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इतिहासाचार्य वि. का. राजवाडे संशोधन मंडळ, धुळे  
या संस्थेचे त्रैमासिक  
**॥ संशोधक ॥**

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महाराष्ट्र राज्य साहित्य आणि संस्कृती मंडळाने या नियतकालिकेच्या प्रकाशनार्थ अनुदान दिले आहे. या नियतकालिकेतील लेखकांच्या विचारांशी मंडळ व शासन सहमत असेलच असे नाही.



६१	डॉ. बाबासाहेब आंबेडकर यांची पत्रकारिता : संदर्भ बहिष्कृत भारतमधील अग्रलेख - - प्रा.सचिन कांबळे, पुणे -----	२५१
६२	डॉ.बाबासाहेब आंबेडकर यांचे शैक्षणिक विचार आणि भटक्या विमुक्त जाती जमाती - प्रा.सचिन साळवे, लोणी-काळभोर, जि.पुणे. -----	२५७
६३	साहित्यिक जोतीराव फुले - प्रा.संजय साठे, टेंभुर्णी, ता.माढा, जि.सोलापूर -----	२६२
६४	डॉ.बाबासाहेब आंबेडकर यांचे पाकिस्तान संबंधीचे विचार - प्रा.संतोष कारभारी, पुणे -----	२६६
६५	डॉ. बाबासाहेब आंबेडकर यांचे जातिव्यवस्थेच्या उगमासंबंधीचे विचार - प्रा.संतोष मरकवाड, एल.बी.पी.एम. कॉलेज, सोलापूर. -----	२७०
६६	समाजसुधारक महात्मा फुले - प्रा.सरला चव्हाण, करमाळा, जि.सोलापूर -----	२७५
६७	सामाजिक विषमता व काळाराम मंदिर सत्याग्रह - प्रा.शंकर आवारे, नाशिक -----	२८२
६८	महात्मा फुलेंचे शेती विषयक विचार - प्रा.बप्पासाहेब शेजूळ, कुर्डुवाडी, जि.सोलापूर -----	२८६
६९	डॉ.बाबासाहेब आंबेडकर यांचे स्त्रीसबलीकरणातील योगदान - डॉ.शिल्पा शेटे, शिरूर, पुणे ---	२८८
७०	महात्मा जोतिबा फुले यांनी हंटर शिक्षण आयोगाला सादर केलेले निवेदन-एक अभ्यास - डॉ.शिवाजी वाघमोडे, जेऊर, जि.सोलापूर -----	२९२
७१	डॉ. बाबासाहेब आंबेडकरांचे आर्थिक विचार : चलन, शेती, कामगार, उद्योगधंदे - प्रा.सुभाष शिंदे, वाघोली, जि.पुणे. -----	२९८
७२	महात्मा फुले यांचे शेतकरी प्रश्नाविषयी विचार - प्रा.सुनिल राजपूत, अणदूर, ता.तुळजापूर, जि.उस्मानाबाद -----	३०२
७३	बहिष्कृत हितकारिणी सभा आणि डॉ. बाबासाहेब आंबेडकर - प्रा.सुप्रिया पवार, श्रीगोंदा ----	३०६
७४	डॉ.बाबासाहेब आंबेडकरांचे स्त्री विषयक विचार - प्रा.डॉ.महादेव थोरात, कुर्डुवाडी -----	३११
७५	महात्मा फुलेंच्या शिक्षण विषयक विचारांचे महत्त्व - प्रा.डॉ.महादेव थोरात, कुर्डुवाडी. -----	३१३
७६	डॉ. बाबासाहेब आंबेडकरांचे शैक्षणिक कार्य - डॉ.कल्याण वटाणे, पंढरपूर -----	३१५
७७	डॉ. बाबासाहेब आंबेडकर यांच्या राजकीय विचारांचा अभ्यास - डॉ.यशवंत साळुंके, दिंडोरी, जि.नाशिक. -----	३१७
७८	ज्ञानयोगी डॉ.बाबासाहेब आंबेडकर - प्रा.धनंजय मोगले, सोलापूर -----	३२१
७९	डॉ. बाबासाहेब आंबेडकरांचे धर्मपरिवर्तन : एक ऐतिहासिक अवलोकन- प्रा.सुमन केंद्रे, पंढरपूर	३२५
८०	डॉ.बाबासाहेब आंबेडकर यांचा समताधिष्ठित समाजनिर्मितीचा लढा - प्रा.समाधान लोंढे, बारशी, जि.सोलापूर. -----	३२८
८१	डॉ. बाबासाहेब आंबेडकरांना अभिप्रेत असलेली लोकशाही आणि सद्यस्थिती - डॉ.शारदा कदम, वसमत, जि.हिंगोली. -----	३३१
८२	डॉ. बाबासाहेब आंबेडकर यांचे कृषी सुधारणावादी विचार: सद्यस्थितीची गरज - १. डॉ. दत्तात्रय निवृत्तीराव घोडके, पुणे २. प्रा.चारुता प्रताप वगरे, कोल्हापूर -----	३३३
८४	Mahatma Phule: A Charismatic Writer of the Masses of Modern India - Dr.Anand Hipparkar, Karjat, Dist. Ahmednagar -----	३३७
८४	Ambedkar and Dalit Women: The Long-Lasting Legacy of His Discourse on Women Empowerment - Dr.Anisha Shrivastava, Gaziabad, UP -----	३४२





