

CONFRONTING CASTE AND BRAHMANISM: AN ASSESSMENT OF JOTIRAO PHULE'S APPROACH TO HINDU SOCIAL REFORM

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Abstract

This paper examines the approach of Jotirao Govindrao Phule (1827-1890), the foremost social reformer and thinker as well as one of the nation-builders of modern India, with regard to the issue of Hindu social reform in India. A radical social reformer of 19th-century Maharashtra, Phule visualized Hindu society free from all social inequalities based on caste, class and gender. He showed extreme concern for the suppressed and the marginalized sections of Hindu society, and started a crusade against the orthodoxy and the “slavery” it imposed upon the downtrodden sections of Hindu community for centuries. The paper is based on the proposition that Phule’s framework of Hindu social reform was radical and his movement was a sort of Hindu reformation movement. His approach to Hindu social reform appears to be altogether different from that of the “revivalist” reformers of 19th century who represented the so-called mainstream tradition of Hindu social reform in modern India. Phule came out with his own idea of the religion, i.e. *Sarvajanik Satya Dharma* (Universal Religion of Truth). In order to materialize his concept of “true religion”, he and his colleagues founded in 1873 *Satyashodhak Samaj* (society of truth seekers) in Pune. The set of principles the Samaj drew up shortly after its formation included belief in equality of all human beings, restoration of whose natural/human rights was one of its aims. Phule was more of a social revolutionary than a social reformer. He identified the Shudra-Atishudras as the ‘leading agency’ of a Hindu reformation movement. He also came across an authentic and extraordinary spokesman of the poor peasantry. The paper suggests that Phule’s insights and framework, if availed of, could have great relevance to tackle the problem of caste, and to solve the larger complex issue of Hindu social reform which is still

lying unresolved and is a big hurdle in the way to nation-building in India.

Keywords: Social reform, *Sarvajanik Satya Dharma*, *Varna Dharma*, Manu, universal religion.

I

Some people are born great, some have greatness thrust upon them and some achieve greatness by their actions and struggles. To the last category, Jotirao Govindrao Phule (11 April 1827 – 28 November 1890), popularly known as Mahatma Jotiba Phule, belonged. He hailed from a humble background, yet achieved the stature of “Mahatma” (great soul). A radical social reformer of 19th-century Maharashtra, Phule visualized Hindu society free from social inequalities based on caste, class and gender. He showed extreme concern for the suppressed and marginalized sections of Hindu society, and started a crusade against the orthodoxy and the “slavery” it imposed upon the downtrodden sections of Hindu community for centuries. In fact, the historical contribution of Phule could be understood by recognition of the fact that he initiated a new tradition of radical social reform in India which was further strengthened by his great “disciple” Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar (1891-1956) and later came to be known as the “Phule-Ambedkar Tradition of Social Reform”. On account of his radical approach to social reform, Phule is called as the “Father of Indian Social Revolution” (Keer 2013: v).

A founder of non-Brahman movement in India, as an eminent social scientist G.P. Deshpande has recently argued, Phule saw ‘Brahmanism’ as the ideological and institutional system of monopolizing knowledge and power by a particular class (Deshpande 2002: 9-10) that has been using these to exclude, divide and dominate other groups in Hindu society. He, therefore, stressed that it was necessary to step out the ideology of Brahmanism from Hinduism for which access to knowledge was an essential prerequisite, that is, one had to understand the system before one could dismantle it (Chakravarty 2002: 115).

Of course, the events, ideas and some figures of Western World had affected Phule’s mind, but the most critical input was provided to Phule by the home-grown *Shramanic* tradition of equality and reason. He appears to be a gifted scholar and, to apply Antonio Gramsci’s term, was an ‘organic intellectual’ of modern India. He wrote many books including the famous writings like *Tritiya Ratna*

(*The Third Jewel*), *Brahmananche Kasab (Brahmin Priest-craft Exposed)*, *'Gulamgiri (Slavery)*, *Shetakaryacha Asud (Cultivator's Whipcord)*, *Sat s̄ara (The Essence of Truth)*, *Ishara (Warning)*, *Asprashyachi Kaifiyat (Untouchables' Apologia)* and *Sarvajanik Satyadharmā Pustak (A Book of Universal Religion of Truth)*, etc.

No doubt, the social reform movement launched by Jotirao Phule was confined broadly to the "Hindu community", though he also tried to present his movement as a "universal movement" through his conception of "universal religion of truth". In fact, Phule's movement was one of the toughest "crusades" waged by the then reformers against the Hindu orthodoxy and unjust social order based on *Varṇa Vyavasthā* and *Brahmaṇ Dharma*. Though Phule did not use the term "Hindu" frequently (Omvedt 2011:108) which actually was not very popular in those days, but it does not make any difference because he was fighting for the "cause" of the lower caste Hindus, namely 'Śudra' and 'Atiśudra'. The important issue is that his framework was most radical framework of Hindu social reform which was altogether different from that of the "revivalist" reformers of 19th century who represented the so-called mainstream tradition of Hindu social reform in modern India.

