

Feministic Approach in Phule's Philosophy of Education

Abstract: Jyotiba Govindarao Phule was one of the most important makers of modern India. He struggled a lot for the education of women and low caste despite of threats to his life. He was the pioneer of revolutionary thinker. He was propagator of human unity and national integrity. He opened a girl's school in 1848 at Budhwar Peth, Pune in the residential building of Tatyasaheb Bhide. He opened two more schools in 1851 among which one school was for girls of backward class. For him, Principle of universalization of education is needed and education should be made compulsory. Such education should serve the nation binding. This paper is an attempt to discuss Mahatma Jyotiba Phule as feminist philosopher in colonial India. He raised the problem of women's oppression. This made him nineteenth century male feminist Philosophers of India.

Keywords: Education, Feminism, Social Justice, Women's Oppression, Caste, Dalit, Untouchable

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The root cause of all kind of gender disparity lies in Indian society in the system of patriarchy. Patriarchy is a system of social structure and practices which dominate oppress and exploit women. The system of patriarchy is an age old tradition of Indian society which finds its roots in our

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religious beliefs. As per Manu a famous Hindu Law giver, women are supposed to be in the custody of their father when they are children, of their husband when they are married and of their son in old age or as widows. Women under any circumstances had no freedom. The *Manusmriti*¹ being known as *Manav Dharma Shashtra* unambiguously pronounces on the position of the women at home as well as in society. While defending *Manusmriti*² as a divine code of conduct shows dignity to women in general by quoting it as 'Yatra naryasto pujoyante, ramyantya tara devata'³ (where women are provided place of honour, god are satisfied and live there in that household). But quite strange, that the champion of *Manusmriti*⁴ seems to keep absolutely quite on all the verses of *shashtra* showing bigotry, intolerance and detriment against women. Some of the utterances as follow:

- It is the nature of women to seduce the men in the world; hence the wise men are unguarded in the company of the women.
- Wise people should avoid alone with one's mother, sister or daughter. Since carnal desire is always strong leads to temptation.
- One should not marry to women who have reddish hair, redundant parts of the body (such as six fingers or toe). One who is often sick, one without hair or with excessive hair and one who has red eyes.
- Wise men should not marry women who should not have and brother and whose parents are not socially well known.
- *Brahmin* men can marry a women belonging to all four *varnas* but *shudra* men can marry only *shudra* women.

¹ *Manusmriti* is a text in the Hindu religion believed to be written by Manu (is a author of *Manusmriti* which lays down the Hindu code of conduct and is believed to be drafted around 1,500 B.C.) which lays down extremely rigorous and discriminatory social norms and dictates for the untouchables and for women.

² Ibid.

³ Hari Ponnamma Rani, Madhavi Kesari *Women in Higher Education in India: Perspectives and Challenges*, Cambridge publication, U K, 2018, ISBN 1-5275-0854-4.

⁴ Ibid

- Although *Brahmin*, *Kshtriya* and *Vaishya* men have been allowed inter-caste marriage, even in distress they should not marry *shudra* women.

- Women have no divine rights to neither perform any religious rituals, nor make vows or observed the fast. Her only duty is to obey and please her husband and only for that she is exalted in heaven.

- Males between the age of 24 and 30 should marry to females between the age of 8 and 12 and so on.

From all the above mentioned verdicts of *Manusmriti*⁵ on women, it is evident that traditionally oppressed in patriarchal society and no mention of education of women was made by Manu. Jyotiba Phule (1827-1890) was one of the most important makers of modern India. Education for women and untouchables was nothing more than day dream in this era. In this situation he struggled a lot for the education of women and low caste despite of threats to his life. He was the pioneer of revolutionary thinking and known as 'Father of Indian Social Revolution' in the modern age as rightly mentioned in his autobiography written by Dhananjay Keer, Thus, he was one of the '*Mahatmas*' (Great Soul) of India, occupies a unique position.

