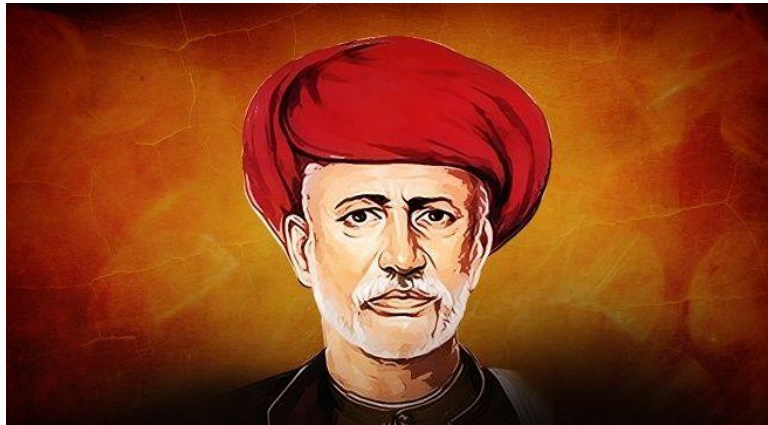




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Mahatma Phule- Great social reformer

Without the attainment of new goals, without understanding the meaning of new types of social goals, the tendency to destroy traditional social institutions cannot be constructed. Mahatma Jyotiba Phule was a man who rebelled against the traditional social institutions of India. The nature of that eternal truth is the principle of human liberation.



Mahatma Phule occupies a unique position among the social reformers of Maharashtra in the nineteenth century. Other reformers concentrated more on reforming the social institutions of family and marriage with special emphasis on the status and rights of women. However, Mahatma Phule revolted against the unjust caste system under which millions of people had suffered for centuries. In particular, he courageously upheld the cause of the untouchables and took up the cudgels for the poorer peasants. He was a militant advocate of their rights. The story of his stormy life is an inspiring saga of a continuous struggle which he waged relentlessly against the forces of reaction. What was remarkable was his ability to stand up against all kinds of pressure without faltering even once and always act according to his convictions. Though some keen observers of the social scene in Maharashtra like Narayan Mahadeo Parmananda did acknowledge his greatness in his lifetime, it is only in recent decades that there is increasing appreciation of his service and sacrifice in uplifting the masses.

Mahatma Phule was born on 11th April 1827. His father, Govindrao was a vegetable vendor. Jyotirao's mother passed away when he was hardly one year old. After completing his primary education, he had to leave his school to help his father by working on the family's farm. Mahatma Phule married to Savitribai Phule in 1840. At the time of marriage Mahatma Phule was 12 years old and Savitribai was 9 years old.

Due to Mahatma Phule's intelligence, his father's friend persuaded his father to allow him to study in a secondary school. In 1841, Mahatma Phule got admission in the Scottish Mission's high School at Pune. It was in this school that he met with Sadashiv Govande, upper caste boy, who remained a close friend of him throughout his life. After completing secondary education in 1847, Mahatma Phule decided not to accept a job under the Government.

An incident in 1848 made him aware of the iniquities of the caste-system, and the predominant position of the Brahmins in the social set-up. He was invited to attend a wedding of one of his Brahmin friends. As the bridegroom was taken in a procession, Jyotirao accompanied him along with the relatives of his Brahmin friend. Knowing that Jyotirao belonged to the Mali caste which was considered to be inferior by the Brahmins, the relatives of the bridegroom insulted and abused him. Jyotirao left the procession and returned home. With tears in his eyes, he narrated his experience to his father who tried to pacify him. After this incident Jyotirao made up his mind to defy the caste-system and serve the Shudras and women who were deprived of all their rights as human beings under the caste system.

Education of women and the lower castes, he believed, deserved priority. Hence at home he began educating his wife Savitribai and opened a girls' school in August 1848. The orthodox opponents of Jyotirao were furious and they started a vicious campaign against him. He refused to be unnerved by their malicious propaganda. As no teacher dared to work in a school in which untouchables were admitted as students, Jyotirao asked his wife to teach the girls in his school. Stones and brickbats were thrown at her when she was on her way to the school. The reactionaries threatened Jyotirao's father with dire consequences if he did not dissociate himself from his son's activities. Yielding to the pressure, his father asked his son and daughter-in-law to leave his house as both of them refused to give up their noble endeavour. On 3 July 1851, he founded a girls' school in which eight girls were admitted on the first day. Steadily the number of students increased. Savitribai taught in this school and had to suffer a lot because of the hostility of the orthodox people. Jyotirao opened two more girls' schools during 1851-52.

Jyotirao was aware that primary education among the masses in the Bombay Presidency was very much neglected. He argued that 'a good deal of their poverty, their want of self-reliance their entire dependence upon the learned and intelligent classes' could be attributed to the 'deplorable state of education among the peasantry'. He blamed the British Government for spending profusely a large portion of revenue on the education of the higher classes.

Widow remarriages were banned and child-marriage was very common in the then Hindu society. Many widows were young and not all of them could live in the way the orthodox people expected them to live. Some of the delinquent widows resorted to abortions or left their illegitimate children to their fate by leaving them on the streets. Out of pity for the orphans, Jyotirao Phule established an orphanage, possibly the first such institution founded by a Hindu. Jyotirao gave protection to pregnant widows and assured them that the orphanage would take care of their children. It was in this orphanage run by Jyotirao that a Brahmin widow gave birth to a boy in 1873 and Jyotirao adopted him as his son, named him 'Yashwant.'

On 24 September 1873, Jyotirao convened a meeting of his followers and admirers and it was decided to form the 'Satya Shodhak Samaj' (Society of Seekers of Truth) with Jyotirao as its first President and Treasurer. Every member had to take a pledge of loyalty to the British

Empire. The main objectives of the organisation were to liberate the Shudras and Ati-shudras and to prevent their exploitation by the Brahmins. All the members of the Satya Shodhak Samaj were expected to treat all human beings as children of God and worship the Creator without the help of any mediator. The membership was open to all and the available evidence proves that some Jews were admitted as members. In 1876 there were 316 members of the 'Satya Shodhak Samaj'.

Throughout his life, Jyotirao Phule fought for the emancipation of the downtrodden people and the struggle which he launched at a young age ended only when he died on 28 November 1890. He was a pioneer in many fields and among his contemporaries he stands out as one who never wavered in his quest for truth and justice. Though he was often accused of fomenting hatred between the Brahmins and the non-Brahmins, very rarely an attempt was made to consider his scathing criticism in a broad perspective. The later generations also took considerable time to understand and appreciate the profound significance of his unflinching espousal of the 'rights of man' which remained till the end of his life a major theme of his writings and a goal of his actions.

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Reference: Collected works of Mahatma Phule Vol.II published by Education Department, Government of Maharashtra, 1991