Before we discuss Jotirao Phule's approach to Hindu social reform, we should know something about Hinduism, Brahman Dharma and Brahmanical social order. Most of the scholars believe that Hinduism is an ancient and profound religion. It was not founded by any individual, but it was a naturally grown-up religion. In such a state of affairs, many sects, sets of belief, institutions, dogmas, customs, etc. emerged in Hinduism of them some were not only non-uniform, but even contradictory to one another. As normally happens, here too the vested interests exploited the situation. Using their influential position in Hindu society, they claimed the systems, beliefs and dogmas favoring their interests to be the 'crux' of Hinduism. The Brahman Dharma was one such outcome of such a state of affairs which resulted in the emergence of an unequal and unjust Hindu social order based on '*Varṇa Vyavastha*' (Rhys 1981: 240).

The Brahman *dharma* and its theories, rituals and institutions had its roots in the Vedic age, particularly the later Vedic period, when the Brahmans strengthened their position in Vedic religion and soon succeeded in establishing their hegemony in the religious and social life. Things cannot be understood unless we clear the cobweb of faction that has been woven around the *Vedas* and Vedic religion. Some parts of the *Vedas* composed in ancient India bear out the fact that the Vedic people fought battles with some alien people, whom

they called 'Dasa' and 'Dasyu'. In all likelihood, the Vedic 'Aryans' devised the system of 'Varna' in purely secular terms – primarily to retain their purity and superiority and impose their hegemony over the then 'low-born' adversaries (Mani 2005: 7-8). Caste system, according to D.D. Kosambi, enabled Indian society to be formed out of many diverse and even discordant elements with the minimum use of violence. However, once developed, it tended to grow into a narrow Brahmanic orthodoxy hampering further developments with the tightening of caste bonds (Kosambi 1970: 172).

The religion of the Vedic people was soon monopolized by the Brahmins who were primarily given away the religious and educational "duties" in the *Varna Vyavastha*. For all-important sacrifices, anyone who is desirous of his 'well being' must turn to the Brahmin who would offer 'sacrifice' on his behalf. Hence, the hierarchical order based on caste was given religious and spiritual sanctity and, as such, mere mortals could not challenge it. A scholar of the subject remarks:

...While a Brahmin may fall from his superhuman status, the Shudra is subhuman all the way. The subhuman Shudra cannot become man, in fact, he does not want to become man as he has killed the man in himself. He has the mind but he does not think, he has a will to act but he chooses not to act. The Shudra is passivity/servility personified; he does act but is acted upon. This is so because, as Manu says, "slavery is inborn in the Shudra". He is supposed to submit to the same Brahmins and gods who oppress him and bring to him all the miseries and sorrows of the world (Haq 1997: 17).

In the so-called *Varna Dharma*, the Shudra was given the name *Pādaja* – "born from the feet" implying thereby that God created the Shudra to be the eternal slave. Initially, the lot of the Vaiśyas, the producing class, was slightly better than that of the Shudras, though these two were oftentimes clubbed together as *Paap-Yoni* (those born of sin). The Vaiśyas were often bracketed with the Shudras, for serving the Brahmins and Kshatriyas. The later Vedic period, during which various *Āraṇyaka* and *Brāhmanas* were composed, witnessed the rise of *Brahmaṇa Dharma* which resulted to systematic segregation of all productive communities – peasants, artisans and laborers as Śūdras, who were called 'Dasyun Vamśah' (descendants of Dasyus), 'Krishnayonih' (people of black origin) and "*Tvacham Krishnam*" (black-skinned people). Treated like social invalids, Śūdras and Atiśūdras (outcast people) were supposed to be fed and to be clothed with the remnants and castaways of food and clothes of

the higher orders. They were not entitled to hear the *Vedas* or wear the sacred thread. They were kept out of all *Yajnas* and *Anusthanas* (Mani 2005: 53). This legitimized the hegemony of Brahmans over the lower orders.

