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Slavery
by
Mahatma Phule

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Biography of Mahatma Phule

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[This brief Life Sketch of Mahatma Jotirao Phule is written by the noted the scholar Dr.Y.D. Phadke. He is the editor of the Collected Words of Mahatma Phule in Marathi. He is also an eminent scholar of Mahatma Phule and the Satyashodhak Movement.]

JOTIRAO GOVINDRAO PHULE occupies a unique position among the social reformers of Maharashtra in the nineteenth century. While other reformers concentrated more on reforming the social institutions of amily and marriage with special emphasis on the status and right of women, Jotirao 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 look up the cudgels for the poorer peasants. He was a militant advocate of their right. The story of his stormy life is an inspiring saga of a continuous struggle whih he waged relentlessly against the forces of reaction. 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 is only in recent decades that there is increasing appreciation of his service and sacrifice in uplifting the masses.

Jotirao Phule was born in 1827. His father, Govindrao was a vegetable-vendor at Poona. Originally Jotirao's family known as Gorhays, came from Katgun, a village in the Satara district of Maharashtra, His grandfather Shetiba Gorhay settled down in Poona. Since Jotirao's father and two uncles served as florists under the last of the Peshwas, they came to be known as `Phule'. Jotirao's mother passed away when he was hardly one year old. After completing his primary education, Jotirao had to leave the school and help his father by working on the family's farm. Jotirao's marriage was celebrated when he was not even thirteen.

Impressed by Jotirao's intelligence and his love of knowledge two of his neighbours, one a Muslim teachr and another a Christian gentleman persuaded his father Govindrao to allow him to study in a secondary school. In 1841, got admission in the Scottish Mission's High School at Poona. It was in his this school that he met Sadashiv

Ballal Govande, a Brahmin, who remained a close friend throughout his life. Both Jotirao and Govande were greatly influenced by Thomas Paine's ideas and they read with great interest Paine's famous book 'The Rights of Man.' Moro Vithal Valvekar and Sakharam Yashwant Paranjapye were two other Brahmin friends of Jotirao who in later years stood by him in all his activities. After completing his secondary education in 1847 Jotirao decided not to accept a job under the Government.

An incident in 1848 made him aware of the iniquities of the caste system, the predominant position of the Brahmin in the social setup. He was invited to attend a wedding of one of his Brahmin friends. As the bridegroom was taken in a procession, Jotirao accompanied him along with the relatives of his Brahmin friends. Knowing that Jotirao belonged to the Mil caste which was considered to be inferior by the Brahmins, the relatives of the bridegroom insulted and abused him. Jotirao 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 Jotirao 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 he began educating his wife Savitribai and opened a girls' school in August 1848. The orthodox opponents of Jotirao 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 which untouchables were admitted as students, Jotirao 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 Jotirao's father with dire consequences if he did not dissociate himself. Yielding to the pressure, Jotirao's father asked his son and the daughter-in-law to leave his house as both of them refused to give up their noble endeavor.

Though the school had to be closed for sometime due to lack of funds, Jotirao re-opened it with the help of his Brahmin friends Govande and Valvekar. 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 also and had to suffer a lot because of hostility of the orthodox people. Jotirao opened two more girls' schools during 1851-52 in a memorial addressed to the Education Commission (popularly known as the Hunter Commission) in 1882, he described his activities in the field of education, 'A year after the institution of the female school I also established an indigenous mixed school for the lower classes, especially the Mahars and Mangs. Two more schools for these classes were subsequently added. I continued to work in them for nearly nine to ten years'.

Jotirao 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 attribute to 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.

