

## **Understanding Jotirao Phule: *Ghulamgiri* As A Critique Of Caste Hierarchy**

By

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### **Abstract**

The persona and thoughts of Jotirao Phule has influenced generations and remain relevant even for the present Indian society. His understanding of social issues and his commitment to the cause of social justice is an excellent example of how changes can be brought in the most difficult times. It is because of people like Phule that the backward communities in India began to assert their presence and the movement for social equality could be brought to forefront by leaders like Ambedkar. His contribution in making of modern Indian democracy is second to none and needs proper recognition. This piece is an attempt to understand the psychology and methodology employed by Phule in understanding Indian society and finding solutions to its most important problem of caste discrimination and the inequalities produced thereby. The piece is based on a critical engagement with one of the seminal works of Phule, *Ghulamgiri*, which remains to be his most significant written work. In this work I argue that in his rhetorical publication *Ghulamgiri*, Phule produces a critique of Indian caste system by highlighting the logical inadequacies used to justify caste hierarchy, which he looks as a product of the process of creation of 'Brahmanical Hegemony'. As a response he tries to propose a counter myth and also prepare the ground of a integral unity to develop a category that he calls 'shudratishudra' to counter the hegemony produced by the caste system. He presents a critique of the caste system present in Hindu society thereby advocating a society based on the principles of rights and equality.

**Keywords:** Phule, hegemony, rights, caste, hierarchy

## **Introduction**

Jotirao Phule (1827-1890) was one of the first to launch an integrated criticism of caste based hierarchy, patriarchal oppression and exploitation of peasants. He was born in a backward caste (Mali) family of fruit and vegetable growers in Pune. His father's services for the Peshwa family helped him get education from an early age however even that was disrupted for a small duration due to pressure from the high castes. He was educated in Scottish missionary school, where he was introduced to the ideas of Enlightenment including the lives of Martin Luther and George Washington. But he was most fascinated by the writings of Thomas Paine, the author of *Rights of Man*. He was married to Savitribai, who not only became one of his most loyal disciples, but also became an active partner in his social revolution. In 1848, he was the first to set up a school for girls from backward communities. He also started a night school for working people, and set up a shelter home for upper caste widows and illegitimate children who were victims of sexual and material oppression from their family members. His dedication and services in the field of education, later earned him a felicitation from the Department of Education in 1852. His most significant analytical work *Gulamigiri* (slavery) came out in 1873, and was heavily inspired by the practices of slavery in America, which prompted him to draw significant parallels between oppression produced by caste hierarchy and that produced from racial discrimination. He was convinced that an egalitarian society could only be created by challenging the prevalent forms of domination and exploitation. For this purpose, he set up the *Satyasodhak Samaj* (society of the seekers of truth) in 1873.

## Challenging the Brahmanical Ideology

Phule believed that in order to dismantle the system of oppression, it was important to understand how that system functioned. He insisted that education and knowledge had the true potential to create conscious beings who could act as agents for change. In his struggle against Brahmanical ideology, Phule was hugely inspired by the writings of Buddha and Kabir. Buddha's tenant of equality of all human beings was the bedrock of his philosophy. He hailed Buddha as the saviour of masses and accused the brahmans of nursing a grudge against the Buddha by absorbing his principles within Hinduism. Kabir's radical critique of Brahmanical practises and his stress on unity of God and mankind became the guiding light for critiquing dominant Hindu practises. Similarly, Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man*, as well as the French and American Revolution, which was based on individual notion of rights, inspired Phule's rejection of the inhuman subjection of one man by other that was an inherent component of caste based hierarchy.

Phule wanted to create an ideological basis for revolution against Brahmanism. He was convinced that the Brahmans' control and domination on every aspect of Hinduism was complete, and therefore, though he never uses terms like Hindu or Hinduism in his writings, it is fairly evident that he referred to Brahmanism and Brahman religion in its place. He criticized the brahmanical domination within Hinduism, as it had historically led to exclusion, oppression, and exploitation of other social groups by imposing a hierarchical structure. He was convinced that the hierarchy created by the Brahmanical system lacked rationality. In this regard, Phule questioned the theory about the divine origin of brahmanical superiority. He contended that this claim of superiority of Brahmans in the Hindu fold was based on a hegemonic construction of *chaturvarna*, which was legitimized through an instrumental

production of religious texts. Phule was therefore convinced that the Brahmins were able to establish cultural hegemony, primarily due to their control over knowledge system and the religious order. On the other hand, the toiling castes lived and worked within the political, social and ritual relationships laid down by the Brahmins, and unwittingly succumbed to their interests. Keeping these conditions in mind, Phule believed that the only panacea could be the complete rejection of the caste system.

For this purpose, Phule led a categorical attack on the beliefs and practices of the Brahmins. For example, he strongly condemned Brahmins practises such as wearing of sacred thread, and equally mocked at attempts made by people belonging to lower castes, who claimed higher social status by adopting customs and practises of high castes. Phule said that the sanskritizing tendencies led people into trap of Brahmins, and ensured the continuation of Brahmin rule by continuing divisions among lower castes. Contrarily Phule proposed a dichotomous conception of social structure represented by two groups – *Brahmins* and *Shudr-atishudra*. One of the central aims of this division was to unite the lower castes in the struggle against Brahmins, and at the same time, reject the centrality of the pollution principle, and untouchability as a practise, primarily among the lower castes.

Phule led a full blown polemical war against the Brahmins. Through his writings, Phule produced subversive tracts against Brahmins, and vehemently contested its philosophical and metaphysical formulations. This included mocking the brahmanical beliefs and practices, questioning their myths and redirecting their ideological tool in order to construct an alternative vision of culture and society, which was to be based on equity and reason. In 1873, Phule published *Gulamgiri*, which was a manifesto against caste-based society.