Caste, according to Manu, is the creation of God, and the Brahmans, who are at the pinnacle of caste hierarchy, are the living embodiments of God on earth. In his own words, “A Brahman is a great god, whether he is learned or imbecile, and the Brahmans should be respected in every way, even if he indulges in crime.” (Doniger & Smith 1991: 317-319) On the other hand, he (Manu) says that Shudras are not entitled to education, to amass wealth, or bear arms. A Brahman can take away any possessions from a Shudra, since nothing at all can belong to him as his own. Women, similarly, are debarred from property and other rights. Manu places all women, irrespective of their caste, in the category of the ‘lowly Shudra’ and expects them to surrender body and soul to men. The supreme duty of the king, Manu continues, is to enforce this hierarchical order under the guidance of his Brahmans. His divinely ordained duty is to sustain and strengthen the “*Varna Dharma*” (Doniger & Smith 1991: 417).

The *Bhagavad-Gita*, the finest philosophical text of Brahmanic Hinduism and its most popular scripture, centres on the philosophy of *Varṇāshrama Dharma* through its specious glorification of ‘*Karma Yoga*’ and ‘*Swadharmā*’. The *Gita* is honoured of tender than read, and understood far less than it is recited (Kosambi 1970: 209). Its much glorified concepts of ‘*Svadharmā*’ (one’s duty) and ‘*Niskāma Karma*’ are embedded in the idea of unwavering performance of the duty of the *Varṇa* which one belongs to. The word for duty used in the text is “*karma*” which literally means action. A reader having a little bit of common sense can see that the term *karma* is used in the text to mean duty as laid down in the system of *Varna*. The *Gita* says that the ‘duty’ of the Shudra is ‘service’: “Doing service of the *Dwijas* (twice born) is the natural duty of the Shudra.” Hence, like other Brahmanical works, the *Gita*’s overriding concern, too, is to extol the *Varna-Jati* ideology (Mani 2005: 60-61).

Though we also hear from the mouth of Lord Krishna himself: “For those who take refuge in me, be they even of the sinful breeds such as women, *Vaiśyas* and *Śudras*....” (citation?) It means all women and all men of the working and producing classes are defiled by their very birth, though they may in afterlife be freed by their faith in the God who degrades them in this one. Not only that, the God himself had created such divisions: “The four-caste (*Varna*) division

has been created by me” (Kosambi 1970: 15). This is proclaimed in the list of great achievements.

To Jotirao Phule, “Brahmanism” expresses the superiority and privileges of the Brahmans and other high castes on the one hand and slavery and exploitation of the Śūdra-Atiśūdras on the other. Therefore, he used the word “Brahmanism” instead of “Hinduism” (Deshpande 2002: 5). The Brahmanism created various barriers in society and caste was one of them and it was a very big barrier for him. His “disciple” B.R. Ambedkar also expresses a similar opinion about caste and says:

The effect of caste ... on the ethics of the Hindus is simply deplorable. Caste has destroyed the sense of public charity. Caste has made public opinion impossible. A Hindu’s public is his caste. His responsibility is solely to his (own) caste. His loyalty is restricted only to his caste. Virtue has become caste-ridden and morality has become caste-bound. There is no sympathy to the deserving (Ambedkar 2004: 46).

II

In such state of affairs, it is not difficult to understand as to why Phule, who himself belonged to a caste called *Mali* (cultivators specializing in horticulture) which was though a touchable and comparatively well-off caste but ritually fell in the Śūdra *Varṇa* and considered as inferior one, confronted caste and Brahmanism and started a crusade against it. He came out with a radical framework of Hindu social reform in which he has mainly countered Brahmanic Hinduism and also advanced an alternative model to it. In fact, Phule studied the causes of the “slavery” and all-round backwardness of the Śūdra-Atiśūdras in the religious exploitation. And India has been also a slave and backward due to domination of the conventional Brahmanic religion.

In order to counter Brahmanic Hinduism, Phule challenged the authority of the *Vedas* and other scriptures. He did so, perhaps, for the first time in the history of modern India. It is noted that almost all of his contemporary social reformers supported the Vedic tradition and Swami Dayananda Sarasvati had even elaborated a plan for the regeneration of ‘*Āryāvarta*’ through the revival of Vedic religion (Jadhav 1987: 291). Phule, however, did not agree with the opinion that the *Vedas* were the “holy books” of the Hindus created by God himself. He believed that, in fact, the “Bhat (orthodox) Brahmans” wanted to establish their hegemony through the religion, hence, they emphasized that the *Vedas* were the creation of God. He argued:

If God had created the Vedic scriptures for the liberation of entire mankind, the Bhat Brahmins would not have prohibited the Shudras and Atishudras from studying the *Vedas*. The Bhat Brahmins have thus violated God's commandment, and are not the Shudras and Atishudras suffering from that? Why should they either trust the God who is supposed to have created the Vedic scriptures or the scriptures themselves? Or, indeed, why should they call themselves Hindus? (Deshpande 2002: 188)

