

JOTIRAO PHULE'S ALTERNATIVE TO *BRAHMAN DHARMA*: A LOOK INTO HIS SPIRITUAL CONCEPTION OF SATYADHARMA

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Abstract

This paper is an humble attempt to explain the spiritual conception of '*Satyadharna*' propounded by Jotirao Govindrao Phule (1827-1890), the foremost social reformer as well as social thinker of modern India. A radical reformer of the nineteenth century Maharashtra, Phule came out with a fresh framework of Hindu social reform wherein he, in addition to other things, proposed his idea of *Satyadharna* as an alternative model to *Brahman Dharma*. The paper argues that though Phule was not satisfied with the existing state of affairs in Hinduism, he neither himself thought of conversion nor suggested his followers to embrace other religions. To him, just "*Arya Bhats*" (orthodox Brahmins) alone did not constitute the Hindus, but "*Shudras, Atishudras, Bhils* etc." all are Hindus; though, those Hindus were unfortunately "put to great deprivations and hardships" by "Brahmanism". Clearly, he was different from his other contemporary reformers who strived for reforms in Hinduism without questioning Brahmanism. But Phule, in his framework of Hindu social reform, earnestly expressed the need to step out the ideology of 'Brahmanism' from Hinduism. Accordingly, he came forward with his idea of '*Satyadharna*' which was his alternative model to *Brahman Dharma*. The paper suggests that Phule's idea of '*Satyadharna*' was the outcome of his ground-laying and 'organic' approach which was based on a 'perspective from below' or that of lower classes of Hindu society. His alternative religion transcends all artificial divisions/distinctions prevalent among the people based on

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caste, class, gender, community, status, position, privilege, physical condition, faith, opinion, food habits or the mode of apparel, etc. The major thrust of Phule in his idea of *Satyadharm*a was mainly upon the universal values of morality, equality, fraternity and rationality and these values could be identified as the precepts of his religion of truth.

Keywords: Jotirao Phule, Indian Reformation, Hindu social reform, Hinduism, Brahmanism, *Brahman Dharma*, *Varna Vyavastha*, *Satyadharm*a, *Satyashodhak Samaj*, *Shudra-Atishudras*, human rights.

(1)

At the very outset it must be kept in mind that while discussing Jotirao Phule's alternative model to *Brahman Dharma*, the most important thing to remember is that he represented a very different set of interests and a very different outlook of the Indian Renaissance. The upper caste elite and its intellectuals expressed an ideology of the Renaissance (and also nationalism) based on bourgeois class/high caste aspirations and the 'great' tradition. Phule, however, represented the idea of a cultural revolution with an outlook based on lower class/caste aspirations and the 'Little' Tradition. His framework of social reform, therefore, represented the desires of the lower castes for social transformation along radical lines (Omvedt: 1971: 1969). If the '*Shudras*', '*Atishudras*' and women had to be liberated from the '*Brahmanic* slavery', definitely there was a need of a radical blueprint of social reform.

No doubt, Phule's exposures to new intellectual currents of the world especially took place after coming in contact with the Christian missionaries in his early formative years. He was particularly influenced by John Wilson, a missionary of Free Church of Scotland, and his understanding of 'Brahmanism' was close to that of the missionaries like Wilson (Shinde: 1987: 25-26). Hence, it is true that Phule was an admirer of some of the attributes of Christianity and was also influenced by the missionaries who gave opportunities to the people belonging to the lower castes to have access to education which was hitherto denied to them in their parental religion. Moro Vitthal Valavekar, Phule's close friend from his childhood and colleague, has left an important account of his own and his friend's religious attitude while they were in school. He recalls that he had found most striking in the teachings of missionary teachers the urge to reform Hindu society and to do good to his countrymen. However, the Christianity as an absolute system of values was unacceptable

to them (O’Hanlon: 2002: 113). Particularly, the Christian idea of ‘revealed truth’ or ‘divine sanction’ was not acceptable to them. As such, they had nothing to do with the fundamentalism of any creed or faith. By rejecting such ideas, they had moved away from Christianity (and also Islam). Phule and his friend were, actually, attracted towards the religious radicals like Thomas Paine (1737-1809) who condemned the Christian orthodoxy in an altogether hard-hitting tone (Gavaskar: 2007: 103).

As a matter of fact, Thomas Paine was Phule’s favourite Western thinker who was a great religious radical of America and whose famous treatises like *Rights of Man* (1791) and *The Age of Reason* (1794) had marvellous impact on his mind. “The whole world is my country; my religion is to do good” – was the life motto of Paine. He had especially drawn attention of the western civil society towards the inhuman practice of slavery imposed upon the black people in America (Roy & Kishore: 1998: 51-53). Keeping in view of these facts, some serious historians of the subject (e.g., Rosalind O’Hanlon) suggest that Phule could become a religious radical because he was intellectually influenced by Paine who was a great critic of Christian fundamentalism (O’Hanlon: 2002: 112).

Though Phule was an admirer of Paine and also of some other Western thinkers like Martin Luther, George Washington, Lafayette, Abraham Lincoln and Theodore Parker (an American Transcendentalist, abolitionist and reformer and author of the treatises like *A Discourse of Matters pertaining to Religion*, 1842, and *Ten Sermons of Religion*, 1853) (Joshi & Raman: 1991: 1325); it, however, also comes into view that Phule, by and large, developed his thoughts on the ideological and cultural bedrock of the indigenous *Shramanic* and radical *Bhakti* traditions. As a matter of fact, India through the ages had witnessed a string of counter-cultural movements that professed and propagated a worldview that was radically opposed to the ‘Vedic purity’ and *Brahmanic* celebration of the caste culture. A host of socio-cultural leaders – from Buddha to Kabir – gave a strikingly similar message that caste is divisive, oppressive, inhuman, and hence, unacceptable (Paul: 2008: 81). Significantly, Phule was inspired by the egalitarian philosophy of Gautama Buddha whom he hailed as the “saviour of masses” and accused the orthodox Brahmins of “nursing a grudge against Buddha” for their defeat at his hands. (Keer: 2013: 119) Similarly, among *Bhakti* saints, he was greatly inspired by Kabir and Tukaram. Phule and his associates also felt a deep bond with Kabir who presented a radical critique of Brahmanism in his poems. *Bipramati* – a part of Kabir’s *Bijagranth*. As

a matter of fact, Kabir's *Bipramati* was a great source of inspiration for Phule. He regarded him as one of his ideological mentors (Keer: 2013: 119). He was also said to be particularly fond of Tukaram's famous dictum '*satya-asatyashi man kele gwahi*' – means, know truth and untruth through the voice of conscience. Its obvious implication was a quite yet firm rejection of the authority of the *Brahmanical* literature and institutions. In fact, Phule, later on, saw his own movement as a continuation of those of Buddha, Kabir and Tukaram (Mani: 2005: 254).