He was first revolutionary and leader of downtrodden, peasants and supporter of women's education. He paved the way for the new era of social activism. He was propagator of human unity and national integrity. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar said, "Mahatma Phule is the greatest shudra of modern India who made the lower classes of Hindus conscious of their slavery to the higher classes who preached the teaching of humanity."⁶ For, India social democracy was more important than independence from foreign rule. Jyotiba Phule's views and philosophy was based on facts, reality, experiences and observation. Thus, his philosophy was not utopian but realistic in nature. He founded many movement name the few, movements against discrimination, movement of *dalits*, movement of women's education, peasant movement and

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Kamble, J. R., *Rise and Awakening of Depressed Classes in India*, National Publication, 1979, pp. 53.

movement against blind faith. He inspired many thinkers and social reformers like, Dr. Sahu Mahraj, Maharshi Shinde, Babasaheb Ambedkar and Gadgebaba.

He was first teacher of oppressed class and critic of orthodox social system. Women were always at the centre of Phule's thought and action. His philosophical thinking on social and political issues was influenced by Christianity and American thinker Thomas Paine's ideas of "Rights of Man". Phule worked towards the abolition of untouchability and started educational institutions for untouchables in the second half of the 19th century. When Pandita Ramabai⁷ converted into Christianity, he defended her right to conversion. He does not seem to be in favour of conversion. In his philosophy he gives importance to equality and humanity. He wanted to develop the qualities of justice, through education, equality, freedom and fearlessness. His philosophy of education was especially for the oppressed classes and women. He felt that education should create the feeling of unity. He states that women are not independent due to the lack of education. He was of the opinion that the development in society should be judged by the extent of education made available to women. He was in favour of giving compulsory education to women. He fought for the rights of women and work for their emancipation.

⁷ Pandita Ramabai (23rd April 1858, 5th April 1922), was High caste Hindu women, was great scholar of Hinduism and also studied Christianity. She was an eminent Indian social reformer and activist. A well known scholar and humanist, the greatest woman produced by modern India & one of the greatest Indians in all history --- the one to lay the foundation for a movement for women's liberation in India. She was a poet, a scholar, and a champion of improvement in the plight of Indian women. As a social reformer, she championed the cause of emancipation of Indian women. A widely travelled lady, she visited most parts of India, and even went to England (1883) and the U.S. (1886-88). She married to Bipin Bihari Medhavi, non-Brahmin a Bengali layer. And this created a stir in the orthodox circle of Hindu society. After a great loss of her husband's death shortly thereafter, she found herself unable to play the role traditionally reserved for upper caste Hindu widows, and converted to Christianity an action which created a scandal even in liberal Calcutta. More liberal verdicts have also bemoaned her conversion as unnecessary.

Phule saw women as the victims of the oppressive, caste-based and rigid hierarchical social system. He strongly believed that socio-cultural forces construct gender relations, especially as mentioned earlier in this paper by *Manusmriti*⁸ and Hindu tradition. As Simone De Beauvoir a feminist thinker observed, "Women are made, they are not born", if we compare Phule with Simone De Beauvoir we come across that he also raised the similar question but with a different context of *Hindu* tradition, "Why tradition dishonored woman? The 20th century, Black feminism can be compared to the women belonging to lower caste women in India which is quite differently from mainstream feminism. It retained historical principles but also influenced by new thinkers such as Alice Walker. Where, Walker created a whole new subject of black feminism, which she called woman-ism, and emphasizes the degree of the oppression black women faced as compared to white women same as lower women in comparison to upper caste women. Like, Phule, another contemporary thinker Kimberlie Williams Crenshaw an American lawyer, civil rights activist and a leading scholar of critical race theory who developed the theory of inter-sectionality. In her paper on inter-sectionality she throws a light on status of black women in contemporary society and how it needs to be understood. She says that black women cannot be understood being a black and being women independently but need to study the interaction between the two which frequently reinforced each other.

In ancient India the position of women as earlier discussed does not appear to be very appealing. Usually women have been looked upon as inferior to men. And, at those times they were considered to be on the same level of the *shudras*, the lowest of the four castes. Their freedom was extremely restricted. Right in the earliest portions of the canon women is looked upon as something evil that enticed innocent males into a snare of misery. They are described as 'the greatest temptation,' 'the cause of all sinful acts,' 'the slough,' "demons" etc.

