Caste and Education: The Vision of Mahatma Jotirao Phule

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Abstract

Underpinning the idea of education as “the most powerful weapon,” the paper attempts to understand the importance of education from an Anti-caste Intellectual Thought. In this attempt, the paper analyzes the vision of Mahatma Jyotirao Phule and also studies his two works, The Third Eye (1855) and Memorial Addressed to the Education Commission (1882), wherein he underlines his ideas of education from anti-caste intellectual point of view.

Keywords: Anti-Caste Thought, Dalit, Education, Caste, Reforms, Phule, Modern India

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‘Caste’ is an idea which has been challenged and questioned throughout the Indian history. It is still under the question as it prevails in society. The word 'caste' is an English word derived from the Spanish and Portuguese word ‘casta’. In India, 'caste' refers to the different groups of people classified according to the Brahmanic system. It is root of all the problems the lower caste people face in society. In India, caste is a Hindu phenomenon, which became a permanent marker for the division of people; for dividing society on the basis of ‘caste’ hierarchy. This caste system is composed of four hierarchical divisions of people. On these four hierarchical steps of this ‘caste’ ladder, the Brahmins (as priests) claimed to be at the top. Kshatriyas (rulers) are known to be on the second, Vaishyas (merchants) on the third and Shudras (labours) on the last and fourth position. The people who are outside of these four
varnas became untouchables or avarnas. Just because these people at the very bottom deal with scavenging and other menial works, they are considered as outcastes or untouchables. In Ambedkar’s words, they are the “Broken Men.” Caste endorses the idea of inequality among people in society. It is believed that the Aryans came to the land of India and conquered the Shudras. The idea of caste has its root in the Hindu philosophy based on the irrational beliefs of Hindu scriptures and other Vedic texts. Manuṣmṛiti or ‘The Law of Manu’ is the Hindu text based on Vedic teachings. It is the Manuṣmṛiti that strongly supports the caste system. As K.D. Thomas writes:

Manuṣmṛiti, Bhagavad Gita and Vedas make references to various castes and varnas, but Manuṣmṛiti is the staunchest supporter and advocate of caste system in India. According to the Puruṣa Sūkta of Rig Veda and Manuṣmṛiti, Brahmins originated from the mouth of Brahma, Kṣatriyas from the arms, Vaiṣyas from the thighs and Sudras from the feet of Brahma. (Thomas 234)

Even in Manuṣmṛiti, Manu emphasizes the influence of Vedas¹:

The entire Veda is the root of law, (so also) tradition and the practice of those that know it; (also) the custom of the good, as well as satisfaction of (one's) self. Whosoever dharma was proclaimed by Manu for anyone that is all directed in the Veda; he possessed of all knowledge. (Burnell 17)

These ancient Hindu texts legitimized the caste system of social stratification in India. These texts direct Hindus/Brahmins to follow the Hindu law or codes throughout their lives. Manuṣmṛiti is the evolution of Hinduism and it also justifies the caste system. Untouchables and Shudras are denied the basic human rights. They are denied not only the access to

¹ In this paper, I follow the English translation of Manuṣmṛiti. For details, see Burnell.
temples, but also denied the access to the water tanks and other spaces. Buddha was the first one to bring caste into the public arena, and also to challenge it and protest against it. The evolution and nature of caste has been studied, challenged and contested throughout the different anti-caste movements.

In the history of India, there were many social reformers who tried to annihilate this venomous caste system. Once the vicious nature of this system was realized, the social reformers came out in society to challenge it. Among those social reformers, there were also the ones belonging to the upper caste. There were Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Mahatma Gandhi, and many others. Anti-caste movements also emerged in India. These anti-caste movements were initiated and led by the leaders belonging to lower caste. When one talk about the anti-caste intellectual history, it is to question how the ‘caste’ could be studied from an anti-caste intellectual thought. Phule, Ambedkar, Periyar, Thass, and many others were anti-caste intellectual leaders who started movements and organizations in order to fight against the social evils. Also, these anti-caste leaders not only questioned the ‘caste’, but also raised issues on the gender, culture, education, and socio-economic conditions of lower caste people. The anti-caste intellectuals focused on the various discourses within their frameworks. In one of their projects, there was also the idea of education. In anti-caste movements, many anti-caste leaders talked about the education.