In fact, having taken inspiration from numerous progressive thinkers and scholars both from India and abroad, Phule examined *Brahman Dharma* and its basic principles, and also the current state of Hindu society through his own critical outlook. The more he went deeper, the more he realized that the whole of Hinduism was in utter need of reform. We know that the bulk of Phule's writings on religion consist of a fierce polemic against *Brahman Dharma*. Phule appears to be ferocious and unforgiving in his attack the religion of orthodoxy. According to Gopal Guru, his theory and method of hermeneutics was against the hegemonic and monological mode, generally found in *Brahmanical* traditions where there is no scope of equality for and learning from others (Guru: 2003: 3703). In *Slavery*, he has clearly defined 'Brahmanism' as a system of religious slavery which imposes almost the same hardships upon the lower castes in India which the Blacks had to face under American slavery:

Now the only difference between them and the slaves in America is that whereas the Blacks were captured and sold as slaves, the *Shudras* and *Atishudras* were conquered and enslaved by the *Bhats*. Except for this difference, all the other conditions in which they lived were the same. There is simply not an iota of difference between them. All the calamities suffered by Blacks were endured by the *Shudras* and *Atishudras* who probably suffered more but not less at the hands of the (orthodox) Brahmins. The tales of their sufferings would not only cause the hardest hearts to shed tears but would also dissolve the hardest layers of rocks on the earth and release streams of tears from within which would drove the whole world (Phule: 1873: tr. by Deshpande: 2002: 40).

Needless to say that Phule's position was altogether different from that of the elite reformers. He found that though most of his contemporary reformers spoke of the Hindu social reform (or of even 'Indian nationalism'), their thoughts and actions, in fact, expressed the interests of an elite class and not of a whole Hindu society. As such, they opted, as elites do, not for a revolutionary transformation but for 'modernization' and, in fact, revitalization

of the traditional social orders. They developed an ideology which sought to use a revitalised “Hindu tradition” as the spiritual and moral centre around which the liberal modernism of the West could be grafted (Omvedt: 2011: 101). Moreover, the ideas and actions of these reformers/nationalists evidently expressed the interests of a class and not of the entire Indian society/nation as a whole (Jadhav: 1986: 741). Phule was sharply different from his other contemporary social reformers as his thoughts and actions, by and large, expressed the interests of the major sections of Hindu society, i.e., ‘*Stri-Shudra-Atishudras*’ (women, lower castes and untouchables).

Having been hailing from the lower strata of Hindu society, he actually came out as, to apply Antonio Gramsci’s term, an organic intellectual. In other words, his social location largely helped him to develop his perspective. He viewed the problem of Hindu social reform from this perspective. He not only anticipated the hegemony in *Brahmanic* religion and culture (Naik: 2007: 32), but also came out with an original and, of course, radical framework of Hindu social reform to provide an alternative model to the *Brahman Dharma*. He argued that the priestly order had to be attacked because their hegemony was clearly conspicuous as they exercised their hegemony over heterogeneous categories of the *Atishudras* (Mani: 2005: 255). As such, he appears to be highly revolutionary in his basic approach of Hindu social reform. It is pertinent to note here that some social scientists have recently claimed that Jotirao Phule, like Michael Foucault and much before him, suggested, in his own way, a theory of ‘hegemony’ in his analysis of *Brahmanic* Hinduism. Foucault in his power/knowledge paradigm countered all knowledge systems as ‘regimes of truth’ propounded by the hegemonic powers of the time as every discourse seems to follow the “well-trodden battle-lines of social conflict” (Foucault: 2002: 373). Phule also saw Brahmanism as a kind of ‘regime of truth’ and a hegemonic system of dominance and exploitation for monopolising knowledge, power/privileges by a particular class which uses these to exclude, divide and dominate other groups in Hindu society (Mani: 2005: 271). He earnestly felt the need to step out the ideology of Brahmanism from Hinduism. Being a radical reformer, Phule wanted to abandon the religion of orthodoxy tooth and nail and also provide an alternative model of the same to his lower caste fellows. The idea of ‘*Satyadharma*’ was his alternative model. His model was, in fact, the outcome of his ground-laying approach based on a ‘perspective from below’ or that of lower classes of Hindu society.

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Before proceeding further to discuss Phule's alternative model to the *Brahman Dharma*, we must also know that there was a problem in Hinduism which every reformer including Phule had to face. It was the problem of how to distinguish the religious institutions from the social institutions. Definitely, it was a big problem from a sociological point of view. There has been in almost all other religions a difference between the religious institutions and social institutions. But in the case of Hinduism, we come across the fact that here it is relatively difficult to distinguish between the two. In fact, the Hindu social order was basically prescribed and consecrated by the religion. B.R. Ambedkar has noted this problem in these words:

The Hindus are the only people in the world whose social order – the relation of man to man – is consecrated by the religion and made sacred, eternal and inviolate.... It is not, therefore, enough to say that the Hindus are the only people in the world with a sacred code of religion. So are the Zoroastrians, Israelites, Christians and Muslims. All these have sacred codes. But they do not prescribe, nor do they consecrate a particular form of social structure – the relationship between man and man in a concrete form – and make it sacred and inviolate. The Hindus are singular in this respect. That is what has given the Hindu social order its abiding strength to defy the ravages of time and the onslaught of the time (Ambedkar: 1987: 128-29).

According to Tarkatirtha Laxmanshastri Joshi, each and every situation of the daily life in Hindu society in the nineteenth century Maharashtra was being determined by the religious traditions, customs and manners. There was a religio-philosophical ground for all such traditions (Joshi: 1992: 79). Particularly, the social institutions, customs and traditions were so much so intermingled in Hindu religious philosophy and its traditions that one couldn't think of reforming the 'society', leaving aside the 'religion'. In fact, roots of nearly all social problems of Hindu society lied in Hindu religion. For instance, the roots of problem of social hierarchies and inequalities could be traced in the idea of *Varnashrama Dharma* and also it was enshrined in the doctrines of *Dharma*, *Karma*, rebirth etc. (Ambedkar: 1987: 126-29).

Therefore, for reforming a caste-ridden society, one must have to reform the Hindu religion itself, and for that purpose, a dynamically radical approach becomes a necessity for any genuine reformer. Phule was the first Hindu reformer who had understood this problem (and later on his disciple B.R. Ambedkar) and accordingly

devised his strategies of social reform. As Arvind Deshpande rightly remarks that while other social reformers aimed at social change within the “framework of (Hindu) culture”, Phule having a broader and critical understanding of Hindu culture and society, come out with radical approach of Hindu social reform. As such, his attack was not just on Brahmanism, it was on the entire social culture of Hindus (Joshi & Raman: 1991: 1325). It is also pointed out that there was a risk of becoming ‘anti-religious’ for reformers in such a case, but, admirably, Phule, despite of his all radicalism, never became ‘anti-religious’ or ‘anti-Hindu’. It is true that he was not satisfied with the existing state of affairs in Hinduism, but he neither himself thought of conversion nor suggested his followers to embrace other religions. In fact, as G.P. Deshpande has pointed out, Phule hardly used the term Hindu or Hinduism for denouncing social evils. He referred to ‘Brahmanism’ instead, though his opposing of Brahmanism included “almost everything within the (orthodox) Hindu system” (Deshpande: 2002: 5).