Jotirao boldly attacked the stranglehold of the Brahmins, who prevented others from having access to all the avenues of Knowledge and influence. He denounced them as cheats and hypocrites. He asked the masses to resist the tyranny of the Brahmins. All his writings were variation on this theme. His critics made fun of his ignorance of grammar and philology, his inelegant language and far-fetched interpretation of Indian history and the ancient texts. They brushed his criticism aside by saying that he was merely echoing what the Christian missionaries had said about the Indian society in general and Brahmin in particular. The established scholars in his time did not take Phule's arguments seriously. His critics did not realise that Jotirao's acrimonious criticism was basically a spontaneous outburst of a genuine concern for the equal rights of human beings. Emotionally he was so deeply involved in his work that he could not make a dispassionate analysis and take a detached view of the social forces. Jotirao's deep sense of commitment to basic human values made it difficult for him to restrain himself when he witnessed injustice and atrocities committed in the name of religion by those who were supposed to be its custodians.

Widow remarriages were banned and child-marriage was very common among the Brahmin and other upper castes in the then 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, Jotirao Phule established an orphanage, possibly the first such institution founded by a Hindu. Jotirao gave protection to pregnant widows and assured them that the orphanage would take care of their children. It was in this orphanage run by Jotirao that a Brahmin widow gave birth to a boy in 1873 and Jotirao adopted him as his son.

For sometime, Jotirao worked as a contractor for the government and supplied building material required for the construction of a huge barrage at Khadakvasala near Poona. He had a direct experience of working with the officials of the Public Works Department which was notorious as a hotbed of corruption. Except the British officers holding very high positions in the Department, the clerks and other officers were invariably Brahmin and they exploited the illiterate workers. Jotirao felt it necessary to explain to the workers how they were duped by the Brahmin officials. In one of the ballads composed by him, he described vividly the fraudulent practices resorted to by the Brahmin officials in the Public Works Department (printed at the end of 'Slavery')

In 1868, Jotirao decided to give access to the untouchables to small bathing tank mere his house. In his controversial book called Slavery published in June 1873, Jotirao included a manifesto which declared that he was willing to dine with all regardless of their caste, creed or country of origin. It is significant that several newspapers refused to give publicity to the manifesto because of its contents. His book Slavery was severely criticised for its 'venomous propaganda' against the Brahmins. Jotio dedicated this book 'to the good people of the United States as a token of admiration for their sublime, disinterested and self sacrificing devotion in the cause of Negro Slavery'. The book is written in the form of a dialogue. After tracing the history of the Brahmin domination in India, Jotirao examined the motives and objects of cruel and inhuman laws framed by the brahmins. Their main object in fabricating these fasehoods was to dupe the minds of the ignorant and rivet firmly on them the chains of perpetual bondage and slavery which their selfishness and cunning had forged, The severity of the laws as affecting the Sudras and the intense hatred with which they were regarded by the Brahmins can be explained on no other supposition but that there was, originally between the two, a deadly feud arising from the advent of the latter in to this land. Jotirao argued that the sudras were the sons of the soil while the Brahmins came from outside and usurped everything that was possessed by the 'not one hundredth part of the rogueries' that were generally practsed on his 'poor, illiterate and ignorant Sudra brethren'.

On 24 September 1873 , Jotirao convened a meeting of his followers and admirers and it was decided to form the 'Satya Shodhak Samaj' (Society of Seekers of Truth) with Jotirao as its first president and treasurer. Every member had to take 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 being as children of God and worship the Creator without the help of any mediator. Membership was open to all and the available evidence proves that some Jews were admitted as members. In 1876.

Jotirao refused to regard the Vedas as sacrosanct. He opposed idolatry and denounced the chaturvarnya. In his book Sarvajanic Satya Dharma Pustak published in 1891, his views on religious and social issues are given in the form of f dialogue. According to him, both men and women were entitled to enjoy equal rights and it was a sin to discriminate between human being on the basis of sex. He stressed the unity of man and envisaged a society based on liberty, equality and fraternity. He was aware that religious bigotry and aggressive natioalism destroy the unity of man.