Phule dismissed the notion that the *Vedas* and other Brahmanical scriptures upholding caste system are God-inspired and based on the 'true religion'. On the contrary, he stressed that they are "unethical" and "political" (Mani 2005: 265). He also denounced the basic religious theories which the Brahmanic religion was based upon, particularly the theory of *karma* and *punarjanma* (rebirth). He also denounced the concepts of heaven, hell, sin, virtue, fortune, etc. enshrined in this theory. According to him, there is no such thing as 'heaven' or 'hell' and they are only imaginary creations of orthodoxy to exploit the ignorant people whose knowledge was limited. To Phule, men's accounts of sin and virtues are once and all settled in this life only. (Shinde, 1987: 104) He argued that the toiling masses by being trapped in the notions of *Daiva* (fate), *Sanchita* (accumulated merits/demerits of previous births) and *Prārabdha* (predestination) have lost their dialectical relationship with the world and have been *Dāsa* (slave) to the external forces (Gavaskar, 2007: 96-97).

According to Rosalind O'Hanlon, Jotirao was intellectually influenced by Thomas Paine's famous treatise *The Rights of Man* (O'Hanlon 1985: 198-99) which was called 'Bible of the poor'; and his another book entitled *The Age of Reason* might have helped to shape Phule's thought. It is significant to note that the greater part of the 'Thomas Paine's *The Age of Reason* consists of criticism of "Old Testament" from a moral point of view. He declared that "it is the reverse of truth and I become so tired of examining into its inconsistencies and absurdities, that I hasten to the conclusion of it in order to proceed to something better... Upon the whole, mystery, miracle, and prophecy and appendages that belong to fabulous and not to true religion" (Fast 1964: 299). Likewise Phule also concluded about the Brahmanical mythology and scriptures, that it was a powerful instrument in the hands of the priests to exploit masses. Hence, he rejected *in toto* the Brahman Dharma (which he called 'pseudo religion') along with the texts that uphold it (Deshpande 2002: 5-7).

Phule believed that for reforming the caste-ridden Hindu society, one must have to reform the Hindu religion itself and for that

purpose, a dynamically radical approach becomes a must for any genuine reformer. That is why; he had to come out with such a radical approach of Hindu social reform. It is also significant to note that there was a risk of becoming “anti-religious” for a reformer like him in such a case, but admirably Phule, despite his all radicalism, never become “anti-religious” or “anti-Hindu”. In fact, as Deshpande has pointed out, Phule hardly used the term Hinduism to criticize the “wrong” things in Hindu society; he referred to Brahmanism instead (Deshpande 2002: 5).

One of the foremost features of Phule’s framework of social reform was that unlike other Hindu reformers, he never thought that Śudra-Atiśudras should imitate the Brahmanic way of life. From sociological point of view, he was against any tendency of “*sanskritization*” by which the “low” Hindu castes started changing, particularly in those days, their customs, rituals, ideology, and way of life in the direction of high castes, particularly Brahmins (Srinivas 1972: 6). In fact, Phule was for ‘*de-sanskritization*’ of the lower caste Hindus and his criticism of Brahmanic Hinduism, its dogmas, customs and traditions was an evidence of this. His alternative model of ‘reformed’ Hinduism was actually a sort of “*debrahmanized*” Hinduism which he suggested for his followers to practice.

Hence, Phule was totally committed to the annihilation of the old established order based on Brahmanism and systems like *Varṇa Vyavasthā*, caste system, untouchability and gender inequality. In 1848, the same year which also saw the publication of Karl Marx’s *Communist Manifesto* in Europe, Phule dared to establish the first school for Untouchable girls, the most depressed section of the Hindu society, in Poona. He later opened about 18 schools for the downtrodden in Poona and its surrounding regions (Mani 2005: 272-273). It was Phule who advocated first in India inter-caste marriages and other such relations for the eradication of caste inequalities. He was also a first Indian advocate of human rights. He believed that enlightenment of lower caste people and women was the only way out to combat the social inequalities. He pointed out in the opening lines of his highly thought-provoking treatise *Shetakaryacha Asud*:

Lack of education leads to lack of wisdom, which leads to lack of morals, which leads to lack of progress, which leads to lack of money (and) which leads to the oppression of *Shudras* See, what state of society one lack of education can cause! (Deshpande 2002: 117)

To Phule educating the downtrodden was a “remedy” to each and every problem that they were facing. Hence, he not only emphasized

the issue of educating the oppressed classes in his principles, but also declared the education as “remedial whipcord” for “nauseating wrong” done to them in the past:

So (I feel that) the only sure remedy for this nauseating wrong is that the Shudra farmers should take proper education (be properly educated), should flourish the whip-cord in the air and lash these errant hired ponies soundly till they release (throw off) their droppings (Deshpande 2002: 46).