Being a genuine reformer, Phule, as such, had come out with a religiously radical approach to Hindu social reform. In fact, he was a deeply religious man from the core of his heart. His religious thoughts got prominence in almost all of his writings. His first writing, published in 1853, was *Quest for the Creator* which indicates that he began his contribution to social thought through his insights on religion. And his last book – *A Book of Universal Religion of Truth* – was also a marvelous treatise on religious ethics and universal spiritualism (Jadhav: 1987: 273).

While in Hindu society where caste-slavery rested upon the religion of orthodoxy, Phule, who aimed at complete destruction of caste hierarchies and inequalities, devised such a framework of reform which was fundamentally in opposition to *Brahmanical* religious and social order. As such, his anti-clericalism or ‘anti-Brahmanism’ was not simply a result of the British policy of divide-and-rule or missionary propaganda, as could be argued from a nationalist point of view, but it traced its origins in his idea of radical reform and, in the words of Rosalind O’Hanlon, emerged as the “first expression of Hindu reformation movement” in modern India (O’Hanlon:2002:98). G.P. Deshpande remarks on this aspect of Phule’s ‘activity’ in the following words:

Phule’s achievement was that he widened the very idea of a social organization, which Bombay and Calcutta had restricted to being an upper-caste *Bhadralok*, or, to use the Marathi word, *Pandharapeshha* phenomenon, Phule and the (*Satyashodhak*) *Samaj* began their activity

at the lower end of the social spectrum. This activity took Phule to all corners of western Maharashtra addressing meetings of *Shudras*. Unlike many *Bhadralok/Pandharpesha* reformers and their organizations, Phule's vision, and the scope of the *Samaj's* activity, was broad, sweeping. There was virtually no aspect of social life that did not engage his attention (Deshpande: 2002: 5).

It was clear to Phule that 'Brahmanism' was a religious, or more accurately *Dharmik*, order which perpetuated, rationalized, and made sacrosanct the dominance of the elite belonging to a particular caste in Hindu society. Needless to say that his was not on an attack on Brahmins, but essentially it was on the ideology of *Brahmanic* hegemony (*Brahmanache Varchaswa/Varchaswavad*). Notably, Phule's conservative contemporary Vishnushastri Chiplunkar used the word (*Dharma*) in everyday practice or in politics and administration, where he defended the religion of orthodoxy and the "superior powers" of the priestly caste: "It is the Brahmins that hold the key to knowledge" (Keer: 2013: 147-148). Phule was a critic of such representation of the *Dharma*.

Phule was for *de-sanskritization* of Hindu society and his criticism of the religion of orthodoxy and its all dogmas, customs and traditions, as has been noted, was an evidence of this. His alternative model to *Brahman Dharma* was actually a sort of 'de-brahmanized Hinduism'. Throwing light upon Phule's ideas about his alternative system, a leading sociologist, Thom Wolf, writes:

The starting point for Phule, however, was beyond the Manu worldview horizons, outside the *Brahmanic* system. Thus, Phule called for Manu alternative seeking an alternative to the traditional Hindu system, by calling for nothing less than a foundational change of Indian society. Phule looked around his India and saw the necessity for an alternative.... Therefore, Phule almost 100 years before Ambedkar, saw need for total transformation – political, economic, social and spiritual and sought a comprehensive alternative to the 3000 years old system (Wolf: 2007: 12).

Similarly, Kancha Ilaiah, a renounced scholar of Dalit Studies, believes that Phule was the only person other than and before Ambedkar who thoughtfully saw the needed changes for Indian transformation. As a result, he became the one person whom both Ambedkar as well as Gandhi acknowledged as their own Guru. For, it was Phule alone, who in the nineteenth century worked from a "comprehensive scheme for India's social, political, economic and spiritual transformation" (Ilaiah: 2005: 38).

However, the cultural base for a transformed India and also for a 'reformed Hinduism.' lay in the cultural mentorship of *Baliraja*

or king Bali, a utopia of Jotirao Phule which he propounds in *Slavery* in 1873 as an alternative model to *Brahman Dharma*. He made *Baliraja*, the mythical king of inhabitants, a “symbol of oppressed humanity.” *Baliraja* in his usage was the peasant, the common man. He was an ancient symbol of peasants and a sort of golden age, representing in a Marathi saying that “*Ida pida javo, Balica rajya yevo*” (let troubles and sorrow go, and the kingdom of Bali come). (Phule: 1873: tr. by Deshpande: 2002: 28). This was clearly pointed out in *Gulamagiri* where he described the whole *Brahmanical* tradition as “anti-Bali” (anti-egalitarian) (Omvedt: 1995: 112). Certainly, in his ‘*Baliraja* proposal’, Phule thought about social, economic, political and spiritual liberation of the people of the marginalized castes/classes. In fact, Phule anticipated Max Weber’s thesis that cultural presuppositions deeply carve out the tracks on which popular culture routes their people (O’Hanlon: 2002: 137). Hence, Phule proposed the ‘*Baliraja* alternative’ to the Brahmanism and caste-society. He saw morality, equality, fraternity, prosperity and happiness in the rule of king Bali. This was his alternative model of socio-spiritual liberation.

(3)

It becomes clear that being a great rationalist and radical reformer, Jotirao Phule wanted to change the entire pattern of the outmoded old Hindu religion. In his earlier writings, for instance *Brahmanche Kasab*, *Gulamagiri* and *Shetakaryacha Asud*, Phule appears to have engaged in critiquing the old orthodox religion. But in his later writings, especially *Sarvajanik Satyadharma Pustak*, he also comes forward with his own idea of religion. In this treatise, he attempts to supersede the belief structure of *Brahman Dharma* with an alternative understanding of religion and its practices. Sections of this book deal with nearly all subjects – true faith, proper worship, ethical behavior, righteous conduct, social and gender equality and, most importantly, his notion of *Satyadharma* (Omvedt: 2008: 177). Actually, while dismissing the religion of orthodoxy altogether, Phule presumed that something had to be put in its place. Even a revolutionary culture requires an ethico-moral foundation. That is why, he did not reject the idea of *Dharma* but rather attempted to establish the *Satyadharma*, as, to him, the basis of Hindu society had to be centered on truth and morality.