⁸ Ibid.

According to him ignorance is darkness and education is sun-light. He realized that for social change education is the only effective tool as a result of it he decided to open the door of education for women and oppressed caste people. He worked for the deprived classes and women and made them aware of the importance of education as a vehicle for social change. He said, "Without knowledge, intelligence was lost, without intelligence morality was lost and without morality was lost all dynamism! Without dynamism money was lost and without money the *shudras* sank. All this misery was caused due to ignorance."⁹ For him Education is the only tool to free oneself from the clutches of ignorance, which is the reason of all sufferings. His philosophy is synthesis of Indian and western thought. Humanism is the essence of his philosophy. So we can say that his philosophy is not repetitive but critical, progressive, revolutionary and formative. He is regarded as the most important figure of social reform movement in India and 'Father of Indian Social Revolution'.

In one of his writings he says, '*Jichya Hati Palanyachi dori tich sansare uddhari*' (one [mother] who holds the string of baby's cradle, maintains and emancipates the life of family as well as of society). On his opinion if woman is educated the whole family is educated because women nurtured whole family.

Jyotiba Phule opened a girl's school in 1848 at Budhwar Peth in the residential building of Tatyah Sahib Bhide. He opened two more schools in 1851 among which one school was for girls of backward class. In girl's school there were eight girls admitted on the first day. Steadily the number of students increased. Savitribai, his wife, first women teacher in India taught in these schools and had to suffer a lot because of the hostility of the orthodox society. Women's education was given ample stress in these schools. The 'First wave feminism', emphasised on that women should enjoy the same legal and social rights as men. Its expression can be traced in

⁹ Phadke, Y.D., *Mahatma Phule Samagra Vangmaya*, Publisher Maharashtra Rajya Sahitya and Sanskruti Mandal, Navin Prakashan Bhavan, Mumbai, 1969 pp. 253.

many feminist works. For him education was not just literacy but a tool of social change. Phule perceived education as a means of self-respect and self dependence, and social peace. He made significant efforts to lead the society on the path of liberty, equality and fraternity. He strongly believed in the strength of women and their role in the process of social change and social peace so he felt that education is compulsory for women. His initiative had influenced various spheres of life and transformed the way India today looks at socioeconomic policies, education. He was a critique of the interrelationship between women's issues and patriarchy. He visualized equality and mutual permission as the basis of the man-woman relationship.

He was aware that primary education among the masses in the Bombay Presidency was very much neglected. He blamed the British government for spending profusely a large portion of revenue on the education of the higher classes. According to him, this policy resulted in the virtual monopoly of all the higher offices under the Government by the Brahmins. He boldly attacked the stranglehold of the Brahmins, who prevented others from having access to all the avenues of knowledge and influence. To Mahatma Phule, education is the only tool for eradicating social evils. It was his firm judgement that if social reforms are to be effective and everlasting, persons at all levels should be educated. For this purpose he considered the spread of education as his life's mission. Without doubt we can say that Phule was the pioneer of revolutionary thinking and he was an educational philosopher.

Widow re-marriages were banned and child marriage was very common among Brahmins and other upper castes in the Hindu society. Many widows were young and not all of them could live in a manner in which the orthodox people expected them to live. Some of the delinquent widows resorted to abortion or left their illegitimate children to their fate by leaving them on the streets. Out of pity for the orphans, Jyotiba Phule established an orphanage, possibly the first such institution founded by an Indian, Jyotiba gave

protection to pregnant widows and assured them that the orphanage would take care of their children. It was in this orphanage run by Jyotiba that a Brahmin widow gave birth to a boy in 1873 and Jyotiba adopted him as his son and he was named as Yashwant Phule. On September 24, 1873, Jyotiba convened a meeting of his followers and admirers and it was decided to form the *Satya Shodhak Samaj* (society of seekers of truth) with Jyotiba as its first president and treasurer. The main objectives of organization were to liberate the *shudras* and *atishudras* and to prevent their exploitation by the Brahmins. The membership was open to all. In 1876 there were 316 members of the *Satya Shodhak Samaj*. Jyotiba refused to regard the Vedas as sacred. He opposed idolatry and denounced the *chaturvarnya*. In 1876, Jyotiba was nominated as a member of the Poona Municipality.