Hence, to Phule, the acquisition of knowledge by the downtrodden sections of Hindu society was “emancipatory” and this indicates, in the words of Braj Ranjan Mani, a clear understanding of him about the relation between “knowledge” and “power” much before Michael Foucault:

Phule was the ... first to attempt at transforming plural categories of history into singular or universal. He talked about knowledge and power much before Foucault did. In fact, Foucault’s post-modernist analysis came at a time when Europe had literally seen an ‘end of history’ whereas Phule’s effort was to change the world/society with the weapon of knowledge (Mani 2005: 271).

Phule published *Gulamgiri*, his most famous, hard-hitting and controversial treatise, in 1873 which was a virtual declaration of war on Brahmanism. He also included in this book a “manifesto” exhorting everything to discard caste (Deshpande 2002: 36-37). He remarked that there should be no barrier of the caste to choice a work. “Occupation” and “ordained duty” should be differentiated. For restoration of human rights of man, it is important. He explicates:

When our Creator created all beings on this earth, he created man as a free human being (endowed him with an independent judgment with a ‘free will’). He has also ordained that all human beings be entitled to enjoy ‘human rights’ freely (without any curbs or restrictions on their rights). Hence, (it follows that) each person has an (inalienable) right to occupy positions of power and authority in his village or in a particular administrative division or religion (Patil 1991, Vol. II: 22).

III

In striking contrast to the high caste social reformers of his times, Jotirao Phule believed that one’s radical ideology must be complemented by radical practice. As an ideologue-activist, he grappled with almost all important issues the then Hindu/Indian

society faced – religion, ritualism, caste, mythology, education, gender problem, class, poverty, village, agriculture, politics, etc. His range of concerns and ideas was deeper and broader than that of any other reformer or even political leaders of his times (Mani 2005: 20). Contrary to other contemporary social reformers, he did not take the standpoint from “within” a valued tradition of Hinduism; rather he took a position “without”; then judged the whole culture in terms of two ruthlessly applied values: rationality and equality. Therefore, his framework of social reform, as Gail Omvedt suggests, was most radical reform which was a sort of “cultural revolution” (Omvedt 2011: 108-109). This is, however, not to say that he was speaking as an alien to Hindu society. He did not take a stand outside the Hindu society, but rather one outside the hegemonic “cultural system” (i.e. Brahmanism) which has dominated the society for so long. Actually, he, like great protestant reformer Martin Luther, was for reformation in Hinduism. Like Luther, his idea of the Hindu reformation was based on righteous/truthful conduct, morality and humanism.

Phule not only discarded the Brahmanic caste ideology, supported the Dravidian theory to counter the prevalent Brahmanic mythology and dreamt up a “Bali-Rajya” model of equality and social justice (Mani 2005: 269). Since he felt the need of reformation in Hinduism, he, in addition to presenting a critique of *Brahman Dharma*, came forward with his own idea of the “true religion”, i.e., *Sarvajanik Satya Dharma*. His conception of “*Satya Dharma*” is rather secular (Mani 2005: 12), as he suggested a “universal religion of truth” for all irrespective of the faiths the people were already having. In his “book of religion” he laid down 33 principles to be followed by every lover of truth (Patil 1991, Vol. II: 33-37). These “principles of truth” are the crux of his idea of religion.

Those who are followers of truth are happy human beings – this was Phule’s major contribution to the religious thought. One comes across various words which mean “truth” in his different writings, for instance, *satyaprakash* (light of truth), *satyodaya* (emergence of truth), *satyaisha* (*the Truth God /godly truth*), *sat sāra* (essence of truth), *satyadharmā* (religion of truth), *satyashodhak* (researcher of truth), etc. (Jadhav 1987: 313). Hence, it is needless to say that his classical book of “gospel truth” entitled *Sarvajanik Satya Pustak* was also written by him to propagate truth. He used the famous ancient Indian axiom *satyameva jayate* (truth alone triumphs) and displayed it on his letterheads. “This is very significant, as all great sages of India have also stressed this message and which is the mainspring of Indian/Hindu culture and tradition” (Keer, 2013: 286). When he

later on founded his association, he named it *Satyashodhak Samaj*. In the 33 principles of his “religion of truth” his main stress appears to be the restoration of human rights in India. He argued that even if our Creator would have written a holy book, he would have “surely’ ensured “fundamental human rights” of all in it:

Suppose He had been pleased to write a holy book or Scripture so that all the human beings inhabiting this earth should follow the straight and narrow path of *Truth*. In that (unlikely) event, He would surely have defined, impartially, the fundamental human rights of all men and women, without discriminating among them and He would have taken care to write that religious book or Scripture in a universal language which would have been understood by diverse people speaking diverse languages (all over the world) (Patil 1991, Vol. II: 37).