As told, Phule neither thought of conversion nor suggested his followers to embrace other religions. In fact, throughout his life, Phule remained a Hindu and lived and died a Hindu. But, to him,

only “*Arya Bhats*” (orthodox Brahmins) alone did not constitute the Hindus, but “*Shudras, Atishudras, Bhils and Kolis...*all are Hindus”, though, unfortunately, those Hindus were “put to great deprivations and hardships” by the orthodoxy (Phule: 1889: tr. by Patil: 1991: 28). He, therefore, made every effort to bring together all laboring classes – *Kumbis, Malis, Dhangars, Ramoshis, Bhils, Kolis, Mahars and Mangs* – under one umbrella to wage a morality-driven and knowledge-based struggle against the *Brahmanical* falsehood. (Begari: 2010: 403). Nonetheless, it cannot be said, as G.P. Deshpande (Deshpande: 2002: 9-10) and Gail Omvedt (Omvedt: 1995: 20) claim, that Phule saw ‘class struggle’ between the Brahmins and the lower castes. In fact, his ultimate aim was not revolution but the restoration of brotherhood and love among all human beings. Hence, while rejecting the *Brahmanic* notions of ‘high’ and ‘low’, ‘pure’ and ‘polluted’ and ‘sacred’ and ‘unsacred’, Phule, in his alternative model, preached the idea of universal brotherhood in the principles enshrined in his book *Sarvajanik Satyadharm Pustak*. This idea transcends all artificial divisions/distinctions based on caste, class, gender, community, status, position, privilege, physical condition, faith, opinion, food habits or the mode of apparel, etc. (Omvedt: 1995: 33-37).

It is true that Phule attacked almost everything in the so-called ‘great’ tradition of Hinduism (i.e., *Brahman Dharma*) and rejected it. He always referred to that religion as a “religion of *Arya-Bhats*”. But despite all of his criticism of the old orthodox religion, this couldn’t be said that Phule was speaking as an alien to Hindu religion as his writings as well as actions show a clear identification with the common Hindu masses and their popular culture and traditions. In fact, his stand was against the hegemonic religio-cultural system of Hindus, as Gail Omvedt also suggests (Omvedt: 2011: 108). It is also noted that despite endorsing the racial theory, Phule never treated Brahmins as simply a racial category, a group which is ‘unalterably evil’; but regarded them worthy to be accepted if they would have given up their claims to be the “earthly gods”:

When all the *Aryan-Bhat* throw away their bogus scriptures and begin to behave towards all human beings in the way of Truth, then there is no doubt that all women and men will bow down reverently before the Creator of all and pray for the welfare of the *Aryas* (Omvedt: 1995: 22).

In fact, despite being a fierce critic of the religion of orthodoxy, Phule was a religious man from the core of his heart and believed in the institution of religion and its true spiritual values. Like most of

the leaders and spokesmen of the lower caste Hindus, he also felt the need to establish a religious alternative based upon the philosophy of egalitarian theism. He always thought of the religion. Since his childhood, he was impressed by the concept of devotion to the 'Creator' and that of truly religious conduct/behavior. His thoughts and insights about religion may be found in almost all of his writings. While thinking of writing his 'book of religion', Phule found that there was not a single religious book which contained truth from the beginning to the end. Since all the religious books were written by human beings, it was quite easier to interpolate dogmatic views in them. That's way; the writers of the religious books were pig-headed men (Keer: 1969: 353). In such state of affairs, Phule opines that every religious and revelatory book contains some elements of dogma in response to the dictates of time, place and situation, and as a result, creates divisions, envy and hate:

All the religious and revelatory books that man has produced on our planet, one and all, do not contain a consistent universal truth. This is so because in every such book are to be seen passages interpolated into these texts by certain groups of individuals as the situation in their view warranted and as their dogmatism and mulishness dictated. Consequently, the religions or faiths did not in their final analysis work towards the good of all. This in turn resulted in sects and sectarianism. Small wonder that these sects hated and turned against each other (Phule: 1885: tr. by Deshpande: 2002: 229).

He further stated that if God had created any religious book on the earth, then He would have made it in a simple and universal language so that any human being on the earth could read and understand it easily. Moreover, He would not have created inequality between male and female. Pointing out the adverse effects of the "sinful injustice" done by men to women in India, Phule remarked:

Men in our country did not treat their own daughters or daughters-in-law equally. On the other hand, they stigmatized (treat with contempt) their mothers, sisters, daughters or daughters-in-law (i.e. all women as such in India) 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 declined, an atmosphere of discontent spread everywhere, and sorrow was born (and held its sway in this world) (Phule: 1889: tr. by Patil: 1991: 19).

Since all religious books were authored by men, they did not contain good things about women. They refuse all human rights for

women: "If a holy woman had written any scripture, the men would not have been able to ignore the due rights of women and the men would also not have waxed ebullient about their own rights" (Phule: 1889: tr. by Patil: 1991: 38), Phule argued with a compassionate heart for women.

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As a matter of fact, Phule's alternative model to orthodox religion was not just for Hindus alone. He actually came out with a concept of 'universal religion of truth' (*Sarvajanik Satyadharmā*) to all people of the world irrespective of their different faiths or organized religions. That is why; all the ideas and principles of his 'religion' appear to be flexible and rational even to the extent that except 'truth', he does not suggest anything which looks untruth. Notably, in his *Akhandas* on the subject he preached the truth and truth alone. He was of the firm opinion that there can't be a religion without truth. He writes:

... Unless all men follow the path of truth and treat one another (conduct themselves towards one another) with pure and holy feelings in their hearts (with love and charity), they will not be knit together by pure, loving and fraternal bonds (of feelings and emotions). And, hence, I am sorry to say, the kingdom of God is not likely to come to pass (will not be inaugurated in this unfortunate, hapless, sorrow-ridden) world of ours, for the present (Phule: 1889: tr. by Patil: 1991: 19-20).

To understand his deep concern for truth, we can take, for instance, his concept of God which is totally different from the old traditional concepts of 'God'. As noted earlier, he referred to Him as '*Nirmik*' which means the Creator (Joshi: 1992: 56). He believed that the terms hitherto coined for Creator had grown out of practices/observance of prayer or worship, which only created social rift amongst human beings. It was for this reason that he avoided terms such as *Ishwar*, *Allah*, *Brahma*, and God. It is interesting to note that Thomas Paine has also used the word Creator for God in his *Age of Reason*. There is a similarity between Phule's concept of *Nirmik* and Paine's concept of Creator. To Paine, God is omnipotent and omnipresent and also benevolent. He asks:

Do we want to contemplate His power? We see it in the immensity of the creations. Do we want to contemplate His wisdom? We see it in the unchangeable order by which the incomprehensible whole is governed. Do we want to contemplate His munificence? We see it in the abundance with which he fills the earth. Do we want to contemplate His mercy? We see it in His not withholding that abundance even from the unthankful....

To know what God is, search not the book called the scripture (Fast: 1946: 303).

Thomas Paine further states that everything that is created by the Creator in the world is for the benefit of human-beings (Fast: 1946: 321). Likewise, Phule's *Nirmikis* also omnipresent, omnipotent and benevolent; He is so kind-hearted to human beings that the creation of everything in the world is favorable to the human life. For example, there are oceans on the earth; and to provide water for the human beings, God has planned to mingle salt with the water in the oceans so that it will not be spoiled. And also the Creator has planned to provide various types of trees, flora and fauna etc. on the earth which all are useful to the human beings (Phule: 1889: tr. by Patil: 1991: 13).