### ***Ghulamgiri* as a critique of Brahmanic hegemony**

Ghulamgiri was a text written as an admiration to the people of the United States who had led a war against racism in their country. The constant reference to the US in the text is a reflection of Phule's attempt to compare the situation of the US under the veil of racism and the caste system of India, both of which he calls as 'slavery'. But he was categorical in his understanding of the working of the caste structure as he claims the exploitation and exclusion of the lower castes in the hands of Brahmans as a problem of a higher order. Phule imagined a golden age concomitant to the period before the arrival of the Aryans, and claimed to expose how brahmanical propagandists developed religious literature and caste system to subordinate and subjugate the original inhabitants – the Dravidians – by dividing them on caste lines. In this work, he also tried to expose the follies of brahmanical rituals and practises, which he believed, had led the ignorant masses into a perpetual state of psychological and material bondage. For example, he rejected the doctrine of karma which traces individual sufferings and social and caste status to the karma of previous births. He opined that doctrines like *daiva* (fate), *sanchit* (accumulated merits/demerits) and *prarabdha* (predestination) have killed logical thinking and led to meek submission to external forces. He also challenged the incarnation theory of Vishnu, where it was argued that the deity took birth in different *avatars*, in order to destroy evil, and maintain order in society. Instead, Phule interprets the re-birth of Vishnu as Aryan onslaught on the original inhabitants of India. While reconstructing history in *Gulamgiri*, Phule simultaneously counters the Aryan mythology, and proposes an ideal society based on equality and justice – Bali-rajya. He contrasts Baliraja, the mythical shudratishudra king with Vamana, the brahmanical avatar of Vishnu, who, it is popularly held, crushed Baliraja's head with his feet through deceit. Phule

draws parallels between this mythological event, and all subsequent history of Brahmanical domination, by highlighting it as a conscious ploy to exploit and oppress the masses.

The work is both polemical and rhetorical. It is primarily in the form of a dialogue between Dhondiba and Jotirao where Dhondiba asks questions regarding the history and the situation of Brahmanical supremacy during their period and Jotirao answers her critical questions thereby drawing a trajectory of what he calls deceit and dominance. In the process Jotirao not only reconstructs the myths and legends as present in Brahmanical scriptures, but also tries to critically engage with such stories. In a way he critically examines through rational investigation the advent of Aryans and their control over the lives of the natives, the Dravidians, who later formed the categories of shudras and atishudras. It is an attempt to dislodge the popular perception about the superiority of Brahmans either cultural or intellectual. A significant method employed by Jotirao in the process is the use of important texts like *Bhagawad Purana* and *Manusmriti*, which had an effective role in propagating Brahmanical dominance, to reconstruct this history.

Jotirao argues that the Brahmans have used certain myths to establish their control and produce a hierarchy by positioning themselves at the top. This process did not end in history and has continued even in modern times. Focussing primarily on the situation in Maharashtra, Phule shows how Brahmins control all the important positions of social life-world whereby no aspect of our daily life goes untouched from their interference and hence shudras and atishudras constantly have to face exclusion and subjugation in society. Even after the advent of the British (though Phule seems to an admirer of the British system and its rule), they have continued their dominance due to higher intellect and educational level gained through deceit by misconstruing and misrepresenting their status in history. They continue to dominate

every walk of life by misguiding the authorities and forcing the shudras and atishudras into a state of permanent oblivion. Phule therefore uses the text to enlighten the backward communities and make them conscious about the process through which the structures of dominance are constructed and employed for their exploitation.

For Phule, however, subversion of Brahmanical religion and culture was not an end-in-itself. It was a starting point of an alternative reconstruction. He believed that man and society needed religion, but religion should be based on humanity, morality and ethical conscience. He imagined a harmonious relationship between natural and social world devoid of supernatural intervention and based on empiricism, logic and scientific thinking. He, therefore, rejected institutionalised religions as they promoted middlemen (like the Brahmins), between individual and God. His view about an ideal religion is constituted in his last work *Sarvajanik Satya Dharma Pustak* (The book of the true faith) where he insists on a religion based on moral conduct and egalitarian values.

## **Conclusion**

Jyotirao Phule's views on individual freedom, complete equality and social unity were revolutionary for his times. He ruthlessly attacked injustice of existing society and wanted to lay foundation for cultural unity of masses. Phule had set up the *Satyasodhak Samaj* which aimed at establishing a new kind of society based on the principles of equity, rationality and justice. Education of the masses was given central importance and social causes like widow re-marriage, freeing people from beliefs in superstitions and astrology, encouraging performance of religious ceremony without brahman's intervention were actively pursued by this *Samaj*.

At the same time he faced strong criticism for his work, which ranged from social boycott including his father's hostility to being called a lackey of the British by the nationalists. The conservatives attacked him by arguing that Phule was obsessed with caste injuries and was therefore 'conspiring to make Indians embarrassed about the entirety of their culture'. The nationalists held that his strategy of attacking Brahmans would create hurdles in their aim of creating a national unity against the British, a criticism used later also against Ambedkar. However, close scrutiny of his writings show that he was equally critical of British policies and saw them as anti-people. He blamed them for neglecting education of the masses and bringing pauperization to a large section of Indian population. At the same time he held that the new system of governance introduced by the British patronized also the Brahmans. In this way he pointed at the connivance between Brahmanical domination and British imperialism. For the nationalists' criticism he had this to say: "If the Brahmans really wish to unite the people of this country and take the nation ahead then first they must drown the cruel religion and they publicly and clearly must cease using any artifice in the relationship with shudras who have been demeaned by religion and trample on inequality" (*Selected Writings of Jotirao Phule* 2002, 178).

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