By following the “righteous path”, Phule hoped, people would indeed, be the “blessed citizens of our Creator’s kingdom” (Patil 1991, Vol. II: 40) Hence, he thought about religion and religious equality very rationally. According to him, religion does not create any restrictions, and it can be accepted after reading its fundamental principles enshrined in most of the religious scriptures. Acceptance of religion is wholly dependent on these principles; therefore, in one family, any member of family can accept any religion as per his choice. Since Phule’s idea of religion was “universal” and it was subject to change according to time and space and open to all, Phule never wanted that any human being should be forced to accept any religion. He wrote:

... (Nearly) all the Sacred Books (Scriptures) compiled by different Holy Persons do contain some element of Truth, as per their own perceptions and in consonance with the spirit of their times. (Hence,) in that (ideal) family, the lady (of the house) may, if she likes, embrace Buddhism after studying the Buddhist religious scripture; her husband may embrace Christianity, if he likes (if he so chooses) after studying the Old and the New Testaments (of the *Bible*); their daughter may embrace Islam if she so chooses after studying the *Quran*; and their son may embrace the Universal Religion of Truth (propounded by Phule), if he so chooses after studying the ‘Universal Religion of Truth’. And all these members of the family (the parents, the son and the daughter) should lead peaceful lives, should never envy or hate the other persons’ religion, and all of them should behave towards one another in a spirit of love and understanding, always bearing in their minds that they are the Creator’s children, and, hence, are the members (belonging to) the Creator’s own family (Patil 1991, Vol. II: 39-40).

In sum, Jotirao Phule wanted to destroy the old patterns of

fundamental religion, particularly among Hindus. In short, the salient features of his religious philosophy are as under:

- 1) Anyone has right to accept any religion at any time, therefore, there is no possibility to create domination of any religion. All religions should be respected.
- 2) Religion means adaptation of the principle of “universal truth”.
- 3) Women and men both have equal rights to observe religion and its principles.
- 4) There are, and may be, various religions in the world, but, since all are created by our “Creator”, fraternity must be one of the principles of all religions.
- 5) Religion is the way of emancipation from inequality, illiteracy and discrimination and also a way to create fraternity, peace and happiness (Raskar 2015: 253).

In order to materialize his concept of “true religion”, Phule and his colleagues founded Satyashodhak Samaj (society of the researchers of truth) in 1873 at Poona. Since the Samaj wanted to destroy religious slavery of the Shudras and Atishudras imposed by the Brahmanism, he defined the chief object of the Samaj in its first report as under:

Brahmin, Bhat, Joshi etc. are plundering the Shudras with the help of scriptures. They are degrading them for the last 1000 years. Samaj is established to advice and educate the Shudras so that they can understand their rights and will free themselves from hopeless scriptures which are the main instruments in the hands of the (orthodox) Brahmans in the name of religion (Report of the Pune Satyashodhak Samaj 1875: 2-3).

The set of principles the Samaj drew up shortly after its formation included belief in equality of all human beings. Members were exhorted to spread truth and propagate righteous conduct among people and make them aware of man’s natural/human rights and social obligations. The Samaj rejected the so-called sacred texts, mythical tradition and all sorts of religious base of social inequalities. Its opposition and rejection of these things was based on rational arguments. It was intended to make aware the Śudra-Atiśudra masses of the ‘game’ of the orthodox Brahmans and to make them free from their ‘social slavery’ (Umapathi 2007: 140).

A number of socio-religious activities were conducted by the Samaj in its earlier days under the guidance of Jotirao Phule. Purpose of these activities was to provide an identity to the Śudras and Atiśudras

of a “new moral community” through Satyashodhak Samaj and its new traditions and rituals as against their ideological and social adversaries, i.e. the orthodox Brahmans. A renowned scholar of the subject, Rosalind O’Hanlon’s remarks are very important in this context:

Phule and others hoped that the Society (Satyashodhak Samaj) would take a lead in establishing the idea of the *Shudras* as a new moral community, independent of Brahmanic Hinduism. The Society would express this spirit through the worship of a Supreme God that transcended all conventional religious confessions, including Hinduism, and by taking into their own hands the conduct of all ceremonies and other social occasions which required a religious sanctification through the performance of rituals (O’Hanlon 1985: 237).