Phule's *Nirmik*, like Kabir's, was conceived in radical monotheistic terms, He did not believe in the prophets or messengers of God as propounded in the institutionalized religions. Nor did he believe in the theories of hell and heaven, incarnation and predestination. His own mind and conscience, to paraphrase Thomas Paine's 'maxim', was his temple. In this sense, Phule's *Nirmik* was transcendental, but resided within his own being (Mani: 2005: 265). He believed that though the Creator has created all living things, but he has endowed humans alone with a rational faculty (intellect) and by its judicious use, humans can improve their lot. With such ideas in the background, Phule came out with his concept of *Satyadharmā*. In the introduction of his *Sarvajānik Satyadharmā Pustak*, he dreams of the restoration of "*Nirmik's* kingdom of truth" on earth in these words:

In this vast boundless space of ours, the *Nirmik* has created all living beings along with innumerable solar systems and their planets and satellites. By the grace of God, I have written this humble book for the good of humanity, to show to men and women what kind of conduct to adopt towards others, with His thoughts always in their minds, and which will please Him. I ask of Him that this book be accepted by all and that all of us enjoy equally *Nirmik's* kingdom of truth (Phule: 1889: quoted in Joshi: 1992: 56).

Phule did not like the methods of worshipping God prevalent in the old Hindu religion (and, of course, other religions). He did not believe in offering any flower or *Naivedya* (food offered at the time of worship) to *Nirmik*. Since *Nirmik* has created flowers and sweets and scented things for the use of humans, it is useless and meaningless to dedicate these things to *Nirmik*. Similarly, *Nirmik* can't be pleased by meditation alone. Repeating in mind countless times the name of God is not the proper way to worship. Then what should be the

proper way to “make ourselves blessed”? He clarifies:

Repeating *Nirmik's* name is not going to make ourselves blessed. Those who do not earn their livelihood on the strength of their own labour, or do not strive for the good of the world, but, in order to fill their own bellies, resort to donning the garb of hypocritical mendicants, forever intoxicated with *bhang* or gorging on the delicacies offered by ignorant, simple-minded persons and indulge in meaningless repetition of God's name, expose themselves to the derision of the sagacious. With gratitude in one's heart for God and by treating one another like brothers and sisters, all human beings can be happy, *Nirmik's* regime will be established and His kingdom will come (Phule: 1889: quoted in Joshi: 1992: 59-60).

Thus, according to Phule, righteous conduct is the true remembrance of *Nirmik*. Instead of offering food or sweets etc. to Him, we should offer it to the poor, the handicapped and the needy people (Phule: 1889: tr. by Patil: 1991: 36-37).

As a matter of fact, Phule intended to write his book of religion to teach how men and women should follow the right path of conduct and live peacefully for the happiness of all humanity, keeping in heart the Almighty, and enjoy the fruit of the holy and veracious kingdom of *Nirmik*. This book is a significant proof to show that Phule was not only a social reformer but also a theologian who was interested to suggest a right path of spiritual elevation and moral conduct to his followers and guide them in their socio-religious life. He begins his book with the injunction that people could never be happy in the world unless their conduct was true:

Truth is the primary home of all,
 The refuge of all religions.
 All the happiness in the world
 Is the offspring of truth.
 Truth is the shelter of happiness,
 The rest is all darkness.
 Verily, truth reigns supreme,
 It does away with spite and gall.
 Those sustained by truth
 Can verily rout the false-hearted.
 On seeing the power of truth
 The jester turns green with envy.
 Real happiness is not for the actor
 Who attempts to shun truth and God.
 Joti prays to all the people,
 Do not give in to untruth

(Phule: 1889: quoted in Joshi: 1992: 58).

“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 writings, for instance, ‘*Satyaprakash*’ (light of truth), ‘*Satyodaya*’ (rise of truth), ‘*Satyaish*’ (the godly truth). ‘*Satsar*’ (essence of truth), ‘*Satyadharma*’ (religion of truth), ‘*Satyashodhak*’ (researcher of truth), ‘*Satyasamaji*’ (follower/worker of *Satyashodhak Samaj*) etc. (Jadhav: 1987: 313). It is also pertinent to note that he named his association as *Satyashodhak Samaj* and it is needless to say that his classical book entitled *Sarvajanik Satyadharma Pustak* aims at defining the principles of religion of truth. He used the fundamental spiritual axiom “Truth alone triumphs” and displayed it on his letter-heads. Significantly, great sages of India had also stressed this message, which has been the mainspring of Hindu/Indian culture and tradition (Keer: 2013: 286). Hence, the most important feature of his idea of religion is that it was totally based on ‘truth’ and reason. He writes:

If you yearn for happiness (in life), then take your firm stand on the truth (always follow the truth). Propitiate the truth and act courageously, and make all the people of the world quite happy and contented. Only then you will be the picture (embodiment) of true happiness, you will be a victor of the race of life and you will also enable others to be such victors. Deep self-introspection is the true (authentic) knowledge (wisdom), and is an unerring sign of an enlightened intellect, says Jyoti (Phule: 1889: tr. by Patil: 1991: 157).

Thus, Jotirao wanted to suggest an alternative monolithic religion of truth. Based upon this idea, he did a severe critic of the *Brahman Dharma*:

If *Nirmik* is the creator of us all, then he should grant human beings mercy to suitably enjoy all the human rights that have been created. Since this does not happen, human beings have to undergo various kinds of unbearable sufferings. Feelings of enmity have flourished among the people of the nations of the world, giving rise to undue pride in one’s country and religion. Rivers of numerous nations of the world join the sea. How can any (particular) river be termed holy, for, even that holiest of holy rivers carries the excreta of a dog in its womb before proceeding to the sea. When all human beings are equal in body and mind, how can some acquire holiness by birth and thus attain superiority? (Phule: 1889: quoted in Joshi: 1992: 58-59).

A staunch critique of the Brahman’s superiority in Hinduism, Phule had attacked several times the profession of priestcraft and the conduct of the priestly caste in Hinduism. In stripping the Brahman

of his religious authority and the social hierarchies created by the *Brahman Dharma*, he hoped, the *Satyadharm*a would make the lower caste men/women understand the working of the natural world and distribution of power and authority in their own society (O'Hanlon: 2002: 128). As noted earlier, his *Priestcraft Exposed* (1869) was specially intended to throw light on the exploitation of peasants etc. by the priests wherein he attempts to undermine existing belief of Hindus in the necessity of a priest or mediator to carry out religious rituals. He argued that no such intermediary was necessary between the man and *Nirmik*, and what orthodox Brahmins did attempt to interpose themselves was in search only of money and power, and not for the spiritual well-being of the Hindus (O'Hanlon: 2002: 208).