In 1876 Jotirao was nominated as a member of the Poona Municipality, He tried to help the people in the famine-stricken areas of Maharashtra when a severe famine in 1877 forced people in the rural area to leave their villages. Some of them had to leave their children behind and appeal issued on 17 May 1877 by Jotirao indicates that the

Victoria Orphanage was founded under the auspices of the Satya Shodhak Samaj to take care of these unfortunate children. From the beginning of the year 1879 Krishnarao Bhalekar, one of his colleagues, edited a weekly called Deenbandhu which was the organ of the Satya Shodhak Samaj. The weekly articulated the grievances of the peasants and workers. Deenbandhu defended Jotirao when Vishnushastri Chiplunkar, a powerful spokesman of the conservative nationalists, attacked Jotirao's writing in the most vitriolic style.

Narayan Meghaji Lokhande was another prominent colleague of Jotirao, Lokhande is acclaimed as the Father of Trade Union Movement in India. From 1880 onward, he took over the management of Deenbandhu which published from Bombay. Along with Lokhande, Jotirao also addressed the meetings of the textile workers in Bombay. It is significant that before and his colleagues Bhalekar and Lokhande tried to organise the peasants and the workers, no such attempt was made by any organisation to redress their grievances.

One of the charges levelled by Jotirao against the leaders of the Brahmo Samaj and the Prarthana Samaj, the Sarvajanik Sabha and the Indian National Congress was that despite their programmes, in reality, they did very little to improve the lot of the masses. He felt that these organisations were dominated by the Brahmins and were not truly representative in character. In his booklet called Satsara (The Essence of Truth) published in June 1885, he criticised the Brahmo Samaj and the Prarthana Samaj. Addressing their leaders he declared, 'We don't need the help of your organisations. Don't worry about us' In his book, Sarvajanik Sabha or the Indian National Congress. He warned that the persistent demand made by these organisations for Indianisation of the administrative services, if accepted, would lead to Brahminisation of the service in India. He thought that it was difficult to create a sense of nationality so long as the restriction on dining and marrying outside the caste continued to be observed by people belonging to different castes. Education of the masses would promote the process of nation-making.

It should be remembered that just as Jotirao did not mince words when he criticised the leaders of the reformist movement he was equally fearless in criticising the decision of the alien rulers which did not contribute to the welfare of the masses. When the government wanted to grant more licences for liquor-shops, Jotirao condemned this move as he believed that addiction to liquor would ruin many poor families. On 30 November 1880, the President of the Poona Municipality requested the members to approve his proposal of spending one thousand rupees on the occasion of the visit of Lord Lytton, the Governor-General of India. The official wanted to present him an address during his visit to Poona. Lytton had passed an Act which resulted in gagging the press and Deenbandhu, the organ of the Satya Shodhak Samaj, had protested against the restriction on the right to freedom of the press. Jotirao did not like the idea of spending the money of the tax-payers in honouring a guest like Lytton. He

boldly suggested that the amount could be very well spent on the education of the poor people in poona. He was the only member out of all the thirty-two nominated members of the Poona Municipality who voted against the official resolution.

Another incident also revealed his attachment for the poor peasant and his courage in drawing the attention of member of the British royal family to the sufferings of the framers in rural areas, On 2 March 1888, Hari Raoji Chiplunkar, a friend of Jotirao, arranged a function in honour of the Duke and Duchess of Connaught. Dressed like a peasant, Jotirao attended the function and made a speech,. He commented on the rich invitees who displayed their wealth by wearing diamond studded jewellery and warned the visiting dignitaries that the people who had gathered there did not represent India. If the Duke of Connaught was really interested in finding out the condition of the Indian subjects of Her Majesty the Queen of England, Jotirao suggested that the ought to visit some nearby village as well as the areas in the city occupied by the untouchables. He requested the Duke of Connaught who was a gandson of Queen Victoria to convey his message to her and made a strong plea to provide education to the poor people, Jotirao's speech created quit a stir.

Throughout his life. Jotirao 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 18 He was a pioneer in many fields and among his contemporaries he stands out as one who never wavered in his quest for trust for and justice, Thought he was often accused of fomenting hatred between the non Brahmins, very rarely an attempt was made to consider his scathing criticism in a broad perspective. The later generation also took considerable time to understand and appreciate the profound significance of his unflinching espousal of the rights of man remained till the end of his life a major theme of his writings and a goal of his actions.

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