To trace the idea of ‘caste’ and ‘education’ from an anti-caste intellectual point of view, and to discuss the ‘education’ as a means of emancipation and social transformation, this paper primarily focuses on the vision of a great anti-caste intellectual, Mahatma Jotirao Phule (1827-1890). He had a vision of social justice through education. His initiatives towards
bringing education for lower castes and women are significant aspects of his struggle against Brahmanism. He is also known as the nineteenth-century philosopher of Modern India. He emphasized the need of education for lower castes in order to gain the freedom and social rights. When one talk about the socio-economic condition of lower castes, it becomes important to talk about the literacy of Dalits. The socio-economic conditions of Dalits have always been worse. It is important to attain education as it is also the achievement connected to "health, political participation, and other indicators of social development" (Stephen 32). The paper also attempts to show that how without education, ignorant lower caste people are subjected to treacherous nature of upper caste people. Education is “the lighting of a fire.” It is apt to quote Nelson Mandela's famous phrase here: “Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world.” This paper thus intends to trace the idea of education from an anti-caste intellectual thought.

Education in India has always been dominated by upper castes and upper classes. With many other things, lower caste people were denied the right to education. The Shudras and ati-Shudras were not allowed to pursue education as it is the instrument that can establish the better social status for them. The upper castes also did not want them to rise near or above their own social status. As assigned by the birth, the lower castes were expected just to do the labour and menial works. Also, educating the Shudras and ati-Shudras was against the Hindu law as proclaimed in Hindu teachings. In Manusmriti, verse IV (79-80), Manu instructs Brahmins not to teach or advise any Shudra:

“One may not abide with outcasts, nor Chandalas... nor with low-born (people)... nor with Antyavasayins ... One may not give advice to a Sudra.” (Burnell 88)
According to Manu, the Shudra and ati-Shudra are not suitable to attain the fruit of education. So a Brahmin should neither instruct nor advise a Shudra/ati-Shudra. It is against their law to impart education to them. Neither should a Brahmin become a disciple of a Shudra as they will be disqualified for Shradha (respect and reputation). So, the Brahmins are taught not to establish any kind of social intercourse or “abide” with the low castes. Manu also instructs that Brahmins “should never recite (the Vedas) indistinctly or in presence of a Sudra” (Burnell 91). In accordance with these Hindu codes, the right to education was denied to lower caste people; a path to seek the truth was denied. In the nineteenth century, Phule was one of the very first anti-caste intellectuals who publically criticized the mythos of Manusmriti.

A well-known anti-caste intellectual and a great social revolutionary of the nineteenth-century Maharashtra is Mahatma Jotirao Phule. Born in 1827, Phule belonged to a Mali caste (Gardener). Phule’s family originally belonged to the Satara district of Maharashtra and his father was a vegetable-vendor at Poona, India. Phule had an immense love for knowledge. He achieved education despite the obstacles. He attended his first school between 1834 and 1838. Phule also read the philosophy of Thomas Paine, an English-American political theorist. He was greatly influenced by Paine’s ideas of social equality. Phule was determined to work against the injustices in Indian society. Phule carried out the main leadership of Non-Brahmin Movement in India. His intelligence, education and dedication awarded him with many ideas and critical thinking to fight against the prevalent social injustices and Brahmanism. Phule challenged the caste system and sought to bring the abolition of caste system. He worked to uplift Shudras and ati-Shudras. In 1848, Phule and his wife, Savitribai Phule, opened a school,

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2 Shudra varna below the Maratha kunbis, farmers caste of Maharashtra.
3 For a comprehensive account of Phule’s life and education, see O’Hanlon.
which is known as “the first school” in India for the lower caste people. This was the beginning of establishment of such institutions and organizations for the upliftment of social status of Dalits. It was later in 1873 when Phule with his followers founded the Satyashodhak Samaj (Society of the Seekers of Truth), which became an influential organization for the promotion of education and for all the initiatives Phule took to liberate the Shudras and ati-Shudras from exploitations.