It is pointed out here that his mentor Thomas Paine also never felt the need of a mediator in his concept of religion. According to him, "He (Jesus Christ) preached most excellent morality and the equality of men; he preached also against the corruptions and greed of the Jewish priests, and this brought upon him the hatred and vengeance of the whole order of priesthood" (Fast: 1946: 289-90). Phule held the same opinion about the priestcraft prevalent in Hinduism. In fact, one of his prime concerns in his book of religion appears to dethrone the priest from his preeminent position of go-between God and man, and in this sense, he was rescuing Hinduism from "Brahman philistines", as G.P. Deshpande points out (Deshpande: 2002: 12).

According to J.R. Shinde, a significant feature of Phule's religion was that it not confined only to individual but to the whole society as well. In other words, the nature of his religion was more social, more public, and more universal than individualist (Shinde: 1987: 106). Therefore, he named it "universal religion of truth". Another feature of his idea of religion is that it was totally based on rationality. He clearly writes:

The Creator has endowed all beings with eyes (eye sight) with which they are able to see one another. He has also equipped them with the rational faculty with which they can search for the (real) truth and lead the ignorant to the (right) path. The Creator has ordained (only) one Religion of Universal Truth (for us all). What is propriety of the people quarreling (among themselves) on various counts? Let all human beings conduct themselves in awe and fear of the Creator, and thus lead happy lives, says Joti (Phule: 1889: tr. by Patil: 1991: 137).

Hence, Phule suggested truth and truth alone should be the basis of any religion or society. Without observing truth in daily life, human-beings cannot be happy and the kingdom of *Nirmik* is not

likely to be manifested. As a true *Satyashodhak*, Phule preached truth throughout his life. In his book of religion, he laid down thirty-three principles for the guidance of his followers. These principles are the crux of his idea of *Satyadharmā*. Some of the important principles of his 'religion of truth' are as under:

- (1) Our Creator has created the human beings.... (and) has graciously bestowed all human rights on all men and women, without any distinction. No particular man or a group (gang) of men has any right to oppress any human being. Those who do not so oppress their fellow beings should be designated as the votaries or followers of the truth.
- (2) Our Creator has created all human beings. Each woman will choose one man as her husband, and each man will choose one woman as his wife. Barring such legitimate instances (cases, examples), if all men and women behave towards all other human beings as brothers and sisters, they should be designated as the votaries or followers of the truth.
- (3) Our Creator has given all human beings full freedom to express, to write down and to publish (propagate) their personal opinions and views regarding the human rights (which He has so kindly bestowed upon them all). Those who take scrupulous care not to harm other human beings while exercising the above mentioned freedom in their personal lives should be designated as the votaries or followers of the truth.
- (4) Those who accept the view that our Creator has endowed all human beings with the requisite capacity to hold (and enjoy) any position of authority in matters of religion or village administration or revenue administration, in consonance with their innate ability and capability, should be designated as the votaries or followers of the truth.
- (5) Men or women who do not regard themselves or their blood-relations or their own kith or kin or their own friends and companions only as pre-eminent, sacrosanct or specially privileged hereditarily, and who do not regard other human beings as of mean lineage or as unholy – such persons should be designated as the votaries or followers of the truth.
- (6) Men or women who, on the dubious authority of their spurious and wicked Scriptures, do not stigmatize other human beings as hereditary slaves (helots, thralls) or who do not pay respect to those who stigmatize others – should be designated as the votaries or followers of the truth.

- (7) Men or women who, in order to perpetuate their own domination, do not discriminate against other people's children while imparting instruction to them in the schools, or who condemn persons so discriminating should be designated as the votaries or followers of the truth.
- (8) Men or women who, while dispensing justice in Courts of law, award due punishment to the guilty in accordance with the canons of justice impartially and fairly, and who condemn those who act unjustly and partially in such cases, should be designated as the votaries or followers of the truth.
- (9) Men or women who do not look down upon persons earning an honest livelihood by working as unskilled laborers under a cobbler, but who, moreover, praise persons aiding such artisans, should be designated as the votaries or followers of the truth.
- (10) Men or women who do not discriminate human beings created by our Creator or who do not make any (artificial) distinctions in their dealings with them regarding their food-habits or the mood of their apparel, but conduct themselves with pure hearts to them, should be designated as the votaries or followers of the truth.
- (11) Men or women who do not discriminate against human beings, but who are ever ready to help, to the best of their ability, lepers, physically handicapped persons or orphans, or honor those helping such persons should be designated as the votaries or followers of the truth (Phule: 1889: tr. by Patil: 1991: 33-37).

It is pointed out that though Phule considered ritualism a part of overall mechanism of exploitation in Hinduism and, therefore, severely criticized rituals prevalent in *Brahman Dharma*; yet he himself introduced some new rituals for his followers. In these rituals, however, needy and the poor were to be served, instead of 'lazy' and 'greedy' priests. The question arises why did Phule try to keep intact the outer form of rituals? Giving answer to this question, J.R. Shinde opines that Phule felt when the hegemonic tradition in Hinduism was being thrown away, something new must be introduced in its place so that the new entrants might not feel a vacuum in the new reformed religion (Shinde: 1987: 107-08). In fact, the Hindu masses whom he was addressing was illiterate and highly ceremonially-oriented. Some ceremonies and rituals were, therefore, necessary to satisfy them. Nevertheless, he introduced such new rituals which were useful for the welfare of the masses and also contrary to the

religion of orthodoxy.

Major thrust of Phule in his universal religion of truth was mainly upon the universal values of morality, equality, fraternity and rationality. As such, these values could be identified as the precepts of his *Satyadharma*. Phule himself followed strictly all the principles of his *Satyadharma*. For instance, he preached the ideal of monogamy in the thirty-three principles of his religion. Though Jotirao and Savitribai had not any ward, he did not think of his another marriage. Sometimes, he was advised to do so by his nearest relatives, but he always refused because it was his principle that all those who regard all other women except their own wives as their sisters are the followers of truth (Keer: 2013: 256).

(4)

While going through his work, it also appears that Phule was a great advocate of human rights. He always demanded that rights of all men and women must be honored and ensured. In this context, his mentor Thomas Paine's *Rights of Man* again appears to be a great source of inspiration to him. In his 'Declaration of the Rights of Men', Paine considered twenty-seven principles. In one of his principles, he declared: "Men are born free and equal, and always continue to be free and equal in respect of their rights" (Fast: 1946: 155-57). Phule also preached in the same line: "Every man or woman has God-given rights to freedom of expression in writing, speaking and publishing; he or she (however) should not do it in such a way as to deprive others of their rights" (Phule: 1889: tr. by Patil: 1991: 22). When we cast a glance on *Sarvajanik Satyadharma Pustak* or any of his other major writings, it suddenly appears that he always pleaded for human rights of all individuals. His basic argument in this respect was that since our Creator had created all of us as "free human beings", the human rights are bestowed to all of us as natural rights:

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 are entitled to enjoy their human rights freely (without any curbs or restrictions on their rights). And, hence (it follows that), each person has an (inalienable) right to occupy positions of power and authority.... (Phule: 1889: tr. by Patil: 1991: 22).

