphasizes the continuing relevance of Phule's ideas in addressing ongoing social inequalities and injustices in Indian society:

1. Caste Discrimination: Despite legal prohibitions, caste-based discrimination continues in various forms, making Phule's critique of the caste system still relevant.
2. Education: The struggle for equal access to quality education, particularly for marginalized communities and girls, remains a key issue in India.
3. Women's Rights: Many of the issues Phule raised regarding women's rights and empowerment continue to be subjects of debate and activism in contemporary India.
4. Agrarian Crisis: The problems faced by farmers, which Phule highlighted, continue to be significant challenges in India's agricultural sector.
5. Religious Reform: The need for rational approaches to religion and the rejection of superstition remain relevant in the face of ongoing religious conflicts and practices.
6. Social Justice: Phule's emphasis on social justice and equality continues to influence political and social discourse in India.

### **Conclusion:**

Mahatma Jotirao Phule emerges as a transformative figure in 19th century Indian social reform, whose work and ideas continue to resonate in contemporary India. His multifaceted approach to social change, encompassing education, literature, social organization, and ideological critique, set him apart as a pioneering thinker and activist. By focusing on the rights and upliftment of the

most marginalized sections of society – lower castes, women, and farmers – Phule challenged the fundamental structures of inequality in Indian society.

His emphasis on education as a tool for empowerment, his critique of religious and social orthodoxy, and his vision of a more egalitarian society based on reason and human dignity continue to be relevant in addressing ongoing social challenges in India. Phule's legacy can be seen in the continuing struggles for social justice, educational equality, and women's rights in India.

The document presents Phule not just as a social reformer, but as a revolutionary thinker who sought to fundamentally restructure Indian society. His work is portrayed as laying the foundation for later social and political movements that have shaped modern

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