The idea of caste, according to Phule, is similar to the idea of slavery. Gail Omvedt in *Dalit Visions* traces the history and the construction of Hinduism by studying the major anti-caste intellectuals. Omvedt shows that how oppressive Hinduism is perceived by anti-caste intellectuals in their respective Dalit movements. Phule’s account of caste system and Brahmanism, as also explained by Omvedt, is strongly based on the Aryan race theory in which the Aryans “settled on the banks of the Ganges whence they spread gradually over the whole of India … subjugat[ed] the aborigines” (Omvedt, *Dalit Visions* 17). The Aryans also brought the “weird system of mythology, the ordination of caste, and the code of crude and inhuman laws” (Omvedt, *Dalit Visions* 17-18). Phule believed that these “aborigines” are considered ‘lower castes’ by the caste system; these are the “down-trodden people of India” who were first conquered and then enslaved. Phule’s views on the caste and Brahmanism can be traced in Phule’s *Gulamgiri* (1873), in which he equates Hindu caste system with the system of slavery in the United States of America. *Gulamgiri* is the work in which he exposes the hypocrite Brahmins and the evolution of ‘caste’ through a historical-mythological story in dialogues. Phule dedicated *Gulamgiri* to “the good people of the United States” who devoted themselves in the cause of abolishing slavery in America. He establishes a connection
between the conditions of the lower castes in India and the black slaves in America. Also, he intended to expose the Brahmanism and caste system to the World through this book. According to Phule, caste in India is as venomous and brutal as slavery in the United States of America.

Phule's philosophy of *vidya* (knowledge) was based on seeking truth, which is against the false teachings of Brahmanism. For him, education was not just necessarily to improve the economic conditions of Shudras and ati-Shudras. In fact it was also a path through which the truth and validity of certain things can be found, as "the wise people say—Seek truth." True education is that one, which liberates one's mind. Being progressive in thoughts can bring social transformations. As Omvedt also observes Phule's *vidya* (knowledge) is in “direct contrast with the Brahmanic, ritualistic *shastra* and was a weapon for equality and human freedom as well as economic advance” (Omvedt, *Dalit Visions* 23-24). In order to examine how Phule underlines his ideas on education, *The Third Eye* (1855) and *Memorial Addressed to the Education Commission* (1882) shall be analyzed.

*The Third Eye* (*Tritya Ratan*) is a play written by Phule in 1855.4 In the play, a cunning Brahmin visits the house of a peasant couple, where he finds the woman is pregnant. On the basis of zodiac theories, Brahmin fabricates an unfortunate happening that may harm the unborn child of peasant couple. Brahmin then asks the couple to follow some rituals and to perform ceremonies in order to avoid the foreseen danger. The Shudra couple perform all the rituals and also give a grand feast to the group of Brahmins. To satisfy their own greed for food and money, Brahmins rob the naïve couple. The couple later realized how they were deceived.

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4 The manuscript of the play was found in 1979, and the play was then first published in the journal of *Purogami Satyashodhak* (Marathi), vol. 5, no. 2, April-June 1979.
when a Christian missionary comes as a preacher of knowledge and tells the truth of Brahmin’s tricks. Having been exposed to the reality of Brahmins, the couple decide to “educate themselves at the Phule’s night school, since in education and knowledge lay the key to a true understanding of their own society, of events in the world, and of the real natures of God and men” (O'Hanlon 124). The poor cultivator also exposes how Brahmins operates in the village in order to prevent the children from gaining the education:

All of the Brahmins would secretly give advice to the Malis and kunbis not to send their children to school or would put the fear of the kulkarni into them…

The above passage provides an evidence of Brahmins’ conspiracy and of their deliberate acts to keep all the lower castes ignorant and illiterate. Through the plot, Phule wanted to highlight that how the Brahmins “owned their success to the denial of any form of literacy or learning to the Shudras and ati-Shudras” (O'Hanlon 124). According to Phule, the lower castes are so ignorant due to the lack of education that they are easily deceived by the guileful Brahmins. Brahmins on any occasion visit the house of lower castes and dupe them in the name of religious rituals. The central story of the play is itself the story of an ignorant Shudra couple who are exploited by a cunning Brahmin. The play also seems to represent the idea of Brahmanic religion, which is full of “wicked tricks”, delusive faith and the rituals. In this play, Phule’s intention, as also argued by O'Hanlon, was not to focus on Brahmans as “the ultimate cause of the deprivation of the lower castes”. He was against Brahmanism. Phule emphasized that, the backwardness of lower castes, which is due to lack of literacy and knowledge, is the reason that supports their miseries. As Phule notes:

5 The text of the play is adopted. See, O'Hanlon. 125.
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 by the lack of knowledge.⁶ (Deshpande 117)

In other words, the deteriorating condition of Shudras and ati-Shudras was a result of the denial of education to them. The play thus seems to highlight the importance of education and knowledge by depicting the exploitation of illiterate Shudra couple. According to Sharmila Rege, Phule defined education as “a tritiya ratna (third eye), a medium for interrogating our misrecognition of the social world perpetuated by the dominant, for understanding and transforming interlocking oppressive social relations” (Rege 67). Phule’s vision of education and the ideas to reform education can be traced in his Memorial Addressed to the Education Commission.

In 1882, Phule wrote a long statement to the Hunter Commission on Education in India. In this political piece of writing, Phule appeals the Government to reform the system of education because the educational policy is not reaching to the masses (to the lower castes). He endorsed the idea that education should be made available to the masses. Phule also focuses on the idea of primary education which, he thinks, should be made compulsory till the age of twelve. Phule’s document begins with his explanation of the contributions he made in the field of education:

A year after the institution of the female schools, I also established an indigenous mixed school for the lower classes, especially the Mahars and Mangs.

(Phule 102)

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⁶ A famous phrase adopted from Phule’s work Cultivator’s Whipcord. For the source, see Deshpande. 117.
He meant to say that he is doing a fair amount of contributions for the access to the education, but it seems the Government is ignorant of the condition of Shudras and ati-Shudras. Phule represents his critical views on the educational policy of Government. Throughout the pages of his document, he emphasizes that how the benefits of education are being enjoyed by only the people belonging to upper castes. The British Indian Government was the hope for the lower caste people as it was the only political force that could fight against the Brahmanism. Education was entirely dominated by Brahmins. In his ideas on the education, Phule had also stressed the English education for lower castes. In a way, he is mainly exposing how the dominance of upper castes operates in the tract of education. He proposes the plan for the amendment in the education system. In his proposal, he puts forward also the idea of scholarships which will be helpful for the masses to acquire the education. Without scholarships, the lower classes will further be excluded again due to their poverty. He also asks for the increase in the number of schools, for remodeling the teachers and the method of teaching in the schools. The lower class people feel alienated in the school because of the Brahmin teachers. The lower caste people were never treated with dignity. In other words, Phule mainly recommended to conceptualize the system of education so it may be fruitful to all the groups of people in society, not just to Brahmins.