He further argued if our Creator had written a holy book, he would have "surely "and "impartially" ensured 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 (also) 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) (Phule: 1889: tr. by Patil: 1991: 37).

Naturally, in the principles of his 'religion of truth' Phule's main stress also seems to be on restoration of human rights in India. As such, he came forward as the first champion of 'human rights' in modern India. In almost all of his writings, he has stressed on the equal 'human rights' for all men and women. He has particularly preached his idea of human rights in the principles enshrined in his book *Sarvajanik Satyadharm Pustak* where he opines that the natural rights are inherent to all human beings regardless of all artificial divisions/distinctions based on caste, gender, community, class, faith (Phule: 1889: tr. by Patil: 1991: 33-37). Giving advice to the members of his society, he said:

Men and women should not discriminate against one another (should treat others justly) irrespective of the consideration of their villages, or presidencies, or countries, or continents or irrespective of religious beliefs which they profess, but they should regard themselves as members of one world-wide family, (and) should behave amicably and in unison, observing strictly the truthful doctrine (path). Only thus can they please Creator.... (Phule: 1889: tr. by Patil: 1991: 39).

He demanded from the dominant castes/classes who had 'enslaved' the lower castes/classes for generations, to restore their due human rights immediately. He did not hate them and was kind enough to forgive them if they would restore the human rights of the lower castes:

Since you did enslave the *Shudras* and *Atishudras* and have tortured us through generations as if it were your inherited right until today, you should first restore to the *Mahars* and *Mangs* their due human rights and apologize to them. Having accomplished that if you would then come and consult the ignorant *Shudras* like us, we shall see what we can do (Phule: 1885: Deshpande: 2002: 207).

Similarly, at some other place, while appealing particularly the orthodox Brahmans to "follow the path of truth", he, on behalf of the downtrodden, again expressed the same views:

If they genuinely repent for their crime, and if they search for the eternal truth and if they sincerely try to follow the path of truth, then (and then) only will the *Shudras* and *Atishudras* and the *Bhils* (tribals) and the fishermen etc. will not take revenge upon them for their past and present crimes committed against them, but will certainly forgive them (magnanimously) (Phule: 1889: tr. by Patil: 1991: 32).

Phule was, perhaps, the first Indian thinker who pleaded for equal rights for both men and women openly and, thereby, anticipated the 'U.N. Charter of Universal Declaration of Human Rights' (1948), the first articles of which states: "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights and as a result of common birth into human family they are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one-another in a spirit of brotherhood" (Naik: 2007: 34).

A true champion of human rights, Phule had deep sympathies for the Depressed Classes. He always preached for the upliftment of the Untouchables. Therefore, he taught in his religion of truth that those who do not exploit poor and downtrodden people "either in the name of religion or because of astrological superstitions" are the followers of truth. Similarly, those who do not look down upon the untouchable people (like cobblers) etc. are the followers of truth (Phule: 1889: tr. by Patil: 1991: 36). Thus, Phule objected to all kinds of degradation of one human being by other human being. To him, all those who observed the practice of untouchability or caste discrimination were the followers of 'untruth'. Similarly, those who do not show their respect for handicraftsmen were also not the followers of truth. He attacked the orthodox '*Arya-Bhats*' for the "absurdity of their queer behavior" with the lower castes:

The *Shudras* and *Atishudras* are absolutely ignorant (illiterate). The cunning Aryan Brahmans do not think it below their dignity to worship the crawling poisonous snakes, as also the monkeys. But they take a great delight in eating and drinking (and also in associating shamelessly) with the prostitutes whom the *Shudras* and *Atishudras* abominate.... So what then is the basis (authority) for the evil practice of the cunning Aryan Brahmans in regarding even the best among the *Atishudras* as mean and contemptible? A little reflection will prove to you the absurdity of their queer behavior (Phule: 1889: tr. by Patil: 1991: 21).

To Phule, a true faith gives vision to people to make "deep self-introspection" and imitate a path of "true ethical conduct":

If you yearn for happiness (in life), then take your firm stand on the truth (always follow the truth). Propitiate the truth and act courageously,

and make all the people in the world quite happy and contented. Only then you will be the picture (embodiment) of true happiness, you will be a victor in the race of life, and you will enable others to be such victors. Deep self-introspection is the true indication of an enlightened intellect (intelligence) ... True ethical conduct is the (ideal) religion of man. Everything else is unethical, says Joti (Phule: 1889: tr. by Patil: 1991: 157).

Phule opined that illiterate people do not know which factors effect on the progress of human beings. Even the Brahman priests, who exploit the lower castes and behave with them contemptibly, are actually doing this in ignorance, but right education of "love and charity" would also enlighten them about the true religion:

Truthful conduct is the essence of the true religion of humankind and the (orthodox) Brahman does not know this secret. *Laxmi*, the goddess of wealth, massages the feet of the hardworking *Shudras*, and she never spurns them as (mean) *Kunbis*. Human beings will surely be happy if they try to please one another through love and charity. Then all evils will flee from them helter-skelter. A hard working person is the true brother (helper) of a *Shudra*, and you should always try to benefit him, says Joti (Phule: 1889: tr. by Patil: 1991: 153).

Phule describes the character of a true follower of truth in one of his poems as under:

He to whom truth has revealed itself will never (even dream) to trouble any other person in the least. He will never profess himself, as a Brahman falsely (does), in thought, word and deed, and will never try to flaunt his superiority over the *Shudras* and allied persons. He does not show-off his high birth (social rank) and does not practice his hypocrisy on any one. We should regard such a person as one (follower of truth) who appreciates the merits of others, and should always associate with him, says Joti (Phule: 1889: tr. by Patil: 1991: 154).

In another poem, he further throws light on the character of a "truly enlightened person":

He who has developed an aptitude to follow the path of truth is, indeed, an adornment to humanity, and is also truly happy. His earnest desire is that all (human beings) should be happy. He is avid for virtue and is truly enlightened (learned). He unerringly identifies the source of joys and sorrows of others, and conducts himself towards them in befitting manner. He alone is truly blessed..., says Joti (Phule: 1889: tr. by Patil: 1991: 155).

According to Phule, educating the down-trodden was a 'remedy' to almost each and every problem that they were facing. As noted

earlier, poverty and exploitation of *Shudras-Atishudras* was, according to him, chiefly due to lack of education. Hence, he not only emphasized the issue of educating the lower classes in the principles of his religion of truth, but also declared education as “remedial whipcord” for “nauseating wrong” done to them in the past (Phule: 1889: tr. by Patil: 1991: 46).