To Gail Omvedt, founding of the Satyashodhak Samaj was an essential step of Jotirao Phule to attain the goals of “cultural revolution” against Brahmanism. It was also a part of his strategy of initiating the radical reforms in order to provide an “alternative” to the Brahmanic Hinduism. It is pointed out that not only non-Brahmans but Brahmans were also benefited with the initiatives of the Samaj. For instance, when Phule on behalf of the Samaj addressed and appealed to *Navis* (barbers) of Maharashtra that they should not attend the ritual of removing the hairs of widows, most of the Brahmans’ widows were saved by him from the insulting and inhuman practice. For such women, Phule also opened a widow home at Poona (Keer 2013: 83-86).

One of the important and radical ceremonies introduced by Satyashodhak Samaj was the conduct of marriages without aid of the Brahman priests. In the report for 1873-75, two such marriages in Poona and 11 in the nearby village of Bhilar have been reported with “greatest pride”, with a criticism of the extortionate demands of the Brahman priests at the marriage of the wards of Shudras (Report of the Pune Satyashodhak Samaj 1875: 2-3). The Samaj also opposed the exploitation of the peasant and lower caste masses by Shetjīs (moneylenders) and ‘Bhatjīs’ (Brahman priests). It opposed caste discrimination and untouchability in a sharper tone and focused on the upliftment of the downtrodden masses particularly the Untouchables and the women. The Samaj insisted upon simple and less expensive marriages, opposed child marriages and supported widow remarriages and inter-caste marriages. Further, it opened schools and hostels for the students belonging to Śudra-Atiśudras in Poona and some other places (O’Hanlon 1985: 235-242).

IV

In fact, Phule was more of a social revolutionary than a social reformer. As G. P. Deshpande suggests, Phule was first to identify and theorize the bipolar structure of Hindu society, marked by the dichotomous relation between the oppressors (orthodox Brahmans, moneylenders, etc.) and the oppressed (Śudra-Atiśudras) and he wanted the community of the oppressed to lead a revolution for an all-round reform and change in the Hindu society. He points out:

Phule was more of a revolutionary. He had a complete system of ideas and was amongst the earlier thinkers to have identified, in a manner of speaking, 'classes' in Indian society. He analysed the *dvaivarnik* structure of Indian society, and identified the Shudra-Atishudras as the leading agency of a social revolution. And the Shudra-Atishudras will lead to the revolution on behalf of whole society, to liberate the entire people from the shackles of Brahmanism. What they will lead, then, is not a movement for some reform in the present structure, some tinkering here and there, but a total smashing up of the entire oppressive structure ideological and material (Deshpande 2002: 20-21).

Hence, Phule strove to bring all labouring classes of Hindu society – Kunbi-s, Mali-s, Dhanganar-s, Ahir-s, Bhil-s, Koli-s, Chambhar-s, Mang-s and Mahar-s, etc. – under one umbrella to wage a morality-driven and knowledge-based struggle against Brahmanical thralldom. He also saw the subjugation of women as a part the larger hegemonic design inherent in the ideology of caste. Pointing out the repercussions of the 'sinful injustice' done by men to women in India, Phule said:

Men in our country did not treat with respect their own daughters or daughters-in-law. On the other hand, they stigmatized (treated with contempt) their mothers, sisters, daughters or daughters-in-law (i.e., all women as such) as an un-natural (unbecoming), and a very untruthful and cunning breed (of women) as a whole. They further treat them with great contempt as though they were serfs and slaves captured as booty in a battle. As a result of this injustice, Truth (truthful/righteous conduct) declined, an atmosphere of discontent spread everywhere, and Sorrow was born (and held its sway in this country) (Patil 1991, Vol. II: 19).

Phule's critique of Brahmanic Hinduism implied the view that the abolition of the Brahmanical systems would ensure the end of patriarchy as well. Hence, according to Uma Chakravarty, Phule also emerges as a staunch critic of Brahmanical patriarchy:

He alone, among nineteenth century social reformers, was able to stand outside the Brahmanical patriarchy and, although gender was not a

central factor in his analysis of caste and the reproduction of inequality, his rejection of caste system and of Brahmanic Hinduism enabled him to adopt a more radical approach to gender inequality than any of his contemporaries (Chakravarty 1998: 65).

Phule also comes across as an authentic and extraordinary spokesman of the poor peasantry. He was the first social activist who made agriculture and the peasant predicament one of his central concerns. In his *Shetakaryacha Asud*, he depicted the peasant pauperization caused by the colonial and Brahmanical exploitation. He sharply criticized the policies of “our cunning Government” and, like a nationalist, found the British Raj responsible for farmer’s starvation:

Moreover, our cunning Government, through its Brahman employees, has carried out surveys every thirty years and has established levies and taxes as they willed, and the farmer, losing his courage, has not properly tilled his lands, and, therefore, millions of farmers have not been able to feed themselves or cover themselves. As the farmers weakened further because of this, they started dying in the thousands in epidemics. There was drought to add to the misery, and thousands of farmers died of starvation.... (Deshpande 2002: 167).