In the vision of Phule, the education was not only for the lower castes but also for the women. In fact, he educated his own wife, Savtribai Phule. Savtribai was the main leader of women's education as she was the first woman teacher who founded “the first school” for females. Both Jyotirao Phule and Savtribai Phule are considered as the pioneers of women's education organizations. They both worked together to liberate women from patriarchy and
untouchability. They opened several girl schools. Muktabai, a dalit girl, was a product of Phules' school, where the new education “enabled [her] to see through the selfish priestcraft and hollow wisdom of the most sacred entity in the cast hierarchy” (Mani 70-71). When she was eleven years old, Muktabai wrote an essay in which she speaks against “the oppressive forces” of caste and Brahmanism. Muktabai attacks the “hollow wisdom” of Brahmins by emphasizing that the education is not all about Vedas or the religious books, which are full of “wild beliefs and superstitions.” In the concluding part of the essay, Muktabai calls attention to the need of education which, she thinks, is the only “medicine” for Mangs and Mahars, two dalit castes in Maharashtra. As she enjoins, “Oh, the mahars and mangs, you are poor and sick. Only the medicine of knowledge will cure you and heal you” (Mani 75).

The essay by Muktabai thus endorses the “potential explosiveness” of education in which Phule strongly believed. For Phule, education is a means of igniting the minds of the oppressed for “desirable socio-cultural transformation”. So it may be said that the vision of Phule in the matter of education and social development was very progressive. He is the first anti-caste intellectual who had stressed the importance of education, indeed “mass education” for the lower caste people and women. He became a great role model for the subsequent generations.

Later in the twentieth century, Phule came to be acknowledged as the "Guru" of Ambedkar. The November of 1890 marked the Phule’s death and Ambedkar’s birth was marked with April 1891. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar is a brilliant figure from our Indian history. Ambedkar achieved the highest education, becoming well-versed in all the subjects. He was

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7 The essay is called “Mang Maharachya Dukhvisayi” (‘About the Grief of the Mangs and Mahars’), which was originally published in 1855 by Dyanodaya journal. For details, see Mani.
an economist, a politician, a social reformer, journalist, administrator, jurist, Dalit activist leader and a Buddhist revivalist. He was the first Indian to pursue an Economics doctorate degree abroad. He was also awarded the Bharat Ratna in 1990. Ambedkar was the first Law Minister of India after Independence in 1947. He was also the chairman of the drafting committee of the Constitution of India. And most importantly, he was the first Dalit who achieved a doctorate degree. Ambedkar was greatly influenced by the ideologies of Phule. Ambedkar honoured Phule as: “The Greatest Shudra of Modern India who made the lower classes of Hindus conscious of their slavery to the higher classes and who preached the gospel that for India social democracy was more vital than independence from foreign rule.” (Rao, Babasaheb Ambedkar 29)

It would be appropriate to say that Ambedkar further carried out the projects which Phule had taken up. However, Ambedkar’s strategies to fight against the social injustices were based on the new radical, economics and political views. Ambedkar, like Phule, advocated the education for the lower castes and women. In fact, it was Ambedkar who brought the Dalit women as speakers and chairpersons into the public spaces during the Ambedkarite movements. Ambedkar’s awareness of the importance of education, as Omvedt writes, was not simply an individual discovery, but it “echoes” the ideas of the great Phule who believed in the “transformatory character of education.”

To conclude, the ideologies of anti-caste movements were centered upon "emancipation", which all the intellectuals sought for Dalits. Phule was the first anti-caste intellectual who talked about the education for the masses (for Dalits). He fought against Brahmanism which is “superstition, a bag of tricks, a weapon of domination” (Omvedt, Dalit
Phule is considered not only the leader of the anti-caste movement, but also an activist for women empowerment. His wife, Savitribai Phule, is the main contributor in the educational project for oppressed women. According to Jyotirao Phule, the education of women and the lower caste people deserve the priority because their social status and condition is much degraded in society. In order to stress the points made in this paper, an attempt was made to analyze Phule’s *The Third Eye* (1855) and *Memorial Addressed to the Education Commission* (1882). The writings of Phule represent his educational ideology and his critical views on Brahmanism. The vision of Phule was thus to fight the system of caste and transform society with the “weapon of education.”

**Works Cited**