He was so much certain about his ‘remedy’ that he even predicted that when the down-trodden would be educated and “to learn the tenets of the true knowledge, one day a person of “saintly character” or a “true follower of truth” will arise from among them and “will glorify our names”:

All the *Shudras* and *Atishudras* as also our other compatriots such as the *Bhils* (tribal people), the fishermen etc. who have been traditionally condemned as mean, ignoble and insignificant by the *Arya-Bhats*/Brahmans for centuries, should send their sons and daughters to the schools where they will begin to learn (imbibe) the tenets of the true (universally valid) knowledge. When, in due course of time (in the fullness of time), all our sons and daughters will be properly educated in the tenets of the true knowledge, a saintly character will arise from among the ranks of the *Shudras* and other allied classes, who will strew flowers over the graves of us all and will truly sanctify and glorify our names. I prophesy thus with my heart brimming over with joy and grateful thanks! (Phule: 1889: tr. by Patil: 1991: 47).

Definitely, this was the prediction by a true Mahatma, a follower of truth, which later on came to be true in the rise of Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, the champion of the weaker sections in India, from among the ranks of the Untouchables who really “strew flowers over the grave” of Mahatma Phule when he declared that he (Phule) was one of his three great Gurus, other being Mahatma Buddha and Mahatma Kabir. Quite interestingly, apart from Ambedkar, Mahatma Gandhi also took inspiration from Phule particularly from his concept of truth. Everyone knows that Gandhi was also a follower of truth. In beginning, he worshiped God as truth. But, interestingly, after some time he changed his views and corrected himself and said: “In fact, it is more correct to say that Truth is God (rather) than to say God is Truth.” (Gandhi: 1981: 7-8) Gandhi came closer to Phule this way.

(5)

Phule’s formulations on *Dharma* are simple and straightforward and create in a sense, to use the words of G.P. Deshpande, a “republic of equalitarian dharma” (Deshpande: 2002: 12). Deshpande argues

that that it may sound paradoxical, but his conception of *Satyadharma* is rather secular, as he suggests a 'universal religion of truth' for all irrespective of the faiths the people were already having. His religion was open to all. It was subject to change according to time and space. Overall, his focus was on the individual and his relation to the *Nirmik*. The universal was the main theme of his religion. Personally, Phule believed that there should be only one religion in the world, and that is, universal religion of truth. Nevertheless, he never allowed any sectarian tendency in his idea of religion. He never tolerated any religious fanaticism. To prove his theory of 'one religion' and 'one Creator', he cited many examples. For instance, there is only one sun in the world that never makes any difference between human beings. Then why should we think of many gods and many religions? (Jadhav: 1987: 321).

Phule also never wanted that any human being should be forced to accept any religion. The membership of any religion should be a matter of willingness and choice on the part of individual himself/herself and it should not be determined by his/her birth. That's the reason, he allowed in his ideal of *Satyadharma* that there may be followers of different religions in a single family and it is not necessary that all members in a family should belong to only one religion. He writes:

...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. 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 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, if he so chooses, after studying *A Book of Universal Religion of Truth* (by Mahatma Phule -1891). And all these members of the family (the parents, the daughter and the son) 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 mind that they are the Creator's children, and hence, are the members of (belonging to) the Creator's own family (Phule: 1889: tr. by Patil: 1991: 39-40).

In sum, Jotirao Phule wanted to destroy the old pattern of orthodox religion among Hindus. Like Karl Marx, he believed that man makes religion, religion does not make man. Religion is the self-consciousness and self-esteem of man who has either not yet found himself or has

already lost himself again (Marx & Angles: 1975: 38-39). His concept of religion mainly focuses on the emancipation of man, particularly the downtrodden, from the age-old established orders. Hence, his religious teachings aim at the upliftment of the disadvantaged lower castes and women. All of his thirty-three principles meant for truth-seekers indicate that he was chiefly concerned for the cause of the oppressed humanity including peasants, workers, women and the downtrodden. Like a true Mahatma, he was full of compassion for all the oppressed. Most important thing of his ideal of *Satyadharma* was that, to him, the 'truth' and 'religion' are the two sides of the same coin. According to him, truth itself is religion and the precepts of religion of truth are morality, equality, fraternity and rationality. That's why; he basically preached the 'righteous conduct' among his followers through his concept of religion throughout his life. As such, we may sum up Phule's religious philosophy, in the words of Dr. Vishram Ghole, as follows:

Worship one God, practice righteous conduct. Everyone should behave like brothers and sisters towards each other. All human beings, men and women, should have equal rights. There should be no caste discrimination. The evil customs of today, which are the offshoots of our religion, should be discarded (Joshi: 1992: 57-58).

Similarly, J.V. Naik points out that Phule's understanding of religion shows a "healthy opposition to escapism, devotionism, externalism, hypocrisy, formalism and selfishness in religious matters" (Naik: 2007: 34-35). Nonetheless, Phule was entirely a religious man having a unique religious mind. Phule's mind could be best explained using the words of Jiddu Krishnamurti: "The religious is not the mind that goes to churches, temples, mosques. Nor is it a religious mind that holds to certain forms of beliefs, dogmas.... Not being nationalistic, not being conditioned by its environment, such a mind has no horizons, no limits. It is explosive, new, young, fresh and innocent." (Krishnamurti: 1974: 18). Being an 'explosive, fresh and innocent' religious mind, Phule advanced his framework of socio-religious reform wherein he coined, as has been noted, his fresh concepts of equality, reform and religion particularly for the Hindus who were the victims of 'Brahmanism'. In short, he envisioned a popular form of 'reformed Hinduism' wherein he dreamt of an egalitarian and moral society based on his conception of the 'religion of truth'.

To conclude, it may be stated that being an organic intellectual, Phule viewed the problem of Hindu social reform with the perspective of the lower classes of Hindu society. Resultantly, he came out with a radical framework of social reform wherein he, in addition to other

things, proposed his spiritual conception of *Satyadharmā*. Though he was not satisfied with the existing state of affairs in Hinduism, he neither himself thought of conversion nor suggested his followers to embrace other religions. To him, just “*Arya Bhats*” (orthodox Brahmans) alone did not constitute the Hindus, but “*Shudras, Atishudras, Bhils and Kolis* etc.” all are Hindus, though, those Hindus were unfortunately “put to great deprivations and hardships” by the *Brahmanical* orthodoxy. He argued that the priestly order had to be questioned because their ‘dominance’ was clearly conspicuous in Hinduism. It was for this reason that he earnestly felt the need to step out the ideology of ‘Brahmanism’ from Hinduism. As a result, he came forward with his idea of ‘*Satyadharmā*’ (religion of truth) which was his alternative model to *Brahman Dharma*. His alternative religion transcends all artificial divisions/distinctions prevalent among the people based on caste, class, gender, community, status, position, privilege, physical condition, faith, opinion, food habits or the mode of apparel, etc. The major thrust of Phule in his idea of *Satyadharmā* was mainly upon the universal values of morality, equality, fraternity and rationality. Most importantly, his concept of religion mainly emphasises on the emancipation of man. All the principles of his *Satyadharmā* meant for the “truth-seekers” indicate that he was chiefly concerned for the cause of the oppressed humanity including lower caste *Shudra-Atishudras*, women, peasants and workers.

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