Phule further argued that the white officers avoided their duty and indulged in “lassitudinous luxury” relying solely on the advice of the Brahman officers who were invariably corrupt. But the Government was going on to spend the money collected from the peasants upon the salaries and pensions of the “white and black employees”:

Both these white and black employees have so completely denuded the farmer, behind the Government’s back, in order to enjoy themselves day and night, that the Governor feels ashamed to invite him to his court. Cannot the farmer be invited to the Governor’s court – the farmer, on whose labors the Government depends for its army, its ammunition, and the inordinate salaries of its black employees, and the lassitudinous luxury of the white ones, and their pensions? ... (This is) the condition of one who is the foundation of all nation. He does not get enough food to feed his belly, not enough clothe to cover himself, and the sword of the taxes to be paid is constantly hanging on his head, and the hunting dogs of the lords do not even sniff at him (Deshpande, 2002: 166-167).

Phule felt that the heavy assessments by the colonial government on the one hand, and the usurious moneylenders supported by the corrupt high caste officials of the government departments and law courts, on the other, were responsible for the vast and perpetual indebtedness, of the cultivators. Commenting on the reports by some

of the British officers and Indian individuals and Sabha-s, regarding the causes of rural indebtedness which according to them was due to “lack of thriftiness”, “love of extravagance”, etc. of the cultivators, Phule said that it was based upon “wrong and mischievous witness” of the Brahman officers and was “contrary to the fact” (Deshpande 2002: 164-169).

He also came forward with several plans and suggestions for peasant upliftment as well as for structural changes in rural society in India, especially Maharashtra (Deshpande 2002: 179-182). In a word, Phule had deep concerns for the development of agriculture and rural economy and amelioration of the conditions of the peasants and tenant cultivators.

Though Phule was heavily criticized by the conservatives and reactionaries of his times (he had to face even an unsuccessful attempt of murder conspired by his opponents), he equally had many admirers and followers too. He was equally admired by the three stalwart nation-builders of India – Swami Vivekananda, Mahatma Gandhi and Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar. “Him I call Mahatma”, Vivekananda said, “whose heart bleeds for the poor” (Keer 2013: 278). Similar tribute was given to him by Gandhi, who said, “Jotirao was the real Mahatma” (Keer 2013: 29). And, as everybody knows, Ambedkar, the chief architect of *Indian Constitution*, had declared that Phule was among his three “Gurus” (teachers), others being Buddha and Kabir.

Finally, we may sum up with the proposition that though some frameworks of Hindu social reform were put forward by other Hindu reformers in India during the colonial times, Jotirao Phule, who represented the enlightened sections of the lower caste Hindus, found all such frameworks insufficient and unsuitable, particularly for the cause of lower classes. He, therefore, himself viewed the problem from the standpoint of the ‘*Bahujan*’ people, i.e., the lower classes/castes. He had a clear idea of the declining state of Hindu society in his mind while viewing the problem. To him, the orthodox Brahmans were mainly accountable for the deteriorating state of Hindu religion and society, particularly its lower orders. Hence, he put forth his critique of the ‘Brahmanism’ or Brahmanic Hinduism. As an organic intellectual, he presented a critical estimate of Hindu social order wherein he hinted clearly about the limitations, contradictions and defects of the Hindu society based on *Varna Vyavastha*. He, then, advanced his own framework of Hindu social reform in which he underlined the great need of reformation in Hinduism. He stressed that the idea of equality must be accepted as

a core principle of the 'reformed' Hinduism. While presenting his alternative model to Brahmanism, he came out with his concept of *Sarvajanik Satya Dharma* (Universal Religion of Truth). To preach and popularize the *Satya Dharma*, he initiated a social reform movement in Maharashtra. He founded *Satyashodhak Samaj* in 1873 which actually became the centre stage of his reformation movement in western India and tried to convert the Śūdra-Atiśūdras into a "new moral community". Through his social reform movement, Phule took some initiatives for the liberation of the marginalized and oppressed sections of Hindu society including women. He also took initiatives for agrarian reforms. He suggested that with the adoption of his framework of social reform measures, a "reformed" Hinduism might have had emerged in which 'human rights' of all men and women could have been restored. It would be blessed with all the great virtues of a universal, true and moral religion. In fact, Jotirao Phule was for a complete reformation in Hindu religion and society; hence, his approach to Hindu social reform has great relevance in the caste-ridden Hindu society of India.

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