## Mahatma Phule: A Charismatic Writer of the Masses of Modern India

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### Abstract :

Mahatma Jyotirao Phule (1827-1890) began social change in nineteenth century India especially in Maharashtra through his writings. His period was an indispensable epoch which has been recorded as a period of social condemnation and change that emphasized patriotism, caste, and gender issues. All the major reformers took up the issues related to women such as female infanticide, child marriage, women education, Sati, tonsuring of widows and ban on widow remarriage, etc. Simultaneously, these reformers concentrated more on reforming the social institutions of family and marriage with special emphasis on the position and rights of women. Jyotirao Phule started working on the problem of gender and caste. He stood against the unjust caste-system under which millions of people had suffered for centuries. His revolt against the caste system was combined with social and religious reform with equality. Being influenced by American thinker Thomas Paine's ideas of Rights of Man, he emerged as the unchanged leader of the depressed classes in Maharashtra and was recognized as a leader of downtrodden class across India.

### Introduction :

Jyotirao Govindrao Phule needs no introduction to the readers today as he occupies a unique position among the social reformers of Maharashtra in the nineteenth century. While other reformers concentrated more on reforming the social institutions of family and marriage with special emphasis on the status and rights of women, Jyotirao Phule revolted against the unjust caste system under which millions of people had suffered for centuries and developed a critique of Indian social order and Hinduism. During this period, a number of social and political thinkers started movement against such systems and methods. These thinkers aimed at

upliftment of the status of women socially, economically, educationally, and politically. Of these socio-political thinkers Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, and such other have organized movement for striving equality for Dalit, Backward Classes, and women. As such, Mahatma Phule was an earliest thinker and activist, who strongly opposed gender inequality. He was in the real sense a great thinker and finder of truth. He was severely criticized by Brahmin samaj for his noble work and was even attacked by them. However, he continued with his movement. He sacrificed his life in writing about the progress of the untouchables, peasants, and women. Mahatma Jyotirao Phule is regarded as the most important figure of social reform movement in India. He is also regarded as the father of Indian social revolution. His unrelenting efforts to eradicate social inequalities earned him the title of "Father of Indian Social Revolution".