It is very clear that he had very revolutionary ideas and he expressed his ideas through his books. He had written many books namely *Tritiya Ratna* (1855), *Brahmanache Kasab* (1869), *Gulamgiri* (1873), *Shetkaryancha Asud* (1883), *Satsar Vol.1*(1885), *Satsar Vol. 2* (1885), *Ishara* (October 1,1885), *saravajanik Satyadharma Pustak* (this book was published posthumously). So in all, he worked for whole the life for achieving his motives i.e. compulsory universal education, women education and uplifting of lower caste people. Phule was fully conscious about the importance of education. He knew that education can only be the powerful instrument of social revolution. Education can only bring social equality and social justice in the society. The essence of the educational philosophy of Mahatma Phule was to be educated is a human right. Mahatma Phule emphasized on education to all. He was the sponsor of concept of universalization of education. Universalization of education means to accept and extend facilities of education to all irrespective of caste, creed, religion, sex and physical or moral disability, the article 45 of Indian constitution is the symbol of victory of the philosophy of equality of education propounded by Mahatma Phule. Through his activities and fearless efforts he tried to build foundation of woman

education in particular and education for all and especially the non-established class of society. He wrote many books and through these books he expressed his revolutionary views and awakened the people about their rights. He had revolutionary ideas about different aspects of education which have been explained by him as follows:

For him, individuals being equal, it is necessary to provide facilities to more and more individuals and the monopoly in education should be stopped. While providing education to individuals' religion, race, caste and sex should not be considered. The value of humanism can be developed through education. The Principle of universalization of education should be followed and at same extent education should be made compulsory. The education of women and other deprived groups must be given top priority for establishment of social justice. Such Education must serve as a binding force in society. Mahatma Phule expressed great concern for primary education and primary teacher, He was of the opinion that primary teacher should be a trained person and sufficient salary should be paid. A primary school teacher must be a trained person and sufficient salary should be paid to him/her. For him, curriculum should be utilitarian and practical which can cover the needs of society. Primary knowledge about agriculture and health should be included in curriculum. Values such as freedom, equality, fraternity, kindness, self-respect, devotion to one's nation and internationalism should be developed through education. The down trodden filtration theory advocated by Lord Macaulay is not philosophically sound as it ignores the common masses and their need for progress. In his opinion practical knowledge is superior to bookish knowledge hence primary knowledge in *Modi* (a special Marathi script) accounts, history, grammar, agriculture, ethics should be imparted. For Phule the quantitative growth in primary school is important but it should not be at the cost of qualitative growth. For him providing scholarships and rewards to the needy and deserving student is important.

To summaries his contribution in the field of education, I can say that the development of any nation depends upon the educational growth. Nation forms its developmental model through equal contribution of both men and women educational status. By keeping this in mind the contribution of Jyotiba Phule in the field of education is really important. He was the first Indian educationalist whose pragmatic views on education were honoured by British rule in India. He was a great critic of the system of education laid down by Lord Macaulay. He was practical person with philosophical conviction. The Indian educationalists of his period and after his period were deeply impressed by the richness and originality of his thoughts. But it is sad that some contemporary leaders and reformers in the field of education could not appreciate him due to the grip of traditionalism. His reformatory educational ideas and principles especially in the field of women education and universal, free and compulsory primary education are most astonishing in the modern Indian society too. It is said that the history of woman education in India will be just incomplete without reference to the contribution of Mahatma Jyotiba Phule. He is rightly called Mahatma. For his subtle and substantial contribution towards women and lower caste emancipation is immense. As it is rightly regarded him as Martin Luther of Maharashtra. So for him, Lack of education leads to lack of wisdom, which in turn leads to lack of justice. This leads to lack of progress, which leads to lack of money and results in oppression of the lower castes'. Thus, the education is a tool of social justice and equality.

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