His life, contributed to the enrichment of downtrodden masses is dealt in this paper by summarizing some of the major issues from one of his works, 'slavery.' Mahatma Jyotirao Phule wrote 16 books that contributed to the social awakening of the downtrodden masses who were subject to several atrocities of the upper castes and the British administrators of those days. In his book, Gulamgiri, for instance, Jyotirao, for the first time, strove to define the way Brahminical thoughts, institutions and castes had come to govern Hindu society for thousands of years. He thought it crucial to systematically explore the history to find out when and how Brahmins established their supremacy over the Hindu society. This story could be reconstructed from the stories related in the Srutis, Smritis and Puranas. Therefore, he proved an historical analysis of these stories and concluded that in the stories





of the ten avtaras (incarnations of God) the story of Parshuram's incarnation tells the story of the Brahmin's seizure of power. Jyotiba writings strongly state that 'to create a new social system based on freedom, equality, brotherhood, human dignity, economic justice and value devoid of exploitation, you will have to overthrow the old, unequal and exploitative social system and the values on which it is based'. Being fully aware of this as an activist, Jyotiba attacked blind faith and faith in what is given in religious books and the so-called God's words. He could not tolerate unjust social order therefore, he tore the misleading myths to pieces which were governing women, shudras and atishudras for decades. He regarded the practices like yielding to God or fate, astrology, sacredness, Godmen, and such rituals, etc. as irrational and absurd. He authored several books and pamphlets like Tiritiya Ratna (1855), Brahmananche Kasab (1869) and Powada in order to bring the unfortunate masses into the light.

The writings of Jyotirao Phule reveal him a propagator of rational thinking who gave a boost to education of Dalits and the girl children. He campaigned against untouchability and caste system and keenly encouraged women empowerment and education of women.

Jyotirao Phule was profoundly fascinated by Thomas Paine's book '**Rights of Man**' (1791) in 1848 and realized that social justice could only be achieved with liberty of women and oppressed sections of society such as Dalits of his times. He and his wife Savitribai Phule fought for the education of girl students and opened a school in 1848.

Phule, went further and along with his followers, formed Satyashodhak Samaj in 1848 which meant 'Seekers of Truth' to attain equal social and economic benefits for the lower caste community of Maharashtra. It reflected Phule's intellectual rationalism where the primary emphasis was on 'truth-seeking' by positioning the individual at the Centre. The other vital mandate of the samaj was to conduct 'religious' ceremonies without Brahman

priests and to educate the next generation under duress. He wrote on abolition of untouchability and caste system in Maharashtra. He dedicated his book Gulamgiri (slavery) to the African American movement to terminate slavery. Mahatma Phule's writing, and reading were profound. His books Shetkaryancha Asood, Sarvajanic Satyadharma and Gulamgiri are celebrated. His writings show how great a thinker and writer he was!

He read broadly on American Democracy, the French revolution and was stuck by the logical way of thinking of Thomas Paine. Phule was hugely fascinated by this book and developed a keen sense of social justice, becoming passionately critical of handicap caste system in India. Besides being a leader and organizer of the underprivileged class movement, Phule was a philosopher in his own right having written several books and articles.

Mahatma Phule was an original thinker who held a basic philosophical position. In his book, Brahmananche Kasab (1869), Phule exposed the exploitation by the Brahmin priests. In Gulamgiri (1873) he provides a historical survey of the slavery of lower castes. In 1883, he published a collection of his speeches under the title Shetkaryancha Asud (The cultivator's whip-cord) where he analyzed the way peasants were being exploited in his days. He presented his philosophical statements in Sarvajanic Satyadharma (A book of True Religion for All) published in 1891, a year after his death. His writings reveal his thoughtful criticism of social and political questions. He wrote heavily in Marathi which even the commonest can understand. Jyotirao Phule was one of the makers of modern India. He was the philosopher, leader, and organizer of the oppressed castes who always practiced what he preached. He had primarily put on his agenda the rights of untouchables and women and spent his lifetime for their freedom. He detected and theorized the most prominent issues of his time.

Phule's relevance lies in the fact that Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar was fascinated by the ideas of Jyotirao Phule and considered him a guru.





Ambedkar recognized the intellectual legacy of Phule and longed to project him on to the national scene. Ambedkar was influenced more specifically by Phule's radical, anti-caste movements, his uplifting of the conditions of peasantry and his liberation of women. Indian society is in a state of flux today - the way it was during the time of Phule (1827-1890). The issues of caste, lower condition of women, the pitiful condition of farmers are the problems that continue to plague India since colonial times. And so, continues the country's quest to break from these shackles of oppression, mental slavery and suppression.

There is a pressing need to revisit the thoughts and ideology our very own thinker like Mahatma Phule. Surely, such an endeavour will help modern generation to (re) interpret our contemporary social reality.

Phule was a revolutionary intellectual of Maharashtra. He was a great iconic soul having organizing principles that were both inclusive and contradictory. He referred *streesudraatishudra* (women, OBCs, Dalits and tribals in today's vocabulary) as one group which was conflictingly combating Brahmanical supremacy (he rarely used the word Hindu or Hinduism. He preferred Brahmanism instead).

He called it *brahmanache varchaswa* (Supremacy of the Brahmins) or *Brahmanvarchaswadi* in Marathi. Moreover, Phule was the first thinker to recognize that Brahmanism does not necessarily mean the Brahman caste but it is a sort of ideological, religious (dharmic) (super) structure that preserves and appropriates the exploitation of the common. Phule relentlessly pursued to reform the society through revolutionary ways. The resuscitating desire for societal transformation was a break from his contemporaries. Phule's contemporaries were trying to reform Hindu society by launching *Prarthana Samaj*, *Poona Sarvajanic Sabha*, *Brahmo Samaj* and *Arya Samaj* in Maharashtra and elsewhere. Thereby they remained within the holiness of the Hindu fold - a

feature of the first-generation Indian renaissance. Phule did not leave entirely this tradition, but he did not believe in the sacredness of Hindu religion either. Phule remained within Hindu realm but through his rational mind, he primarily and eloquently assaulted the two-fold ideas of dharma and caste which were the main mainstays of Brahmanical supremacy. In this respect, he is unlike his contemporaries and his books are a testimony of this.

He dispensed with this oppressive structure by fighting it completely and diluting its sacredness. He deciphered that Brahmanism obtains its legitimacy from its sacred texts and that, in turn, rely heavily on the avatar *kalpana* (imaginative incarnation). In his book titled, *Gulamgiri* (Slavery), Phule lays bare different Brahmanical Godheads. Mahatma Phule wrote *Gulamgiri* (1885) which is one of the first critiques of the caste system. This piece takes stock of its major argument and its significance. Written in Marathi, with an English preface, the text has been translated into English as *Slavery*. It is considered as one of the first treatises against the caste system. It critiques the institution of caste through a 16-part essay and four poetic compositions and is written in the form of a dialogue between *Jotiba*, and a character he calls *Dhondiba*. Its main thrust is an inversion of the racial theory of caste. What is the racial theory of caste? According to this theory, a superior, foreign race invaded this land. They became what we know as Brahmins today. The lowly, indigenous people who were conquered became the shudras. He, with such writings, attempted to provide an intellectual and ideological footing for a persistent critique of the caste system. Phule's writing does not present history in normative terms. For him, writing history was not truth-writing but a mere functional means for the rebellion, exposing and obliteration of the established truth(s) propagated by the Brahmanical supremacy.

Phule wrote *Sarvajanic Satya Dharma* (Book of the Public Religion of Truth) when the orthodox men of his time charged that the samaj could not





be called a religious body since it has no religious text (Dharmagranth) of its own. As an alternative, the emphasis of Satya Dharma was again to kick-off the Brahman from his predominant position.

Phule's idea of dharma was very plain and unequivocal. For him, it was a platform of enthusiastic egalitarianism having no room for discrimination. Further, Phule obviously saw the role of dharma and caste in the creation of relations of Indian society. Phule puts these production relations with his thorough analyses of the peasants' issues in colonial India. He is the first Indian thinker who made agriculture - its process and production - a major point for his thought process. His book *Shetkaryacha Asud* (The Cultivator's Whipcord) acquaints us with the vivid description of farmers' pathetic circumstances - their starving bellies, rag-wrapped bodies together with the continuous harassments from pawnbrokers.

Phule advised the active role of the state in agrarian strategies; the need for soil maintenance, rain harvesting and building of bunds (bandhara); usage of advanced technology for cattle breeding and specific professional education of peasants and their children, etc. In his view, it will relieve peasantry from its miserable situation. However, as a pre-industrial intellectual, the obvious inadequacy of Phule's agrarian system is that he understood peasantry as a massive sort.

Phule's intellectual legacy that sowed the initial seeds of India's social revolution remains unfulfilled even today. More than a reformer, he was an architect of ideas. By building an alternative system of ideas he attempted to decode the subtleties of our social reality. The questions that bothered Phule continue to disturb us even today perhaps with greater intensity. Therefore, it is an immediate need to connect with Phule in a way we have never done before.

Phule's writing speak for the emancipation of the downtrodden people and the struggle which he embarked at a tender age and got over only with his death on 28th November 1890. His books

exhibit the fact that he was a pure pioneer in several spheres and among his contemporaries he stands out as one who never deviated from in his mission for truth and justice. He extensively discusses the exploitation of women and underprivileged class and protection of human rights in rational humanist manner.

Phule takes an already existing discourse and inverts its moral logic. He admits Brahmins as a different race who invaded and conquered us. But he upturns its moral logic and says the invaders were, in fact, corrupt, cruel, and depraved. They were not at all Superior. To make his point clear, Mahatma Phule takes it upon himself to subvert certain Hindu myths.

Phule can be called a Modern Indian Philosopher. His writing discusses practical and social problems of inequality and oppression. One can read him as a thinker who separated himself from the metaphysical roots of Indian systems of philosophy like Yoga, Vedanta and Buddhist Philosophy to give these systems social meaning from the point of view of the ordinary person. In his view, Maya or illusion does not apply to the empirical social world. He has removed illusions from people's minds through debate. He has written books and dedicated them to common people. He instructed the public through many poetic compositions. He has inculcated in people the habit of inquiring into the authenticity and cause and effect of religious matters. He has demonstrated what is right and what is wrong with respect to a particular custom.

#### Conclusion :

The life of Jyotiba Phule, thus, becomes a new source of learning and inspiration for modern generation because it is replete with the depiction of oppressed masses of humanity, supreme courage, sincerity, and selfless sacrifice. Jyotiba worked for the masses and made them aware that education is a vehicle of social change. He revolted against the unjust caste-system and upheld the cause of education of women and lower castes. He ushered





in primary education as a tool in perceiving the work of the oppressed castes as dignified labour whom society exploited. He raised the issue of women's oppression. His thoughts on freeing women from oppression through their own efforts and autonomy make him join the company of other nineteenth century men like Mill and Engels. Phule believed that women must, through their own struggles, evolve ways of living with dignity. In this, education played noticeably a crucial role for Phule. Phule not only practically changed social mindset but also influenced Ranade, Agarkar and Ambedkar. Phule insisted on the idea that society should adopt liberal philosophy wherein orthodox customs are abolished. Phule wrote immensely about India's gender question.

He upheld the view that women have a crucial role in creation of open-minded society through the development of their rational faculties through education. Rather Phule was committed to the equal worth and freedom of all every individual. Following Engels, Phule understood women's oppression as a material problem that is linked to caste (for Engel's it is related to class). He related some aspects of women's position to the Brahmanical social order. Though he did not say so explicitly, he seemed to imply that the end of Brahmanical domination would end the exploitation of women.

For him, "Education is the power to think clearly, the power to act well in the world's work, and the power to appreciate life". In view of Mahatma Phule, knowledge matters because it can question, change and transform the individual and society. Thus, for Phule, like John Dewey education can empower and make society more democratic. It can help in reconstructing, rethinking, interpreting tradition. This aspect of Phule is extremely relevant in the paradoxical context of caste in present-day India where caste discrimination is prevalent despite constitutional provisions.

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